

Make Meaning and Purpose Key Elements of Teaching and Learning

By
Elliott Seif*

I recently posted a commentary on ASCD Edge about research-based beliefs about teaching and learning and their implications. The first one was:

Learning is purposeful and contextual. Therefore, students should be able to see the purpose in what they are asked to learn. To create purpose, pose relevant and “essential” questions, create meaningful challenges, conduct investigations, and/or use inquiry/problem-based learning strategies.

This commentary elaborates on that belief, suggests its importance, and describes more ways to implement it.

Do you ever wonder why history facts that students have learned are not remembered after they are taught? Why many recent graduates can't make change when they work at McDonalds? Why so many students remember so little from their previous grade level and courses?

Powerful learning is purposeful, meaningful, and contextual to the learner! We are more likely to remember the times tables when we use it to find an area, or quickly figure out how much six of any one item will cost us. Addition and subtraction skills are more likely remembered when they frequently help us make and get change. Historical facts stay with us when they help us examine an issue in history and think about present day issues. Writing skills are less likely to atrophy if they help us communicate a powerful story or communicate a coherent and well thought out point of view that is acknowledged by others.

Unfortunately, much of the time math and writing skills and historical facts are learned without enough application, without context, or without personal meaning. Math skills are learned as repetitious algorithms, sometimes with 25 similar problems at a time. Writing is boiled down to the five-paragraph essay formula. Historical facts are memorized in order to do well on the multiple-choice test. So why would our students remember facts and be able to apply skills? Why would they become good writers and use their voice to create meaningful communication?

Standardized tests only compound the problem. Almost all standardized test questions are “decontextualized” through isolated multiple choice, matching, or fill-in-the-blank questions, short, artificial reading passages, decontextualized problems, and short essays that are mostly designed to see if students remember isolated facts or use low level

**Elliott Seif is a long time educator, teacher, college professor, curriculum director, ASCD author and Understanding by Design trainer.*

thinking skills. Even tests of writing skills use artificial, formulaic rubrics to rate students on how well they did in their writing, sometimes scored by computers!

While there are some people who are good at remembering isolated facts and figures, for most of us information and data fade away unless we integrate and connect them to previous learning or figure out how to use them in meaningful ways. Only when we find some use for our learning, some purpose, and use what we learn frequently in different contexts do we store it in a place for ready recall. When this doesn't happen, students are more likely to do poorly on tests that measure knowledge or apply skills that have been taught and supposedly learned over time.

What makes learning purposeful and contextual? My next door neighbor's daughter, age 7, is constantly coming into our house with math mysteries -- giving us math problems to solve on the calculator. She loves to do that. She's practicing her math skills on us! When my daughter was younger, she and a cousin would go around the house measuring the area of everything. The well-known math teacher, Kay Toliver, has created a series of materials and DVD's that demonstrate her engaging teaching strategies, and in one of them she takes walks around the local school community with her students to discover how the math that she is teaching can be used to figure out the price of an item in a store, or to measure the area of a playground¹.

Unfortunately, much of today's commercial curricula and curriculum standards are focused on covering too much knowledge and teaching too many skills learned in too short a period of time! In Philadelphia, where I live, the social studies curriculum standards are chock full of so much content, taught in such short periods of time, that it is virtually impossible to teach social studies with any meaning and purpose. Over the years, I've examined too many curriculum guides and standards, observed too many teachers, watched too much passivity among students, and read too many traditional tests that emphasize the learning of too many inconsequential facts, trivial skills, and/or global generalities. For some reason, in a world of search engines that enable us to find large amounts of knowledge instantaneously, many still think that the more knowledge students are taught, the more educated they are. We've got to come around to the idea that meaningful learning puts greater emphasis on asking good questions, learning how to inquire, focusing on a relatively few core ideas and powerful learning to learn skills, giving students something important to think about, applying learning to new and novel situations, communicating well, giving them a reason to learn something, and slowing down the learning process.

We as educators need to concentrate on and share ways to make learning more purposeful and meaningful for our students. We need to develop good reasons for students to learn what we think is important, put more learning in a larger context, help students make connections and develop networks of learning, and provide more opportunities to apply learning. Purpose and meaning can come in very different forms. Poetry or art education classes might include a discussion of the meaning of a poem or artwork, a comparison of poems or artwork from the same author or artist, and an opportunity for students to write their own poems or create their own artwork in the style

of the author or artist. A history teacher might discuss what it was like to live in a different time and place and then explore the question: which time period would you rather live in? A statistics teacher might ask a group of students to create and conduct a survey, and then to tabulate reliable and valid survey data. Sometimes meaning and purpose is created simply by emphasizing the fun of solving mysteries and puzzles, of conducting a research project on something of interest, or of being hooked by a good story.

The current emphasis on “standards” and standardized tests that promote out of context learning, without connections, without motivation and engagement, and without meaningful inquiry is one of the most serious problem in education today. The emphasis in many high schools on taking Advanced Placement tests that include too much knowledge and not enough meaningful and purposeful activity only exacerbates the problem. In place of AP classes, high schools need to offer in-depth elective seminars on a variety of topics that broaden student’s critical and creative thinking and interests, promote discussion, and offer opportunities for research into questions of interest. We need to increase the emphasis at all levels on implementing performance tasks and research projects that help students apply learning and see connections to the outside world. And we need to offer more opportunities for students to interact with the world outside classrooms and schools.

There are ways to do this, and some are already available. *Understanding by Design*, published by ASCD, has at its core a planning process that promotes the development of unit based essential questions, big ideas that isolate critical knowledge and skills, performance tasks, and interactive, engaging instruction. Project and problem-based design models, such as the project design approach developed by Buck Institute (www.bie.org) also promote meaningful, purposeful learning. Curricula already exist that focus on clarity of purpose, relevance, depth, contextual and meaningful learning².

Until teachers, schools and districts spend more time finding ways to make learning more purposeful, and to engage students in more meaningful learning, we will be teaching too much decontextualized information, ideas and skills that are hard to remember and limited in their usefulness. In a world of so much information and the technology that enables people to find information quickly, literally in the blink of an eye, some purposeless, sterile, decontextualized learning is bound to be part of the educational experience. But without a long-term focus on creating a more meaningful curriculum, too many educational experiences will be built around a traditional learning model that doesn’t provide enough children with purposeful, context driven, and motivating learning experiences.

Let’s hope that we all come to our senses soon and make meaning and purpose a much larger focus of educational planning and practical implementation in a 21st century world.

¹ For further information on her materials, search Kay Toliver or go to: http://www.fasenet.org/store/kay_toliver/#

² For examples of purpose and meaning based curriculum materials, go to:
www.era3learning.org/resources/curriculum.