'Critical Questions' Series
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Will That Be On The Test? Creating Engaging Learning Environments

In his book 'Outliers', Malcolm Gladwell (2008) stated that pioneers such as the Beatles and Bill Gates were phenomenal in their craft because they had mastered it over 10,000 hours. Our students attend school for over 10,000 hours in their K-12 careers. What educational "crafts" will they master when they graduate?

"Will that be on the test?", is a cry for help for many of our students. They have endured many hours in classrooms where they have not been required to think. Their goal becomes to 'get it done', get the grade and survive the day. The classroom learning environment needs to encourage students to take advantage of the opportunity to become self-directed and motivated learners. The following is a 'shift of mind' that occurred in my district.

Learning Trust

This concept works both ways, the students will learn from you and you will learn more about your practice from them. Here is an example. In a traditional classroom, the teacher will read out all of the instructions to the students on a paper. The message that is sent to the students is that the most important thing is compliance with directions and they cannot be trusted to "get it right" on their own. For the highly capable students, they must wait until the teacher reviews the entire assignment before they can start. They are also told that they must follow these boundaries if they want to be successful which limits creativity.

In a classroom where there is learning trust, the teacher hands over the main concepts of the assignment for review. The students assess what they understand and difficulties. The teacher also asks the students for feedback on how to make the assignment more rewarding. This creates a learning partnership where students feel validated and are given an opportunity to explore further options in their learning. After the initial review, students can share their concerns and questions with their peers in groups as well as share their expertise and support others in their learning.

High Cognitive Demand

When a student knows that the end goal is to remember a bunch of facts on the final test to get their grade, then that is often the bar that they will set. The assessment is often low cognitive demand so that basic information is remembered. This tells students that listing, describing and retrieving information is what is important. This is outdated industrial-age thinking. Today's students need to analyze, create, debate, and critique (Bloom,1956) They need to expect to struggle as part of the

learning process and to reflect on their struggles in a journal or peer conversations and then assess what the need to work on. Assessment is too often an 'autopsy' rather than a tool for students, parents and teachers to document growth. Imagine a Student Led Conference with a student proudly showing a parent some early reflections where they struggled and then showing evidence of how they have improved. This creates a motivated student who can see the results and is in charge of their learning.

Use of Resources: Flow of Information

My superintendent once told me, "Frustration occurs when you run out of options." This is often the problem that students have with cognitively demanding work. The goal for a teacher should be to encourage the students to utilize the resources in the room. The best resource to tap into are the thirty other students in the classroom. In a typical middle school classroom, that would amount to over 2,000 hours of learning experience. The role of the teacher is to have the students turn to their peers and other resources and not to them. Some suggestions for teachers are:

- Find alternative methods to the teacher delivering the content
- When a student asks a question, throw it back to the class
- Tell students to use their resources instead of solving the problem for them
- Stop playing the role of the validator. Allow the students to figure it out
- Provide thought provoking questions that challenges student thinking and sparks debate

Think about all the life-long skills they are learning as a result of peer networking in the classroom. The actual subject becomes the tool for students working together to problem solve which is real world application. Take advantage of the fact that kids like to communicate with each other and move around the room working with others.

"What do you want your students to be able to do after their 10,000 hours in school?" If the goal is to complete the content and get a grade, then don't be surprised if the engagement level is low and compliance is more evident than learning. If your students learn to trust their peers and adults and have developed a tool kit to take on the most difficult challenges then we have created learners ready to be successful in the real world. That makes for a rewarding experience for both the student and teacher.

References:

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