Genius Hour: Critical Inquiry and Differentiation

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What learning experiences stand out as particularly memorable from your years of formative and summative assessment? Perhaps, like many, you cast your mind back to the victories you experienced in those years: the persuasive speech about a topic in which you felt wholly invested and rehearsed endlessly, earning you top marks, the hard-won A– your essay proposing a renewal of the school’s community garden received after countless revisions and meetings with your biology and writing teachers. Possibly you focus instead on the last days, when you appreciated the myriad strengths you had honed over the years and acknowledged the areas in which you planned to improve.

Or perhaps you take a step back and examine the connections you forged to the learning itself: the sociological analysis of hip-hop music your history teacher fostered or the culminating project in your literature class that asked you to create your own literary movement, complete with poetry and short fiction. No matter the specifics of memory, one similarity defines each recollection: the learning that remains simultaneously vivid and relevant to you remains that which was most differentiated to your unique needs. It empowered you to build upon your own interests in constructing a critical response in both the process and the production of that learning’s undertaking.

Why Genius Hour?

The curricular concept underlying Genius Hour embodies an optimal learning relationship: students embracing their own power and responsibility in the learning process work in conjunction with educators who can facilitate and guide that learning to ever-greater heights. In the Genius Hour model, instructors allocate a portion of class time—often the 20 percent that gives the approach an alternate name (20% Time)—for student exploration of a self-selected and/or given topic. Students turn to an array of sources in the course of their explorations and consider the topic from a wide variety of angles before synthesizing all of their research into a central understanding. This culminates in a final product, project, or other such artifact, that is shared with the class and potentially the larger school community (Kirsch, 2014).

A significant body of research supports the need for the increased focus on differentiation that is fostered by the Genius Hour model. Student interests, both existing and burgeoning, are brought to the forefront of the classroom when a differentiated model is implemented, allowing teachers to “use time flexibly, call upon a range of instructional strategies, and become partners with their students to see that both what is learned and the learning environment are shaped to the learner” (Tomlinson, 1999). Accordingly, learning strategy implementation can be targeted to each individual’s needs and strengths (Wormeli, 2007).

The strong level of engagement fostered by critical inquiry stems from the essential truth asserted by Carol Kuhlthau, Leslie Maniotes, and Ann Caspari in Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century (2007) that “inquiry learning engages, interests, and challenges students to connect their world with the curriculum.” Further, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) clearly emphasize the role...
Genius Hour in the High School

Daniel H. Pink’s 2009 book, Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us, examines the role of stimulus in determining successful enterprises in business and school, further asserting in a discussion of self-sufficiency that “encouraging autonomy doesn’t mean discouraging accountability.” Throughout the process of designing a structure to frame student exploration in an initial implantation, Pink’s assertion resonated. In partnership with colleague Christopher Bronke of the English and Communications Department at North High School in Downers Grove, Illinois (C. Bronke, personal communication, February 24, 2014), I created a spreadsheet in Google Drive to promote both student accountability and independence (https://goo.gl/a3Y1zp). Throughout the research process, students recorded their inquiry process on the Google Spreadsheet; prompts such as “Why did you visit this site or resource?”, “List a 3–4 word summary of the page,” and “What did you gain from this site or resource?” were concise and designed to further the students’ research process.

Four classes eventually participated in the pilot and beta tests of the Genius Hour program. In these senior-level AP English Literature and Composition courses, the starting point for the Genius Hour work was a small group study of literature circle texts highlighting the use of dystopia in literature.

Clusters of students reading texts such as Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, and George Orwell’s Brave New World investigated topics as widely varied as the scientific causes for the devastation portrayed in a novel to the complex web of allusions employed by an author in constructing a work, exploring questions or ideas in the course of this Genius Hour work that were inspired by their texts. Students recorded their explorations on a Google Spreadsheet shared with the instructor.

