

## **Perspectives on Relevance and the Quest for Rigorous Student Learning: Balancing Life to Text and Text to Life**

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The objects that the child makes are as useful as those made by the carpenter; but, unlike the work of the carpenter, the value of the child's work does not exist in *them*, but in the *child* that made them.  
Otto Salomon (1892)

*Just as understandings of what constitutes rigorous student learning are in need of more careful analysis (see, for example, Washor & Mojkowski, 2006), so also are prevailing understandings of relevance. This is particularly so in thinking about the notion of relevant student learning experiences and their relationship to student agency and engagement. The challenge of relevance is to engage the student not in just any experiences but in those that resonate with that individual student. It is that engagement with experience that James (1897), Dewey (1938), Bruner (1996), Sarason, (2000), and (Wilson, 1998) sought. For Dewey, engagement meant action and the development of special relationships between the learner and the experience which lead to an expanded self. For Wilson, engagement means an emotional attachment to the objects, processes, and people that the child wants to learn about and from. It is relevance as determined by the individual.*

*The student-teacher partnership opens the door to a unique and powerful opportunity to employ and build upon relevance and relationships in the quest for rigorous student learning. The essential element of this opportunity is the symbiotic and cyclical link that emerges between relationships and relevance. As the teacher begins to engage the student, he comes to know the student well as a person and a learner, and understands his interests and what and how he wishes to learn. The teacher works from knowledge gained through the developing relationship. This knowledge allows the teacher to fine-tune her support and facilitate a more personal and inherently productive learning experience. Simultaneously, the process of knowing the student well as a person and as a learner imposes an obligation on the teacher to respond further to the student's interests. This focused and relevant interaction and the subsequent learning experiences enhance student motivation to think, learn, and perform. And, as Corno (2004) points out, such motivation can lead to volition, the actual implementation of intentions—Dewey's action/performance orientation. Thus, the sequence: Wilson's emotional attachment leads to Bruner's engagement with experience, which leads to Sarason's motivation to learn, which leads to Corno's volition to act.*

*As the level and quality of motivation increase through this symbiotic and cyclical relationship, both the student and the teacher can more successfully understand and pursue strategies for ensuring rigorous learning. This association underscores the power of motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, in moving a learner to embrace rigorous learning. Importantly, through this relevant and rigorous learning built upon a firm student-teacher relationship, the student will more readily recognize the inherent value of 21st-century skills such as literacy, numeracy, innovative problem solving and self-development. Because these skills will be deliberately*

*grounded in the student's own areas of interests, he will more readily recognize them as essential tools to master in order to think, learn, and perform at high levels. Life's experiences lead the student to the text and the text leads the student back to life.*

*As the student approaches learning and as the teacher develops the students, they will have questions such as these:*

- Does this work interest me and fulfill me as a person?*
- Does society (and significant adults) regard what I am learning as valuable?*
- Do I understand the connection between what I am learning, what I need to learn, and its value to me and/or society? What more do I need to learn?*
- Do the skills I am acquiring enhance my sense of agency?*

*Consider these questions in the context of the emerging student-teacher partnership. The student wants to learn; the teacher wants to facilitate and guide that learning. Because she is an expert at teaching, the teacher understands that real learning requires, among other things, a motivated student and deep engagement in rigorous learning experiences. The teacher, understanding the link between relationships and relevance, recognizes that the student will not likely get to this level of learning without the benefits gained through this link, and therefore first addresses relationships and relevance in order to advance student learning.*

*Each of these elements is multifaceted. Through relationships, teachers come to know the student as a person while building mutual trust and respect. They can help the student see the connections between what they learning, why they are learning it, and its value. They also come to know the student as a learner—his skills, knowledge, and dispositions. It is this last dimension that teachers must be cognizant of and fully exploit in order to realize the benefits of investing in building relationships with students to facilitate rigorous learning.*

*Establishing such critical relationships is extremely challenging in a traditional school, but much less so in small schools offering personalized programs. In Big Picture Schools, for example, each teacher works with a group of 15-17 students for all four years of their high school experience. Powerful relationships emerge during this extended time which allows the teacher to develop and work from deep understandings of the learner formed over time. The teacher is able to respond expertly to the student's needs, interests, and uniqueness in ways that positively impact learning and development. In such an environment, it is impossible for a student to be left unknown, much less left behind.*

*As the aesthetics of the student-teacher relationship develops, it is commonly observed that:*

- There is sophisticated and nuanced language used between the student and teacher as well as other students.*
- There are issues, projects, and other objects that both the student and teacher find interesting. Both work to understand more about themselves through these issues, projects, and objects.*
- There is a sense of trust and respect as well as give and take between the student and teacher.*
- Parents, teachers, mentors, and the student all know one another through the student's work.*

