

ED 3780

Part I: Contemporary Learning Experiences

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Introduction

Irrelevant! These materials are intended particularly for anyone who has ever felt at some point in his or her education that what he or she was studying was irrelevant. Just about everyone has had at least an inkling of that at some time and so should be able to empathize with the many students who go through the school day in a state of semi-consciousness, anticipating the time when they can get out the school door and get into something that "really makes a difference." Many teachers have been shocked to learn of the great amounts of time and effort expended on school-like activities in non-school settings by students they had considered unwilling to work.

Unorthodox! In these materials you will encounter a number of suggestions which might be used to help make study in your classroom more nearly related to the world outside of the school. For want of a better term, we have called this "contemporary learning." You will also be exposed to a somewhat unorthodox view of the fundamental purpose of the curriculum, as well as some pretty basic teaching techniques. Finally, you will be asked to look closely at the content of your own subject discipline in an effort to discover elements which might particularly lend themselves to contemporary learning activities.

Finding meaning. The ability to do the things these materials teach will not, by themselves, make you a successful teacher. However, skilled application of the attitudes and techniques which are inherent in this study will enable you to enhance the learning of your students to the point that you should be able to expect a higher level of achievement and fewer problem behaviors from almost any type of class. If students can find meaning for themselves in your classes, they will come to respect you as a teacher who respects them.

Teaching Here and Now: The meaning and place of contemporary learning in the curriculum

Definition: Contemporary teaching is best defined as the implementation of learning activities which draw upon students' experiences, both in and out of the classroom, thus helping them to recognize that they are developing specific skills which they perceive to be significant for the world outside of school as they see it.

If we are to generalize about the world of the students we observe in secondary schools, it would probably consist mainly of television, rock music, junk food, and hanging out with their friends. School and home activities would often be relegated to the category of "necessary but unimportant" by many. If we can find ways to make school somehow seem more part of "real life," we can enjoy increased motivation and greater learning in our classes. The term "contemporary learning" is used to represent a wide variety of teaching elements intended to bring the modern world into the classroom. This approach has four fundamental characteristics:

1. integrated SKILL learning
2. PERSONALIZATION
3. learner INVOLVEMENT
4. immediate FEEDBACK.

It is important for today's teachers to be aware of and utilize these components within their classrooms. Let's define each of these characteristics.

SKILL Learning as a Basis for Instruction

Almost everywhere except school, "what can you do?" is a primary criterion for our evaluation of others, whether it is in job placement or in our selection of a place to eat. In school, the criterion is "what do you know?" Now, there should really be no difference between those two, and they actually are a great deal more similar than they might appear, but the difference is a matter of perception. Maturity helps us to see that what we know is very much a factor of what we can do. Unfortunately, this sort of maturity is one of the last developmental stages, so we spend most of the time conforming to the perception which says that actions speak louder than words, and often miss profound insights even when they arise in our minds, because they lack the substance of action.

The thing that is saddest about all of this is that schools could easily take on that substance if they were directed toward skill learning integrated with concept learning. Every teacher should be able to identify a number of functional skills which students need to develop if they are to be productive in a study of his or her subject. Early studies of learning held to the theory that the mind is like a muscle, so that exercise

(memorization) is good for it. That theory has now been widely refuted as it relates to the mind. However, many of us still conduct our classes as though the exercise of memorizing large quantities of facts or learning highly specialized vocabularies constitutes the primary purpose of those classes. Almost no subject area, except possibly those whose exclusive function is performance, such as music, is safe from its criticism.

Perhaps the way to change our image would be if we could come to see the content of the curriculum as a means to an end rather than as the end itself. The adoption of this view results in a changed perception of the teacher's responsibility to teach all of the concepts which make up a particular discipline. Eventually, even the most dogmatic adherent of any discipline is forced to come to grips with the reality which says that it is impossible to teach (or learn) all of just about anything. That may be because most things are changing at such a dramatic rate these days, or it may simply be a matter of storage capacity. Whatever the reason, the result is specialization which has been defined by some cynic as learning "progressively more and more about progressively less and less." Everyone does it to some extent, whether it is to specialize in the soaps on a particular network or the mating habits of some microscopic bug nobody else has heard of. Specialization is a sanity saver.

