Authentic Teaching
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A popular complaint in high school is “Why do I need to learn this, I’m never going to use this outside of school?” however, this is something that teachers struggle with at every grade level, not just high school. One way to minimize hearing this complaint is by using real-world application in the classroom. This can help kids focus on the topic at hand and give them a better understanding. There have been many theories on what should be done to improve students’ “actual learning” not just what they need to memorize for a test. Coming up with projects that apply to the information being taught is a great way to expand their knowledge because they’re not only learning about what the book says.

Often it is thought that if students can answer questions on paper then they must know the information, but as teachers are finding out, that is not the case. When we ask students how they came up with their answer, or perhaps what method they used in solving the problem students tend to have a difficult time. The problem doesn’t seem to be the students’ ability to do the work, they just don’t understand the work, and if you learn something without fully understanding it then what’s the point in learning or teaching it at all? Spitting out information and memorizing facts and numbers is only going to take students so far.

So what can be done to help students learn and retain information not just recite it back to pass a test? Using “authentic activities” is something that Brown et al recommends; authentic activities can be defined as “to learn to use tools (i.e. the concepts and procedures) as practitioners use them, a student, like an apprentice, must enter the community and its culture” (p. 166). Using real-world application can help engage students in what they are learning. If students were to know what they learned in the classroom could be used outside of the classroom, it would keep them interested in class according to Brown et al, rather than just paying attention so they can answer the questions on their homework assignment.

In Newmann and Wehlages’ article Five Standards of Authentic Instruction, they discuss the importance of authentic teaching. The first standard stating that students engage in Higher-Order Thinking (HOT) during lessons, this means: “Higher-order thinking (HOT) requires students to manipulate information and ideas in ways that transform their meaning and implications, such as when students combine facts and ideas in order to synthesize, generalize, explain, hypothesize or arrive at some conclusion or interpretation”. While tutoring at an after school program at Meyer Middle School in River Falls, WI in the fall of 2013 I helped a student with his math homework and while looking through his book found that each lesson had a “HOT” section in which they (the students) were asked to create their own problem and explain how they came up with it. This proved to be very beneficial to the 8th grader I was working with because the next week he told me he got a 90% on his math quiz. Adding these kinds of problems allows students to actually solve and understand them instead of merely reciting what is on the black board.

The second standard is Depth of Knowledge, Newmann and Wehlage explain that “knowledge is deep when the
(students) make clear distinctions, develop arguments, solve problems, construct explanations…” One way teachers could help with this is by taking on fewer topics and explaining those topics more, giving examples, and going more in-depth so that students can understand each one. Instead teachers are covering multiple topics in a short amount of time and tend to move on before the concept being taught is fully grasped by the students.

Moving on to the third standard which is Connectedness to the World. This standard places importance on applying real-world situations to in-class learning. Some ways to do this would be to let students talk about real-world problems i.e. the environment or helping the poor. Another way to involve students is to let them discuss their own personal experiences as it relates to the subject being taught.

The fourth standard is Substantive Conversation, the main focus of this standard is to encourage class participation. If there is interaction between teachers and students and/or student to student about the topic, then the information being taught will be better understood and more easily retained. Making this standard beneficial for both students and teachers, students will be able to talk through either what they understand or are having trouble understanding. This benefits teachers by giving them (the teachers) an idea of what they can move on from or if they need to spend more time on a specific topic.

The fifth and final standard is Social Support for Student Achievement, this is important from the beginning of kindergarten until high school graduation. Newmann and Wehlage say that having the teacher convey their high expectations of everyone in the class is important, as well as stating that all students can learn important knowledge and skills. Another way to contribute to a students’ achievement is to make mutual respect a crucial part of everyday learning.

When you consider all of these things it shows that there is hope, that we can teach children something they will remember and understand, not just something they can recite and then promptly forget. If teachers and students alike put more effort into the information/material instead of the almighty test(s) everyone will probably enjoy school a bit more.

References
Newmann, F. M. & Wehlage, G. G. “Five Standards of Authentic Instruction” Educational Leadership