*It is this notion of the aesthetics of relationships founded upon intimate knowledge that helps the teacher prepare the student to embrace and engage in rigorous learning.*

*These relationships are essential, as the student cannot determine relevance solely by himself. Relevance, in this construct for rigorous learning, is not as simple as what the student knows about and is interested in on a superficial level. Rather, relevance is more about deep connections between the student, his emerging interest in a given area, and the complexity that defines that area. Within this vision of relevance, determining what is relevant is itself an essential part of learning. Consider one student's learning pathway:*

*For his senior thesis project, Corey, a student at the Met School in Providence, Rhode Island, exhibited in the school's bookstore café a portfolio of his photographs of the Old Royal Mill that he worked on with his mentor, a professional photographer. Over a period of 10 months, from August through April, Cory photographed the mill, perfecting his photography and, with his teacher, Charly Adler, he studied the physics of light and lighting and the lenses and chips that capture and process it. He studied the chemistry of producing the photographs from old fashioned cameras and film processing, and the nature of composition in art and in writing to better communicate his work process and how he felt about his photographs. He consulted with other photographers, read and researched, and spent long hours at various times of the day taking scores of photographs and analyzing their technical and aesthetic quality.*

*As he began his work, Cory undoubtedly did not understand how physics and chemistry were relevant to his powerful interest in photography. His discovery of their relevance to his interests was prompted by his teacher and by the relationships Corey established with photographers who were doing the work he wished to do. Learning what is relevant is, therefore, part of the learning process itself. It emerges from the interaction of the student with adults in real world settings who are doing work similar to his productive interests. The teacher who has established strong relationships with the student-- relationships that reveal the student as a learner as well as a person-- is in an excellent position to help the student discover what is really relevant to his or her interests. Neither she nor the student starts with rigor or the text, but that is where they must and do arrive.*

*Leveraging relevance requires that the teacher identify experiences and adults that have the potential for expanding the student's notion of what is relevant. Discovering what is relevant requires that the student develop ways of understanding consistent with real world demands of this learning and work. This vision of accessible and clear relevance helps the teacher effectively prepare the student to engage in rigorous learning and work. The sequence of moving from life to text, at least initially, evolves into a strong cyclical relationship between what is real for the student and what society believes is important for the student to learn.*

*Without establishing a strong foundation in relationships and relevance, it will be difficult for the teacher to prepare the student to engage in rigorous learning and work. Without establishing a strong foundation in relationships and relevance, motivating the student will be extremely difficult and be based primarily on external incentives. Conversely, with a strong foundation in place built on relationships and relevance, a teacher, and in the bigger picture, a school, can better accommodate itself to each student, rather than demanding that each student accommodate himself to the school.*

*Establishing powerful relationships and relevance entails a personal connection between the teacher and the student and among the objects, places, and situations inherent in all learning experiences. The teacher uses the intimate knowledge of each student to advance learning and growth. The school setting allows each student to craft his or her own experience based on this personalized support. A well-informed teacher connects students to themselves and rigorous learning by connecting his students to the tools, language, and situations in the world and in the school.*

*A disregard for these understandings leads to dysfunctional instructional decisions, requiring, for example, that a student master core curriculum standards *before* being allowed to learn within his interests, or requiring a student to demonstrate mastery of all standards regardless of their relevance to his career pathway.*

*Such dispositions are nearly pathological in their lack of insight and imagination regarding how to move from interests to addressing essential learning standards. Moreover, none of this attention to self, agency, and engagement around what is relevant to the student needs to be interpreted as coddling or pandering to ephemeral interests, but rather to beginning where the student is and refusing to leave him there. Such an approach, as Quartz and Washor (2006) point out, embraces not merely affective support but critical engagement.*

*What does this perspective on relevance look like in the world outside of schools? The images are as abundant as they are varied.*

*A recent story on **60 Minutes** reported on a 14-year old boy who is arguably the greatest composer in the last 200 years. When he was three years old his parents found him drawing cellos on musical notation paper. Neither of his parents plays an instrument. They bought a cello and the boy began playing it immediately.*

*At 15, McArthur Award winner Bill Strickland happened by ceramicist Frank Ross's classroom as he was working a piece of clay on the wheel. "Hey, can I learn how to do that,?" asked Bill, and the rest is history. Ceramics focused Bill's attention to learning, he went on to college, and became a leader for community development in Pittsburgh that focuses on developing children and adults through the arts.*