However, few, if any, of the students who you teach in your subject area in junior high, high school, or even college, will go on to make that subject area their lifework. In spite of his or her mastery of the subject and the teaching skills it involves, an individual math teacher generates few mathematicians; an English teacher educates few grammarians. The variety of academic and vocational choices available out in that big world forces us to accept this reality, and today's rapidly changing vocational scene underscores it. But a truly skilled teacher can leave a mark on that student, nevertheless, in the form of skills, attitudes, and habits of mind learned through study in a fruitful environment. Immortality for teachers past, present, and future lies in these "little things" we teach, because the "big things" are so complex they can only be seen as an amalgam of all that one has learned.

It is not difficult to put together a group of quite generic skills that teachers have focused on for generations. Try to identify the subject areas from which each might be learned.

1. Read, write, speak, listen, think effectively.
2. Use research tools (dictionary, library, Internet, etc.) effectively.
3. Observe the world and immediate surroundings perceptively.
4. Look for, recognize, and accept similarities and differences.
5. Distinguish between fact and opinion.
6. Recognize the need to support ideas with evidence, and be able to do so.
7. Attack and solve problems systematically.
8. Formulate appropriate personal, academic, social, and vocational goals.
9. View events objectively.
10. Accept responsibility for personal actions.

11. Use available tools as an effective supplement for intellectual and/or mechanical effort.

Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of the skills schools might help students develop, and that even the skills listed above will not be mastered at the end of high school or college. It is important that we keep such a list of skills in mind, however, and try to employ learning experiences in our classrooms that will contribute to students' development of the skills we have selected. Until we stop assuming that our students will develop these skills somewhere in the process of learning the content of our subject, we will generally fail in teaching them. When we employ our content as a vehicle by which students master specific skills, we may be able to teach both skills and content concepts.

PERSONALIZING Learning

Efforts to bring the "stuff" of instruction to mesh with the lives of our students are inherent in the skill learning approach described above, but there are sufficient differences between the two concepts to merit separate consideration here. The term is used here to mean using the experiences of our student to motivate them to learn. We might call this opportunistic teaching because the teacher will be drawing upon things that are often part of the daily lives of ordinary people when they can be applied to the learning activities of his/her class. What is happening around school? What have they seen on television recently? What elements of daily life are related to the skills and concepts under study? What are some things your students are concerned about in the school, community, nation, world? Using resources such as newspaper, magazines, television, music, the Internet, etc. will bring curricular concepts alive for your students.

INVOLVING Students in Learning

An effort to involve students in the learning process represents an attempt to draw upon the old principle of active versus passive learning. It can be accomplished best by using some kind of tangible, concrete object for each student to hold or at least focus closely upon. It may, perhaps, be best identified by contrast with its opposite—the passive learner listening while the instructor talks. Reality tells us that class can't always be some new form of fun and games; and so we must compromise for activities which will involve students as actively as possible without wearing the teacher completely out or messing up the room too much.

FEEDBACK: Immediate and Specific

Teachers can learn to keep a continuous stream of feedback coming to their students through verbal reinforcers, facial expressions, hand signals, and tangible signs of completion or progress. While you may not wish to resort to such obvious efforts as certificates and trophies, you should not overlook the value of concrete symbols of progress. The tests and papers we return to our students are too often symbols of qualified success at best. A major characteristic of contemporary learning is finding out you have learned something before you have forgotten what it was.

In summary we see that **contemporary learning experiences are devices used by skilled teachers to help their students make connections between the world of school and their own world.** This not only requires a degree of originality on the part of the teacher, but may require some restructuring of one's view of subject matter content. Four qualities are inherent in contemporary learning: skill learning, personalization, involvement, and feedback.

