



TEXAS STUDY

Vol. XX, No. 2

OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Spring 2011

The Texas Association of Secondary School Principals

**Create and Nurture Your
Own Educational Experts!**

Product Oriented Education

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Product Oriented Education (POE) is an instructional model designed to engage and involve students in the learning process as producers of knowledge, not just the typical consumers of a teacher-directed lesson. This approach to learning requires front-loading lessons with well-defined plans that turn the learning over to the students. This approach usually involves a problem-based learning situation with the intention of a student, or a group of students, resolving a problem and/or producing a product. This process requires students to be fully engaged in the learning. In addition, students are required to do varying degrees of research and preparation during the lesson timeline.

The primary goals of Product Oriented Education are to help students develop: 1) knowledge production skills; 2) collaborative learning and interpersonal skills; 3) effective information management skills; 4) the skills necessary to effectively allocate time, money, materials, space and personnel; 5) systems analysis, design and integration skills; 6) the skills necessary to select, apply, maintain and troubleshoot technologies; and 7) the capacity for self-renewal. It is easy to see that these are the same skills students need in order to be ready for college or the world of work.

POE was developed as a result of my own teaching experiences and from the experiences of some of the best teachers I have worked with over my 38-year career in education. I formally began the development of the POE instructional model in 1992 while I was a 5A high school principal. I began with a couple of integrated pilot block programs in a regular seven-period day schedule. The first program included Algebra 1, Biology 1 and English 1 teachers and 68 students in a three hour block class. The second program included English III and Art III teachers and 30 at-risk female students in a two hour block class. Teachers in both programs were instructed to focus on the POE model and to integrate the content where it was appropriate. For example, probability in algebra and genetics in biology can be taught in an integrated manner. Probability and photosynthesis may not be a good match, so don't try to force content integration in that case. Both programs were implemented in the spring semester and proved to be very successful. For example, in both programs the students experienced a reduction in failures, tardies, discipline referrals and in-school suspension assignments. There were virtually no discipline problems in either of the two blocks. Grades improved for a majority of the students. Student satisfaction surveys revealed: 1) 77 percent looked forward to coming to school; 2) 72 percent reported an improved attitude toward school; 3) 84 percent reported

that their parents were more satisfied with this program over regular classes; 4) 70 percent said they felt a sense of belonging in these classes; 5) 80 percent reported better communication with their teachers; 6) 88 percent stated that the POE teachers really cared about them; and 7) 77 percent reported that they were more successful in school as a result of the POE program.

What does a POE lesson look like? One story that I love to tell came from the two-hour English/Art block. One of the lessons involved teaching the students creative writing, calligraphy and illustrations. This group of at-risk female students was given the challenge of writing a children's literature story. The English teacher, Judy Radigan, taught the students the basic principles of creative writing, and they researched the rest. The art teacher, Suzanne Peterson, taught them the principles of calligraphy and illustration. Each student wrote a children's literature story using calligraphy and their own illustrations on 11 X 18 pieces of poster board. They tied the pages together with shoestrings. They were amazingly beautiful productions. I offered the students \$50 for any of the books they produced. How many do I own? None! They refused to sell them because they were so proud of what they had made. That is Product Oriented Education.

Another example of a POE lesson comes from my experiences as a sociology teacher. In short, as part of a unit on "culture," students, in cooperative learning groups, were required to study Wissler's Universal Cultural Outline and develop a preliterate culture of their own based on that outline. This lesson required the students to develop a description of their culture for each category in the outline. They had to develop and describe cultural characteristics such as family systems and child rearing practices. An interesting part of the lesson was when these groups of high school students had to agree on the child rearing practices that would prevail in their culture. They had very definite opinions about child rearing. Needless to say, this generated some lively discussions. Then they had to predict the types of personality characteristics that would develop in their culture. The products were outstanding. Students can be very creative when given the freedom to develop their own versions of "knowledge."

Over the past many years, I have worked with a number of teachers to improve the quality of their teaching utilizing the POE model. I have seen teachers and students experience similar types of successful results by turning students into producers of knowledge. Currently, in Greenville ISD we are stressing the POE model, especially in the secondary grades and in all types of classes. In our engineering class

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Instead of planning a typical lesson with explanations and illustrations of the content, the teacher begins with a question or series of questions that require the students to research the issues involved and develop their own response to the questions. Based on their research, information learned, etc., the student(s) produce a final product or demonstration of the learning.

where the students developed their own one-seat electric “car,” they learned more about physics, horsepower, design principles, safety, gear ratios, transference of power, etc., than they would ever learn in a regular classroom. The fastest car reached the speed of 23 miles per hour. Students in a physics class made roller coasters out of popsicle sticks and learned more about potential and kinetic energy than they would ever learn in a lecture hall. The bottom line is that teachers and students can be far more creative in a POE model lesson than in most standard lesson formats. The challenge is to find the time for this innovative method in our standards-based learning environment to develop these types of lessons. However, I submit that it can and must be done since the concepts taught are learned with more depth and understanding, and the analysis and synthesis tasks becomes easier for the students to master. Students’ ability to analyze problems and develop solutions is greatly enhanced in POE lessons.

So how do teachers develop POE types of lessons? First, I would tell most principals that you probably already have a few teachers on your campus utilizing some of the POE concepts. Find them and examine some of their lessons as potential models. Typically, a teacher, or team of teachers, begins with a state standard or clearly defined segment of the subject content that is to be mastered by the students. A professional learning community of subject area or grade level teachers can be very creative in applying POE concepts and developing lessons. Instead of planning a typical lesson with explanations and illustrations of the content, the teacher begins with a question or series of questions that require the students to research the issues involved and develop their own response to the questions. Based on their research, information learned, etc., the student(s) produce a final product or demonstration of the learning. This approach to learning works very well in lessons involving integrated content. For example, instead of lecturing to students about the Oregon Trail, have the students, in cooperative committees, plan a mid-19th century wagon train trip west. They will be required to determine who will make the journey, what they will need to take, what they will need in the way of foodstuff, what time of year they will begin the journey, how they will defend and protect themselves, how will they cross rivers, etc. Each of those issues will require research using primary sources and records such as diaries. A lesson of this type can include geographical concepts, creative writing, ar-

tistic creations, government concepts, etc. Obviously, this can be a very rich learning experience. The final product may include things like hand drawn maps with important landmarks noted; a compact of written instructions for all the participants to follow; a model of a Conestoga wagon; student-made jerky and canned goods, etc. Needless to say, during this process teachers will be required to provide some direct instructions to individual students, small groups of students and/or the larger class. However, during most of the lesson students will be engaged in self-directed or small group directed learning situations.

What are the results of effective implementation of Product Oriented Education? First, students take more ownership for their learning. They realize what they learn in school has real-world applications. Second, students improve presentation skills and increase their self-confidence because they are required to demonstrate what they have learned. Third, the college and work readiness skills of students are enhanced. Fourth, assessments focus on products that work, not just the “right” answer. Fifth, leaning experiences increase in relevance and increase student motivation. Sixth, graduates leave high schools with skills that will come closer to matching the needs of the job market. Finally, time becomes a resource and learning becomes non-negotiable.

The practical principal may want to know, “Will it improve test scores?” Yes it will! When students begin to master the tools of our trade and switch from typical consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge their ability to analyze and solve problems increases. Teachers find more satisfaction in teaching when students are motivated and self-directed. If you would like more free information on POE, feel free to email me at jefferiesd@greenvilleisd.com.