*When Ed Ames was a boy in Maine, he grew up in a fishing village where his passion was to be a fisherman. His family had fished these waters since before the Revolutionary War. Despite his passion, his father told him he was too small and too frail to become one so he sent him off to school for book learning. Ed received a degree in marine biology and merged his love of fishing and science by combining detailed scientific studies of spawning, habitat, and fishing patterns that are guided in part by the anecdotal experiences of aging fishermen. His insightful research earned him a McArthur award.*

~~Ed was "disturbed by the threat to the fishery ecosystem from over harvesting. Ames conducts "What we're really trying to do is not play the role of Luddite, but take the good part of fishing and help it adapt to the 21st century," Ames said. "If the technologies we're using are too efficient or too destructive for the habitats to survive, we need to figure out a way to rein that in and modify our strategies and processes."~~

*In the 1970's Sylvia Fein an artist and psychologist wrote **Heidi's Horse**, a book about the growth of her daughter by displaying a portfolio of the horses her daughter drew starting at a very early age up through her teenage years. Her daughter's interest in horses and Sylvia's wonderful narration is evidence of how parents and teachers can longitudinally take an interest and develop all sorts of academics and text-based learning from the arts.*

*These cases illustrate the many points we have been making throughout this perspective on relevance: that the blending of life to text and text to life or relevance to academics and academics to relevance is extremely important; that adults – teachers and parents - need to pay attention and deliver to their children the objects they value that they want to learn about and find worthwhile doing; that a simple question like, “Hey can I learn how to do that?” coming from a child is not as simple as it appears and can lead to their discovery of themselves; that there is strong evidence of the importance of teacher narrative, student performance and longitudinal studies of every child and that this can happen in schools and homes; and that when children feel what they are doing is who they are and want to be, they learn and want to learn more. Ed's story, for example, is the classic merging of life and text; neither alone would have landed him in the position he is today but it was his life that clearly led him to the textual knowledge he needed to deal with the problems he chose as his life work.*

*Conversely, as neurologist Frank Wilson points out, when our youth are not connected to the work they are doing, not only is it not their work but it is not them. Dr. Wilson illustrates his observation about the importance of the emotional connection with examples from his practice. For over 30 years, he treated musicians with hand problems. Sometimes they would tell him stories about how a conductor wanted them to play a piece of music differently than how they wanted it played. When they heard the piece of music the way the conductor wanted them to play it, they would state that the piece they heard was not them.*

*Such behavior is similar to that of people with Capgras syndrome, a brain condition—most often brought about by a head injury—that results in a severely damaged emotional disconnect. A person with the syndrome will recognize someone as looking and acting like, for example, his mother but believing that the person is an impostor. With the emotional attachment inoperative, the motivation to engage is much diminished. Similarly, when students in schools are emotionally disconnected from their work, they see the work as not theirs or them.*

*Given these understandings, the challenge is create learning environments as places where students feel like what they are doing validates who they are by beginning with what and how they want to learn. The disconnect between students and the curriculum is substantial and a significant barrier to learning. More disturbing is that we have convinced the students that the disconnect is part of what learning is all about. Only later do they discover the fraud.*

*Recently, we received a resume from a 28 year old man. At the very top of his resume he listed his SAT scores, not who he was or did he? Steinbeck said it well **Cup of Gold** when talking about the Governor of Jamaica,:*

*“He had learned without absorbing, remembered without assimilating. His mind was a sad mess of unrelated facts and theories.”*

*This is the sham we can create without generating connections from life and to life.*

*Traditionally, schools have gone from text to life. Most school's mission state they are places of preparation for life and work. Schools have always maintained there is a core body of knowledge that everyone should know and teaching that core body of knowledge is at the heart of their work. At the best liberal arts colleges, the motivated student or the student seeking to find out who they are to make life worthwhile have gone from lectures and texts into the realer world to find out if they like to do what they have studied to do. These colleges and in some cases high schools have created text to life environments that prep our students for the world but these schools already have created environments that students are living and learning in and their main purpose is to maintain that environment and not the environment of the realer world. They don't call these places ivory towers for nothing.*

*As designer critic Ralph Caplan claims for schools, students are not their products but their by-products. The only thing a school can claim as a product is the learning environment. Schools need to become places that make corporations look like ivory towers but they need the support of the realer world to do this. They need to let the outside in and the inside out. The blending that can and now has to take place is that schools have to not only go from text to life but also go from life to text. A few of the best vocational and small high schools have done this as well as the best arts and design and science and math schools but more in the name of relevance needs to be accomplished.*

*When schools go from life to text it implies the generation of a different environment that appeals to many more students especially, the students of today who are exposed early on in their lives to new forms of visual, graphic, audio, and textual information. What our youth are lacking that other generations had more of are the tactile, and the realer world life experiences beyond school. These experiences form the foundation early on and in later years to our students' worth and work. This can happen in schools in homes and a combination of both.*

## **References**

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