Brain-Compatible Classroom

The 1990s are recognized as the decade of the brain. Neuroscientists made many strides in their understanding of the brain and the functions of the mind. Educational researchers and educators have attempted to use some of this information to inform classroom practices. Some of their ideas are sound, and others can be deemed “pop science.” However, with that said, we, as teachers, cannot throw everything that is known about the brain and mind out. More and more solid research will come to light in the 21st century.

One area in which awareness is growing is that of the “brain-compatible” classroom. Kovalik (1994) recognizes eight elements for brain-compatibility. Those elements are:

1. absence of threat,
2. meaningful content,
3. choices,
4. adequate time,
5. mastery,
6. immediate feedback,
7. collaboration, and
8. enriched environments.

Of this list, immediate feedback was discussed in the last section; however, all of the other elements need more definition.

Absence of Threat

The main job for the brain is survival. When the brain feels threatened, it goes into what many call “fight or flight.” The brain takes over the body, and the person either flees (physically or mentally) or fights the opponent. When students feel threatened in the classroom or even in their lives outside the classroom, their brains “shut down” and very little learning can take place. Therefore, it is imperative that as teachers we create a safe atmosphere for our students. “Put-downs” and sarcasm for either the teacher or the other students should not be tolerated. A feeling of trust and worthiness of all students must be built and fostered in the classroom. Class-building, team building, and social skill activities should be a regular part of every classroom, even in junior and senior high.

Meaningful Content

Much of what meaningful content is, was described in the paper on “contemporary learning experiences.” To be meaningful, the content needs to relate to real life. The curriculum should be age-appropriate building upon prior learning and experience. Hooking learning to the creative and sometimes the emotional parts of our brains will help the brain to bridge the learning from short-term to long-term memory.

Choices

Not all students learn the same way. This is a fact we must accept as teachers. Yet, we continually assign work in which the product is the same. Allowing students to have a choice in how they demonstrate their understanding of the concept being learned, is a great brain-compatible strategy. According to Kovalik (1994), allowing “the learner to select, organize, and experience input in preferred ways, results in more learning” (p. 54)

Adequate Time

Students need adequate time to see the patterns and relationships within their learning. Learning is not an overnight process; it is a lifetime process. Deep conceptual learning takes more time than factoid memorization. Deep learning is not “dumped” when the student walks out of the classroom. Unfortunately, this may be the one area that as teachers we have very little control. Schedules are made by administration and that bell will ring whether or not your students have “understanding” of the concept. Also, every student will need a different amount of time. Just be careful not to rush the main concepts of your discipline too quickly. In many cases, it may be better that the students understand deeply 3 or 4 concepts rather than “covering” all the concepts that make up the discipline.

Mastery

Mastery aims to take the student beyond grades to understanding. This means a change in the way we, as teachers, assess student learning. Kovalik (1994) claims that we should assess personal best in each student, not rank all students from high to low. She suggests that authentic assessment in which the students know the judging criteria in advance of the assignment is one way to assess mastery.

Collaboration

Rarely is there a job that our students will have that they will function in total isolation from their fellow human beings. Therefore, students must have the skills necessary to work with a variety of people. Practicing collaboration in the classroom is a skill that will assist them in their adult lives. Also, most research supports the notion that information that is processed in a collaborative fashion is more meaningful to the learner.

Enriched Environments

Enriched environments are classrooms in which exploration is the norm. The environment should be body compatible (not too hot/cold, comfortable, well lighted, etc.) as well as brain compatible. It should be free from clutter and should not be distracting or overstimulating. The other component of an enriched environment is in the provision of first-hand sources for the students. Kovalik calls these “being there” experiences. If those are not available (its hard to get to a rainforest from Utah), then hands-on real items, books, Internet, videos, etc. can supplement the learning.

Kovalik, S. (1994). *ITI: The model: Integrated thematic instruction* (3rd ed.). Kent, WA: Susan Kovalik & Associates.

Key Principles of Brain-Compatible Learning

Uniqueness–

Every single brain is totally unique.

Impact of high stress or threat–

Since the brain's priority is always survival, threat throws the brain into survival mode at the expense of developing higher order thinking skills.

Developmental stages of readiness–

Developmental stages vary in children. Typically a three year span of variance is considered normal.

