How might educators help young people respond to current and future challenges of a changing world? In this article, I describe how educators can design Legacy Projects to provide young people with opportunities to make positive and lasting differences in their lives, schools, communities, and beyond. The connection between legacy projects and the kinds of transformative leadership skills outlined in Sternberg’s (2017) Active Concerned Citizenship And Ethical Leadership (ACCEL) model is also discussed.

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Moreover, preparing young people to more productively engage with current and future challenges of a changing world is a collective responsibility among educators, young people, families, community members, and relevant external experts (Beghetto, 2016a). It also requires a willingness to start the work today, in the here and now (Beghetto, 2016b, in preparation). The question then becomes: How might we assume this responsibility?

In what follows, I discuss how educators can assume this responsibility by designing and implementing student-directed, legacy projects. As will be discussed, such projects provide young people with opportunities to develop and apply the kinds of skills outlined in Sternberg’s Active Concerned Citizenship and Ethical Leadership model (ACCEL; Sternberg, 2017).

LEGACY PROJECTS

Legacy projects refer here to student-directed, creative endeavors aimed at making a lasting contribution by addressing complex challenges in students’ lives, schools, communities, and beyond. Like similar efforts (e.g., Boss, 2015; Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2004; Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999; Torrance & Torrance, 1978), legacy projects require...
students to tackle real-world problems and push academic learning outside the walls of the classroom (Beghetto & Breslow, in press). Legacy projects also require students to collaborate with external partners and produce solutions that live beyond the life of the project (Beghetto, 2016a).

A group of bilingual high school students who design and maintain a translation service to provide Spanish-speaking families in their community with access to educational, health, and community-based information would be an example of a legacy project. A program developed by sixth-grade students to help ease the yearly transition from elementary school to middle school by establishing meaningful connections between fifth- and sixth-grade students would be another example.

In my work with preservice and practicing teachers, I have used the following design questions (in conjunction with other planning materials and activities1) to help them plan student-directed, legacy projects:

1. **What is the problem?** Problem identification is the first stage in developing legacy projects. Candidate problems can be identified by teachers as part of their regular academic curriculum or can be generated by students. The key is spending time exploring and identifying issues relevant to students and their broader communities.

2. **Why does it matter?** Once students have identified candidate problems, the next step is to develop a rationale for why these problems need to be addressed. This includes ensuring that students can communicate the importance of these problems to others so they can obtain support and assistance from external partners.

3. **What are we going to do about it?** This third question is what differentiates legacy projects from typical academic experiences. Although students often learn about challenging, real-world problems and even discuss ways in which they might be addressed, few have an opportunity or expectation to do something about such problems. Taking action is how we move from what currently is to what could and should be (Beghetto, 2016a, 2016b).

4. **What lasting legacy will our work leave as a result of addressing this problem?** This fourth question requires students to take a long view on solutions to problems and plan for ways to sustain, maintain, and curate the work. The question gets at the core defining and distinguishing feature of legacy projects. Put simply, legacy projects make a lasting contribution. A group of third-graders who, for instance, develop a rooftop garden to help supply a local food kitchen with fresh produce for hungry families would also need to establish a plan to ensure that subsequent groups of third-graders inherit and assume responsibility for the garden.

**LEGACY PROJECTS AS A CONTEXT FOR DEVELOPING ACCEL SKILLS**

What makes legacy projects so promising for developing the kinds of transformative leadership skills outlined by Sternberg’s (2017) ACCEL model is that they require young people (and adults) to actually engage with the kinds of problems that matter to them and the broader community. Moreover, legacy projects require students to tackle ill-defined problems (Pretz, Naples, & Sternberg, 2003), which have no clear solutions or predetermined procedures for solving such problems (Beghetto, 2016b; in preparation). Consequently, when students work on legacy projects, they likely will experience states of genuine doubt (Beghetto & Schreiber, 2016; Burks, 1946), which will require them to think and act in new ways (Beghetto, 2016b).

Taken together, the features of legacy projects provide students with opportunities to address complex challenges facing them, their communities, and beyond. Consequently, legacy projects can provide students with first-hand experiences of the core principles of Sternberg’s model: Active Concerned Citizenship and Ethical Leadership. In fact, the attributes of the ACCEL model can be directly incorporated into the design of Legacy Projects by extending the design questions to more directly tap into the kinds of analytical, creative, practical, wisdom-based and ethical thinking outlined in Sternberg’s ACCEL model (see Table 1).

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

We live in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing world: a world that requires current and future generations of young people to have the capacity to take on and successfully address the complex and ill-defined challenges they face. Legacy projects offer one way for educators to help cultivate this capacity. Whether and how legacy projects might better prepare young people to develop the specific skills outlined in Sternberg’s ACCEL model remains an open, empirical question. As such, legacy projects represent an educational experiment. The good news is legacy projects are a low investment, yet potentially high-reward experiment. All it takes to launch a legacy project is a bit of imagination and a willingness to make slight adjustments to one’s existing curriculum (Beghetto, 2016a; in preparation).

Although there are inspiring examples of educators and young people who have addressed complex challenges with remarkable results (Beghetto, 2016a), such efforts tend to be infrequent and unsystematic. What if legacy projects were more widespread and more systematically incorporated into students’ educational experiences? What if all students, at all levels, had opportunities to participate in projects aimed at making
a positive, meaningful, and lasting contribution to their schools, communities, and beyond? What impact would it make? Again, these are open questions that require subsequent empirical exploration. But one question, which seems to have a crystal clear answer, is, How can we expect young people to be able to solve the complex challenges they will face if they have never been given an opportunity to engage with such problems in their present schooling experience?

NOTE

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REFERENCES


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