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CT Manifesto

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Using what Students know and like:

Expanding outward into new areas of subject matter

This semester in Critical Thinking, I’m taking away the importance of relevancy in enhancing critical thinking skills and dispositions, as well as the principle of teaching for transfer. Both of these critical thinking tenets play off of each other and develop life-long learning tendencies in students. Within my current job at Bunker Hill Community College as Service Learning coordinator I see the day to day effects of relevancy and teaching for transfer. With the right service placement that relates to a student’s personal interests and connects overall with the instructor’s outcomes, reflective questions can be developed to transfer experience to classroom theories and ultimately back out to new knowledge of self and civic responsibilities.

You really cannot move from first base, unless something is relevant to a person. For example, I love listening to TED Talks. TED talks are a series of speaking events from experts who have ‘ideas that are worth spreading.’ Some of these talks deal with things I know nothing about or deal with things that I would not find important or interesting, but somehow through listening these talks become worthwhile and inspiring. I’ve trained myself to listen and give something new a few seconds before turning the subject off. However, most people especially young learners are not this way, have not developed these skills and dispositions yet. Relevancy to the subject, why do I need to know this, has to be triggered rather quickly within a lesson in order to find engagement from students.

At BHCC, we use the term engagement a lot. Sayings like ‘we need to engage the students in the classroom with active learning, group work, and problem solving lessons’ are common among faculty and administrators. Relevancy is is one such way to engage students in a subject matter seen through constructed learning pedagogy. Constructed learning allows students to manipulate the subject into real life application. In her essay, “Our Changing Perspective of Intelligence: Master Architects of the Intellect, Robin Fogerty explains that constructed learning comes from Piaget with the intent being on students’ interpreting ideas into new ideas and application. She says, “His work (Piaget) influences today’s classroom through constructed learning designs in which students manipulate subject matter and objects representing the subject matter content as they interpret their findings and form ideas and concepts about the experience” (DM 145). Students are engaged with the subject matter right from the start and are empowered to learn lessons that they deem valuable and significant. With the right facilitation and guidance from teachers, constructed learning allows students to find relevancy within a subject matter and takes pressure and control away from a teacher. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing to give up that power.

Once students are hooked with the subject, I’ve learned this semester, that there is value for transferring old prior learnings and discoveries into new knowledge, skills, and everything else. Both textbooks*, The Thinking Classroom* and *Developing Minds* give great examples of what teaching for transfer looks like and how applicable it is on a daily life. One example illustrates that students start with the knowledge and skills in reading, once that is master, it is transfer into other domains, such as science or math. Therefore when students encounter a science textbook, their prior learning of reading is triggered, setting up a playing field for other connections to be made. In their article, “Teaching for Transfer” David Perkins and Gaveriel Salomon say “Students learn mathematical skills not just for the sake of figuring Sammy’s age when it’s two-thirds of Jane’s, but for the smart shopping in the supermarket, wise investment in the stock market, understanding of statistical trends, and so on” (371). Teaching for transfer has great potential to happen all the time, in every lesson, assignment and reflection. The trick, like relevancy, is empowering students to recognize their prior learning as well as proposing where and how new ideas, knowledge, skills and dispositions can be utilized in the future.

So how do I see teaching for transfer in my job as service learning coordinator, well for starters, I now see it everywhere. The other day I was in a class, where all the students are tutors/mentors at the Charlestown Boys and Girls Club. They go once a week, journal weekly about their experience and will have a final capstone paper at the end of the semester. The course is a cluster, linking together a first-year experience seminar with psychology 101. The capstone paper requires students to link the service experience to different concepts they have learned in psychology. During class that day, I arranged the students into small groups and gave them guiding questions focusing on the different ways they can use and examine their service experience. Questions included, ‘how are you seeing psychology principles active in your experience? What new things are you learning about yourself? In terms of career choices, communication styles, time-management, priority setting? How will you be able to use the experience in the future?’ I was initially surprised by how well the students connected with the questions, within minutes they were brainstorming, developing responses. They were surprised that the experience could show them so many different things about themselves and about their studies. The questions were able to get the wheels turning in their minds in seeing the experience through a variety of different lens. In *the Thinking Classroom* Shari Tishmans says, “Learners are plagued by the problem of ‘inert’ knowledge and skill—learning stored up in memory that does not get activated in useful circumstance” (160). Luckily this did not happen through the activity, but does commonly happen in classrooms where intentionality in instruction and design has not be given its proper due diligence.

In closing, I’ve learned and connected with a variety of different critical thinking tenets through the course. Yet making things relevant and understanding how things transfer and connect to each other, matters the most for me. If I am not engaging students in why, they should volunteer in their community or how it can beneficial to them, I’m not giving service the proper due diligence. And I’m not enhancing the value in experiential education for students.