The process was, at times, uncomfortable for learners, who expressed varying degrees of security with the Genius Hour model; Jamal (all student names are pseudonyms) noted, “I was overwhelmed with the amount of freedom of knowledge and personal choice I was given. . . . I finally allowed myself to . . . uncover new questions I had. . . . Eventually, I began to recognize that my searches all have a connection of some sort” (2015). In a variation on the original implementation plan, the students’ work was further differentiated through careful instructor interaction with each individual’s learning needs (see tabs at https://goo.gl/a3Y1zp). The teacher’s interaction with each student’s inquiry work was characterized by parallel research and predictive suggestions based on the widely varying research avenues each student pursued during the Genius Hour sessions. Alexia, for example, was inspired by The Handmaid’s Tale to explore the relationship between matriarchal societies, motherhood, and modern-day culture. Recommending and providing resources regarding the institution of patriarchal roles in society at varied points in history provided balance to her inquiry process and prompted her to ask questions that further refined the research question she was developing.

An important aspect of the students’ experience with the Genius Hour Project stemmed from the use of cooperative learning. Incorporating this learning process allowed students to work within “a paradigm of learning that requires subdividing the classrooms and putting kids to work in active, flexible, inquiring, hands-on teams” (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). Students were grouped according to text and/or research avenue; group members had their own individual sheet on the primary Google Spreadsheet on which they recorded the date, the source examined, the impetus for that examination, and the overall findings fostered by that source (https://goo.gl/a3Y1zp).

Peers then commented on the direction of group members’ research and considered patterns that seemed to be developing in the course of those explorations. Students responded positively to direct feedback from peers. Fatima remarked,

It was extremely helpful when my group mates commented on my progress and asked important questions for me to consider . . . (and) allowed me to receive suggestions from people looking at my exploration with different perspectives. While I really appreciated receiving suggestions from others, I also found it helpful to comment on others. Even though our group had the same author, our explorations were wildly different. (2014)

Peer interactions provided learners with experience not only with the skills of critical inquiry, posing central questions, developing research plans, collecting and synthesizing information, but also with the development of the vital skills of evaluating researchers’ credibility and arguments. The instructional model also integrated a series of metacognitive checks throughout the Genius Hour
process. Student, peer, and instructor feedback was incorporated both via individual conferencing and the use of Google Forms (found at https://goo.gl/Vhy0s6). Learners were able to utilize these varied types of feedback as they created their final projects and developed their reflections about the process, the product, and their own learning.

Subsequent to the research phase of the model, students began to develop syntheses of their inquiries, considering the directions of their explorations and translating them into products including project pitches and reviews of literature. Mariana commented on realization that her inquiry process had, in fact, led to a central conclusion that she ultimately turned into a statement about the role of poetry in the modern world:

The initial research log filled out carries a distinct flow of thoughts as it is read from top to bottom. It starts with the idea of the monster in The Picture of Dorian Gray and ends with the question of whether rap is poetry. Two ideas that seem unrelated are united by the thread of my research. I looked at this thread as a whole when crafting my initial pitch for the project. (2015)

Students created and/or conducted Genius Hour projects that were shared with the whole group in brief (five- to seven-minute) presentations. Not surprisingly, products ranged considerably, reflecting students’ distinct interpretations and understandings of the topics they had refined and also focused upon furthering their individual skill sets: students’ original musical compositions set to a backdrop of digital storytelling, scientific analyses of climate change and subsequent effects on human life, digital public service announcements considering the roles of bystanders and victims during wartime.

The role of the teacher during the project. (2015) was not the case. In fact, I may have learned more about my own topic after I had presented than in the weeks following the presentation of their work. Students quickly realized that the Genius Hour process had by no means ended with the presentation of their work; indeed, Frank noted, “Following the presentation, one may have felt that the learning was over, yet I soon discovered this was not the case. In fact, I may have learned more about my own topic after I had presented than in the weeks and months leading up to the final project.” (2015)

**Reflections**

Ultimately, the student performance levels demonstrated irrefutably a central truth: Genius Hour work builds investiture in the learning process by meeting students at their own level and empowering them to surpass that level every step of the way. The words of the students themselves provide the greatest motivation to an instructor to embark on the challenge and the promise of incorporating differentiated, critical inquiry into the classroom. The reflection of one student, Tomas, echoed the words of many others: “[The Genius Hour project] was a fantastic use of time in the classroom for me . . . [and] also allowed me to gain different perspectives about my book and the way the author viewed the events of 1945. It also allowed me to gain more background knowledge about subjects I was not particularly well-versed in. . . Overall, the genius hour was fantastic way for me to learn more” (2014).

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**References**


