

Connecting Learning to the World through Inquiry, Gr. 8

Teacher: **[00:00]** And I think one of the things that's most important in setting up a classroom environment is to have a safety net around students so that they don't feel threatened by giving answers, by sharing ideas, by offering opinions. And that goes back to the whole motto of, "I know you don't know, neither do I. What do you think?" Asking open-ended questions, having them pose open-ended questions themselves that have no right or wrong.

[00:26] That's something that I work on in my classroom right from the very beginning of the year, and I make sure that anything they are given doesn't have a right or a wrong. And that lends itself to discussion and the students, knowing that they can't be wrong, then start to open up, and they're much more willing to participate in class. And we hear from the students and we know that the sharing of ideas, the sharing of information student to student, is way more effective and way more, it's I guess, far more educational for the students. The learnings, their outcomes increase because of the participation and the collaboration.

[01:02] And of course, collaboration is important in every aspect of the world. When these kids get out into the workplace, collaboration is going to be really important. Those skills they need to have. In order to develop those skills, we need to start now. We need to start when they're 13 years old, and make it a safe environment for them. An environment where laughing at an answer just is not acceptable. Or even more so, that all of the students know and understand that any answer is acceptable. It's the thinking that goes behind it.

[01:33] I really encourage my students to say what they think and then say, "Why do you think that?" and "Where did you come up with that idea?" and allow them to explore their own thinking process. And I call it making their thinking visible. Tell me what you were thinking how you got to this conclusion. And when you set up an environment like that in the classrooms, students will much, much more readily participate.

[01:57] I think one of the other things to engage students in learning, to bring out their natural curiosity, is, you need to make the tasks, as many as you can, authentic tasks. And that's another high-yield strategy that's particularly needed in middle school. Students want to know why they're doing it. And, as I said earlier, they have a right to know why they're doing it. "What does this relate to in my world?" And so if we can make the tasks authentic, that there really is a reason for doing it—I'm continuously in search of tasks that the kids can do where they might be writing letters to somebody or it might be a writing contest that they've entered.

[02:37] And several examples of those have happened in my classroom in the last couple of years. The Hamilton Police Force took on 3 new horses as part of their force. And we were involved in the naming of the horses. So there was a research element to the project. The students came up with a name that had to be relevant to the area. And at Spencer Valley, 2 students here actually did win the contest. That was an example of an authentic task where they were really engaged. There was an outcome that was going out into the community and they hoped to be successful.

[03:07] This year, another authentic task was the Eric Walters/Deborah Ellis, who are 2 Canadian—actually, Toronto local authors—had a "Write for a better world".

And a lot of what I'm doing relates to globalization, relates to the world around us. It's really important in my mind that they see the world around them, and they have an opportunity to explore that world around them. So again, another authentic task. They were writing a story. Limited to 400 words, so there were lots of curricular expectations that were being met, but it was the task that came first. We're going to write the story about being dropped onto another country somewhere. What did you see? What did you learn? And it was the whole global impact.

[03:48] Again, an authentic task. They submitted it online. That was something new for a lot of the students. They'd never done anything like that before. They were really engaged in the activity, and are continuously asking me, "Are the results out? Are the results out?" We do a lot of work with the Hamilton Spectator. They did advertising, again something that got in—sent in to the Spectator. And our students actually created advertisements using the advertising techniques that we studied. And they actually had a real live client that uses the advertisement, the one advertisement in our class that was deemed the winner.

[04:21] So again, things that there's a real reason for doing it. Another example. Sometimes I have students writing letters to CEOs of companies. One of my big things that I worry about, of course, is the environment. In the past, kids have brought in examples of over-packaging, they have the skills of looking up, Where is the company's headquarters? Who is the CEO? Who am I going to address this letter to? And then putting the letter together and sending that along with the packaging as a way of expressing their concern for the environment.

[04:53] So, lots of authentic tasks that are out there. It takes some time to research them. Again, it's the backwards mapping. Here's the task. Here's what we're going to do. Where would you like to go with this? Ready for a better world? You can choose whatever country you want. What country are you interested in? And I had an array of places where the kids were blown out of their cannon, dropped into this new environment. They did the research as to the customs. And again it was student-driven, what were they interested in. Authentic tasks, they really engage students.

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