

Show & Tell / Designing Relevant Learning

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"Why do we have to do this?" "Why are we learning this?" These are wonderful questions for students to ask.

We didn't always think so. In fact, we used to be frustrated when our students challenged us with such questions. Now we know that these questions mean that students are looking for relevance in their learning—and giving us an opportunity to make connections between the content and their lives.

Relevance Is Key

It's not just students; we all search for relevance in our learning. For example, the two of us recently attended a seminar about having hard conversations. Actually, we were assigned to attend; we really didn't have a choice. Much like our own students, we were not sure that the information would be meaningful. In fact, we were skeptical.

When we arrived, it was clear that we were expected to learn and participate. Each table contained instructional materials and name cards that included question stems and expectations. The instructor began by stating the learning objectives for the day. That was unsurprising; most teachers do that. But more important, she took a few minutes to make a connection with our work and personal lives, sharing her thinking about the usefulness of the information we would learn and informing us that we would engage in a case study from our own workplaces. Further, she told us we would have four different conversations with four different people during the day as our case studies developed.

Just that fast, she had our attention. We were hooked—or, in the language of education, we were motivated to learn. We were willing to try to complete the tasks that she assigned because we not only understood their relevance to our own lives, but also anticipated that we would be engaged in interesting, collaborative tasks with other learners.

And that's what's missing from a lot of schooling. Teachers may share the day's learning target with students, but often they don't communicate *why* students should learn the information. In other words, the learning is not purpose-driven.

Teachers can ensure that learning is purpose-driven for students in a number of ways. Sometimes, we can relate the learning to life outside the classroom. Other times, the relevance comes from students' satisfaction in building their own competence, as is the case when students develop their writing skills or collaborate to solve complex problems. And sometimes learning is done simply for learning's sake: We tell our students, "Educated citizens in a democracy know this, and you are a part of that citizenry."

See It in Action

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept14/vol72/num01/Designing-Relevant-Learning.aspx>

In the video clip that accompanies this column ([see video below](#)), a high school math teacher invites her students into learning geometry (specifically, mid-segments of triangles) by letting them know that this is one way that volcanologists measure volcanoes. Later in the lesson, she notes that they could also use this information to build a prop for a movie. These brief comments suggest how the learning has relevance in the world beyond school.

But motivation is fickle, and it's not as simple as making a connection with students at the outset of the lesson. We have to maintain their interest. Back in 1757, Edmund Burke wrote,

Curiosity is the most superficial of all the affections; it changes its object perpetually; it has an appetite which is very sharp, but very easily satisfied; and it has always had an appearance of giddiness, restlessness and anxiety.¹

As our "hard conversations" teacher did, after capturing students' attention we need to create purpose within the lesson itself. In the video, the teacher achieves this goal by giving students engaging, collaborative tasks. She does not tell students the properties of the mid-segments of triangles; she asks them to figure it out. They analyze data, compare their findings with those of others, and solve complex problems. In general, the collaborative tasks that motivate students the most are complex; they require that students use academic language and their argumentative skills to work together to create a product.

Your Turn

As you approach your next unit of instruction, consider the relevance and applicability of the information you'll teach. You might want to post a relevancy statement in the classroom. Here's a template:

We are learning about [topic], which is important because this knowledge is used by [profession] to [out-of-classroom connection]. But that's not the only reason to learn about [topic]. We use this as learners to [academic connection]. Finally, knowing more about [topic] will provide us with some important knowledge as we become global citizens!

The teacher in the video established relevance by having her students work both together and individually—for example, to summarize their observations in a data table and then analyze that data. The teacher in our "hard conversations" seminar used a quadrant partner activity so that we were accountable to four other people for specific conversations and products. No matter what instructional routine we use, we can motivate students when we clearly communicate the purpose of the learning and then involve students in complex tasks that provide significant amounts of accountable interaction.

¹ Burke, E. (1757/2008). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (reissue edition). London: Oxford University Press, p. 29.