What Does It Take for a Project to be “Authentic”?  
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Everyone thinks that Project Based Learning has something to do with “authentic” learning. But not everyone agrees what this means.

Take this quick quiz:

Which of the following projects could be called authentic?

a) Students learn about endangered species in their region and take action to protect them, including a public awareness campaign, habitat restoration field work, and communication with local government officials.

b) Students design and create a calendar with pictures and information about endangered species, which they sell at a pre-winter break community event and donate the money to an environmental organization.

c) Students play the role of scientists who need to make recommendations to an environmental organization about how to protect endangered species in various ecosystems around the world.

To authenticity purists, a project is not really authentic unless it is in the real world, connected directly to the lives of students and real issues their communities. By this standard, choice “a” above certainly qualifies, and maybe “b”, but probably not “c”.

But I think the answer is “d) all of the above.”

There is a sliding scale of authenticity in PBL, which goes from “Not Authentic” to “Somewhat Authentic” to “Fully Authentic.”

“Not authentic” means the work students do does not resemble the kind of work done in the world outside of school or it is not intended
to have an effect on anything apart from an academic purpose. A not-authentic project would involve the kind of assignment students are typically given in school: compose an essay, create a poster or model, write and present a book report, or make a PowerPoint presentation on a topic they've researched. Beyond their teacher and maybe their classmates there’s no public audience for students’ work, no one actually uses what they create, and the work they do is not what people do in the real world.

“Somewhat authentic” means students are doing work that simulates what happens in the world outside of school. In a project that is somewhat authentic, students could play a role (as in choice “c” above): scientists, engineers, advisors to the President, or website designers who are placed in a scenario that reflects what might actually occur in the real world. Or students could create products that, although they are not actually going to be used by people in the real world, are the kinds of products people do use.

“Fully authentic” means students are doing work that is real to them—it is authentic to their lives—or the work has a direct impact on or use in the real world. The “real world,” by the way, could still be school, which is a very real place for students. In these projects, like choices “a” and “b” above, students might advocate for a cause; take action to improve their community; perform a service for someone; create a physical artifact to display or distribute, or express their own ideas about a topic in various media.

A project can be authentic in four ways, some of which may be combined in one project:

1. It meets a real need in the world beyond the classroom or the products students create are used by real people.

For example:

- Students propose designs for a new play area in a nearby park.
- Students plan and execute an environmental clean-up effort in their community.
• Students create a website for young people about books they like.
• Students write a guide and produce podcasts for visitors to historic sites in their county.
• Students serve as consultants to local businesses, advising them on how to increase sales to young people.
• Students develop a conflict resolution plan for their school.

2. It focuses on a problem or an issue or topic that is relevant to students’ lives—the more directly, the better—or on a problem or issue that is actually being faced by adults in the world students will soon enter.

For example:

• Students create multimedia presentations that explore the question, “How do we make and lose friends?”
• Students learn physics by investigating the question, “Why don’t I fall off my skateboard?”
• Students form task forces to study possible effects of climate change on their community and recommend actions that could be taken.
• Students decide whether the U.S. should intervene in a conflict inside another country that is causing a humanitarian crisis.

3. It sets up a scenario or simulation that is realistic, even if it is fictitious.

For example:

• Students are asked by the Archbishop of Mexico in 1819 to recommend a location for the next mission in California.
• Students act as architects who need to design a theatre that holds the maximum number of people, given constraints of available land, cost, safety, comfort, etc.
• Students play the role of United Nations advisors to a country that has just overthrown a dictator and needs advice about how to start a democracy.
Students recommend which planet in our solar system ought to be explored by the next space probe as they compete for NASA funding.

Students are asked to propose ideas for a new TV reality show that educates viewers about science topics such as evolutionary biology and climate change.

4. **It involves tools, tasks, standards, or processes used by adults in real settings and by professionals in the workplace. This criteria for authenticity could apply to any of the above examples of projects.**

For example:

- Students investigating the physics of skateboarding test various surfaces for speed, using the scientific method and tools scientists use.
- Students exploring the issue of how we make and lose friends conduct surveys, analyze data, record video interviews, and use online editing tools to assemble their presentations.
- Students acting as U.N advisors to an emerging democracy analyze existing constitutions, write formal reports, and present recommendations to a panel.

I agree that fully authentic projects are often the most powerful and effective ones, because they are so engaging for students and allow them to feel like they can have an impact on their world—so the more of them, the better. But if you can’t get there yet, don’t feel like you’re failing the authenticity test in your projects. Some is still better than none!