Project-Based Approaches to Historical Inquiry

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Project-based learning typically involves tasks that are complex and open-ended.

One challenge is to gather data that will capture this complexity and ‘open-endedness.’
Having met this challenge, one is faced with another: how to make sense of a rich body of qualitative data?
Traditionally, the starting point would be some version of grounded theory. But what version?
For me as a practicing sociologist, the challenge is to find the right balance between theory-driven research and research that is informed by grounded theory.
There is no shortage of learning theories and many are relevant to the kinds of learning processes we have documented.
But those who conduct research on learning are only now beginning to appreciate the social dimensions of learning.

Moreover, we still know very little about the mechanisms of learning when learning tasks are complex and open-ended.
One way to formulate a research question is therefore:
What are the distinctive features of learning when tasks are complex and open-ended?

What are the strengths of this approach to learning?

What are its potential weaknesses or inherent challenges?
To begin to answer these questions we are working to provide a detailed account of the learning processes of two students.
Both students found topics that captured their imaginations and engaged their interests.

For both students this phase of the learning processes was ‘sparked’ or driven forward by contact with visiting experts.
One student move successfully through a multi-phase sequence of tasks and presented her project or 'performance' at the regional heritage fair.
For the other student, the learning process was stalled when he had difficulty finding sufficient information to investigate his topic.
There is wide agreement that one of the strengths of project-based learning is that it encourages students to exercise their imaginations and pursue their interests.
But associated with the project-based approach is a challenge: to sustain the interests of students over extended periods of time.
To do well in these circumstances, one would expect students would need high levels of self-regulation.
Students would need to possess a willingness to persist in the face of frustration (as when a student researcher cannot find the information he needs).
But in the situation a student has an opportunity to learn something about self-regulation.
It is quite possible that given the right scaffolding at a key moment a student might learn to think creatively and persist when confronted by a 'gap' in the relevant source material.
There are, then, two key ‘sensitizing ideas’ from the world of learning theory the help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of project-based learning.
One is the idea of interest. Our data will allow us to describe the path of emergent interests and to determine the factors that spark and sustain them over time.
The other is the related idea of self-regulation. Self-regulation, the ability to manage one's learning, is especially important when tasks are complex and open-ended.
I should add that while there are many accounts of the merits of project-based learning, we know very little about the specific links between project-based learning and the development of historical thinking.
How do students benefit from historical field trips?

How do they make sense of direct encounters with historical landscapes and artefacts?
Conventional templates for assessing progress in historical thinking rarely address these fundamental questions.
Students typically encounter history in texts. How do they respond (emotionally and cognitively) when they encounter history as an experientially given (rather than a textually mediated) reality?
In such circumstances, what are the milestones of progress in historical thinking?
We are hoping the data we have gathered will help us understand questions like these.