

opinion

Perspectives on relevance and the quest for rigorous student learning: balancing life to text and text to life

Elliot Washor 31 March 2008

Every learner has interests that can be used to create relevant and powerful learning opportunities. We believe, however, that three core aspects of relevance are often overlooked.

Relevance begins with the individual learner. It is the learner who decides what and from whom he will learn. Relevance is about deep connections between the student, his emerging interest in a given area and the complex learning challenges that define that area. Relevance starts and ends with what the student really wants to learn and broadens out as the student makes connections and wants to learn more.

Determining what is relevant is itself an essential part of each student's learning.

Relevance involves a balance between student interests and the curriculum.

Traditionally, schools and colleges have featured learning that employs an approach that could be characterised as 'text to life'. They emphasise in their teaching the world of words in all manner of texts – textbooks most prominently, if not exclusively – in order to prepare students for the world of action. It is extremely important, however, to blend 'text to life' with 'life to text'. The world of action, and the student's interest in that world of action, will lead him to the textual knowledge he will need to deal successfully with future challenges in his life's work.

Addressing what is relevant requires a special student–teacher relationship, in which the teacher establishes a relationship with the student through the student's interests. As this relationship builds the level and quality of the student's motivation to learn, both the student and the teacher can more successfully understand and pursue rigorous learning strategies.

Importantly, through this relevant and rigorous learning built upon a firm student–teacher relationship, the student will more readily recognise the inherent value of 21st-century skills such as literacy, numeracy, innovative problem solving and self-development. Because these skills will be deliberately grounded in the student's own areas of interests, he will more readily recognise them as essential tools to master in order to think, learn and perform at high levels. In an ongoing cycle, life's experiences lead the student to the text and the text leads the student back to life.

As the teacher begins to engage the student, she comes to know him well as a person and a learner, and understand his interests and what and how he learns most productively and comfortably. The teacher works from knowledge gained through the developing relationship to fine-tune her support and facilitate a more personal and inherently productive learning experience. Simultaneously, the process of knowing the student well as a person and as a learner imposes an obligation on the teacher to respond further to the student's interests.

This cycle is the key. As the student discovers and expresses his interests, he will

have these questions: How can I learn to do this work? What about it is attractive to me? Why does it interest me and fulfil me as a person? The attentive teacher will enter the dialogue by introducing additional questions for the student to contemplate: Does society (and the group of significant adults around me) regard what I am learning as valuable? Do I understand the connection between what I am learning, what I need to learn and its value to me and society? What more do I need to learn in order to achieve mastery?

Working with the relevance–relationship partnership as we have described it is extremely challenging in a traditional school, but much less so in small schools offering personalised programs. In Big Picture Schools, for example, each teacher works with a group of 15–17 students for all four years of their high school experience. Powerful relationships emerge during this extended time and allow the teacher to develop and work from deep understandings of the learner formed over time.

What signs indicate a strong student–teacher relationship?

- There is sophisticated and nuanced language used between the student and teacher, as well as other students.
- There are issues, projects and other objects that both the student and teacher find interesting. Both work to understand more about themselves through these issues, projects and objects.
- There is a sense of trust and respect as well as give and take between the student and teacher.
- Parents, teachers, mentors and the student all know one another through the student's work and interests.

The path from relevance to relationships leads quickly to motivation and engagement, of course, but it also leads the learner to be open to discovering what the world regards as relevant with respect to his interests.

The teacher creates environments – psychological as well as physical – to support learning. These environments can and should extend beyond the school, and should support the student's learning when he is not with the teacher but with others from whom he can learn – peers, parents or expert practitioners who share the same interests.

Adults who would be teachers – parents, mentors, school teachers – need to pay close attention to learners' engagement with the world outside of schools and to the objects (tangible, of course, but also intangible) of interest they value and want to learn about.

A simple desire to learn something (often expressed in the question, 'Can I learn how to do that?') can lead a learner to his discovery of himself and to his full expression of himself as a person and a learner. We find strong evidence in our Big Picture schools of the power of this engagement in teacher and student narratives and student performance exhibitions, and in our longitudinal study data. Our findings are supported by research done by Bloom (1985) and Erikson (1994).

The designer and critic Ralph Caplan claims that students are not the school's products. The only thing a school can claim as a product, says Caplan, is the learning

environment. It follows, then, that schools need to become places that let the outside in and the inside out. The best vocational and alternative schools accomplish this, as have exemplary arts and design and science and math schools. These learning environments hold the most promise for nurturing the creativity and innovation that has made our country the envy of the world.

Relevance, as we use it in Big Picture schools, helps us to create learning opportunities and learning environments that deeply engage learners and challenge them both intellectually and personally within their areas of interest and beyond. Such engagement through relevance engenders the intrinsic motivation that drives the student to the edge of his competence and to the rigorous yet satisfying learning that eludes so many students.

This increasingly complex and diverse world continually creates new opportunities for success, opportunities that allow each individual student to use his interests to guide his learning and development into adulthood. Schools need to become much more relevant to the world we are coming to and to the students who will live, work and learn there.

References for the abridged article

Bloom, B 1985, *Developing Talent in Young People*, Ballantine Books, New York.

Erikson, E 1994, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton & Co, New York.

Dr Elliot Washor is co-founder of the [Big Picture Company](#) and of the [Met School](#) in Providence, Rhode Island. He is coordinating an effort to help districts throughout the country adapt the Big Picture School design. The following article is an abridged edited version of Elliot Washor's paper presented to the [2007 Curriculum Corporation conference](#), written with Charles Mojkowski, a Senior Associate at Big Picture, assisting Dr Washor with the project.