

## Striving for Enhanced Understanding and Retention (Contextualized Learning)

I'd like for you to think about a time when you attended a class or lecture and were really excited about learning more about the subject matter. Now I want you to compare the feeling you had when you arrived prior to the class to the feeling you had when you left. Were the feelings comparable? Did you feel just as excited about what you learned or less?

I would argue there are two types of speakers—speakers who leave the audience with a greater understanding about the subject matter, and speakers who leave the audience feeling confused. Who wants to invest time and energy listening to a speaker, only to leave without information they can understand and use? College-level classes are no different. Students want to comprehend the material, as well as be able to put it to use in the real world. As instructors, how do we differentiate ourselves from our colleagues who leave students with more questions than understanding? I believe that simplifying the material and creating real-world applications is the answer.

### Simplifying

Today's educators are taught to be learners along with their students. Having the privilege of seeing the bright minds of students in action, I have been the beneficiary of this principle at work. My students do a research paper every year using peer-reviewed and primary sources. However, a significant portion of their grade comes from teaching us what they discovered through their research. Because not everyone in the class has read the research on the topic being taught, students must present their research in a synthesized and easy-to-understand manner.

One of my groups focused on the decreasing freedoms of the English colonists who led the American Revolution. More specifically, the focus was on the differences between colonists who came to expect certain freedoms as "Englishmen," and those individuals who were not exposed to nor given similar freedoms. This is a concept that is easy to understand, yet not necessarily relatable to most individuals living in the 21st century. While the findings of the group's research are not applicable to this article, their method for sharing their findings is worth noting. First, the group handed out candy, yes candy, to every student in the classroom. Once everyone had a piece of candy, they divided the

classroom into two sections and picked up all the candy from one side. The other side proceeded to eat (or devour I should say) their candy.

The side that received and ate their candy represented the absence of acquiring something and then having it taken away, in this case freedom. Whether they had the candy or not was unimportant since nothing was lost. However, the side that had their candy taken away represented the individuals who came to expect such rights and then had that freedom stolen from them, which demonstrated a powerful concept. Although, it can be argued that all societies desire these freedoms as much as those who possess them, the contrast between the two experiences was the goal of this activity.

### The Result

"This exercise is too simple for a college class," you argue? I contend that its use was a perfect fit. Why? The group brought an applicable emotion into a rather complex era of history, thereby making it simplified, understandable, and relatable. The activity created a basic human connection to the material, while also incorporating the research. This embodies the fundamental objective of any educational setting. The final result was a higher degree of comprehension, as well as having the learners retain the information longer. The learning experience is now usable and something students can "wrap their heads around," making it that much easier to recall when they need to use it later. Once students comprehend the material, it is important to illustrate how they can apply the information in a real-world context, further enhancing our pedagogical design.

### Practicality (The Real-World Setting)

The cold hard truth is that there will be times when you will find real-world scenarios that fit perfectly into your class, perhaps something learners have already experienced; at other times you will simply be at a loss to identify relevant applications. That's okay. I have told students that although I could not provide a real-world context to which to apply the present information, what we were discussing would assist them in understanding the next topic. In almost every such instance, by acknowledging this lack of real-world examples, students have subsequently shared one with the class, fulfilling the student-centered approach. In most cases, however, there will be ample real-world scenarios to offer students. Some examples follow:

- Government—connect the Supreme Court's historical role and the impact of their present day

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decisions to your students' future, as well as their children's futures.

- Math—relate interest rates to fixed versus adjustable rate mortgages, making personal finance part of the discussion.
- Biology—connect advances in nutrition and medicine to their impact on longer lifespans to create a discussion about resulting societal implications.
- Art—cover artists' roles, such as Norman Rockwell, in influencing history and our present day culture.

Despite the previous examples being oversimplified, in virtually every lesson of every discipline, there will always be countless real-world connections to our students' lives. The ultimate goal for true understanding is for instructors to incorporate those real-world applications into the curriculum to give the class more meaning and purpose.

### **Conclusion**

One of the greatest attributes of a good speaker is his or her ability to answer the following question for the audience: "Why do we care?" The reason we give our valued time to anyone is because we believe that person will share something of value with us. Our students are our audience. We have to remember that we could all simply go home if our students already knew the information we are teaching. To a relatively large degree, as educators we are presumably experts in our field. So let us make the information meaningful and purposeful for our learners. Making learning relevant is the first step toward helping students apply class content in a practical and real-world manner.

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