Three Strategies for Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences

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Do you ever wonder whether your students care about your course material? Do you question whether your students appreciate how the information you address in class is relevant to them? Do you feel like there is often a mismatch between your intentions for your class and what your students actually want to learn?

Students are more likely to pay attention and be excited about your course when they view the class as relevant to themselves and connected to their interests. Professors often find this goal to be elusive when they use a top-down approach to teaching that primarily starts (and ends) with their knowledge of the field and their own beliefs about what students need to know. Instructors can instead maximize student interest and excitement by using a bottom-up approach that involves assessing students' needs, tailoring the course experience, and using teaching techniques that purposefully heighten students' engagement.

Strategy 1: Assess early, assess often.

Many successful public speakers know that they need to tailor their message to resonate with their audience. Similarly, think about how marketers carefully research their audiences to learn more about the needs of consumers to better position their products. This process raises a series of related questions for college faculty: How well do we know what our students already know, what their interests are, what they want to learn, and what lessons they walk away with from our teaching?

The best way to learn the answers to these questions is to ask them often. Instructors who use the "K-W-L technique" ask their students to list what they **k**now, what they **w**ant to know, and what they **l**earned each class (Ogle, 1986). These data are exceptionally helpful in adjusting the content of lessons to ensure that you meet the needs of the greatest number of students. Other classroom assessment techniques that are easy to use include asking students how the material related to them or their interests, inquiring about what remains confusing, or allowing students to provide

feedback to the instructor via clickers (see Angelo & Cross, 1993 for more examples). These methods complement the helpfulness of frequent quizzes and written assignments that regularly monitor students' performance.

Strategy 2: Let students get their feet wet.
Do your students have the opportunity to do what professionals in your field actually do? One reason why college can seem irrelevant to students is that the classroom environment is often far removed from the exciting tasks involved in the discipline. Some fields, especially the laboratory sciences, do have students perform actual tasks. However, faculty who teach in other departments may need to be more creative.

There are two very effective teaching strategies that make material come alive for students by placing them in the first-person role. Problem-based learning presents students with cases and follow-up questions to guide analysis. Students can work individually, or more commonly in small groups. Choose cases that connect to real-world problems so that students grapple with issues that they would likely encounter in the field or profession. Service-learning is another powerful way for students to appreciate the relevance of your material. In service-learning, students volunteer in the community at sites that relate to the class (e.g., social service agencies for psychology classes, adult literacy programs for English classes, not-for-profit corporations for business courses), and then make connections between their field work and coursework through reflection assignments.

Strategy 3: Welcome student input for your content and assignments.
When professors consider what ignites students' interests, or connects with their personal and professional goals, they are able to better design courses that meet students' needs. This tailoring process is deeper than an add-on approach, like incorporating social media or references to popular culture. Rather, this notion involves a partnership with students and sharing a certain amount of control over decision-making.

In more concrete terms, professors increase the relevance of material by providing students with real choices about what they will learn and how they will demonstrate mastery. Professors who use differentiated instruction (cf., Gregory & Chapman, 2002) give students different options during class time (e.g., students form flexible groups that

have complementary tasks centering around the topic of the lesson). Similarly, students have the opportunity to select from a range of options for evaluation (e.g., research paper, oral presentation, applied project, traditional exam). This approach builds on students' strengths and interests.

Importantly, these three strategies interlock to create a maximally relevant approach to teaching and learning. Careful and frequent assessments will allow you to learn who your students are, what they have mastered, and what are the areas of greatest interest. These data will guide your selection of topics that you can emphasize in the class. When you remain open to your students' input, you will increase their ownership and investment in the material. Ensuring that your students have an active role during class time and beyond closes the loop for making your course a personalized and meaningful experience.