The nature of enrichment–

The brain can grow new connections at any age. Complex, challenging experiences with feedback are best. Cognitive skills develop better with music and motor skills.

Emotions are critical to learning–

Emotions drive our attention, health, learning, meaning memory, and survival.

Memory and retrieval pathways–

Information and experiences are stored in a variety of pathways.

Emotional Intelligence: Key Skills

Self-awareness

- Recognizing and naming one's emotions
- Understanding of reasons for feelings

Self-regulation of emotion

- Verbalizing and coping with anxiety, anger, etc.
- Controlling impulses/destructive behavior
- Recognizing strengths of positive feelings

Self-monitoring and performance

- Focusing on tasks at hand
- Setting goals
- Modifying in light of feedback
- Mobilizing positive motivation
- Activating hope and optimism
- Working toward optimal performance

Empathy and perspective taking

- Learning to increase these
- Becoming a good listener
- Increasing empathy
- Understanding others' perspectives

Social skills in handling relationships

- Managing emotions in relationships
- Expressing emotions effectively
- Exercising assertiveness
- Working as part of a team
- Showing sensitivity to social cues
- Exercising social decision-making and problem solving skills
- Responding constructively

Contemporary Strategies Ideas

This packet contains seeds for ideas to be grown into contemporary learning activities in a variety of areas. They are intended to be exactly what the title suggests: seeds to get the teacher to begin thinking about ways to make the activities in the classroom relate better to the lives of the students. Possibilities are limited only by your imagination. Read the ideas from other content areas for other possibilities. Use journals from your subject area as another source for ideas.

Art

- Organize a field trip to dig up natural clay, or have students bring clay they have found. In class, sift and refine it, soak it in water, and work it into usable clay.

Business

- Assign students to assist teachers, librarians, or administrators by doing clerical work.
- Have students study the want ad section of the paper and write their own ads with attention to clarity and completeness while trying to keep the cost at a minimum.

English

- Design holiday greeting cards using original verse and/or art work. Old Christmas, Valentine, or Hanukkah, etc. cards, from home by the students for ideas or for use of the art work.
- Study news writing for patterns and style, then have students write a news item regarding some event for the novels or stories they read. Have them research and write a feature story about the characters for the selection they read.
- Analyze television commercials in terms of the emotions they attempt to evoke or the words and visual images used to appeal to particular emotions. Compare those with ads from teen magazines and other specific media.

Foreign Language

- Post cartoons clipped from newspapers or magazines with the captions written in the target language. Have students write captions for cartoons they select.
- Keep a news map of the nations where the target language is spoken so that any news items relating to these countries will be located in the media and posted in the classroom.

Mathematics

- Plan for the refurbishing of a classroom, school, or house using calculations to determine the amount of carpeting, paint, etc. that will be needed to complete the job.
- Maintain the statistics for the school's athletic teams. Make statistical comparisons based on the data collected.

Music

- Take the opportunity to compare the selections the group is learning to perform to popular pieces they are familiar with. Discuss popular recordings as to musical content and performance techniques.
- Obtain reviews from local newspapers of performances in the area. Consider the comments of the reviewers in relation to the types of performance skills you are attempting to develop.

Physical Education

- Discuss articles from popular media (maybe infomercials) on the subject of fitness. Encourage students to consider why there is so much interest in fitness.
- Encourage students in dance, gymnastics, and tumbling to develop and perform original routines in class.

Science

- Relate situations from nature to the experiences of your students. A study of predator-prey relationships could be compared to landlord-tenant relations.
- Use DVDs, movies, and/or slides of local phenomena to illustrate landforms, types of flora, environmental conditions, etc. You can make a game of identifying local scenes which also illustrate elements of your study. Encourage students to contribute media to the classroom collection.

Social Studies

- Have history students do an oral history activity involving their parents or grandparents. Collect pictures, magazine articles, and other objects from the older era and compare with current objects. Develop a time line illustrating the effect of historical events on families and communities the students know.
- Have students plan how they would improve their living environment, beginning with the classroom, then moving to the school, home, and community.