Enhanced Student Success
Through Personalized Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Creating successful students beyond the classroom means creating students that are confident, independent, lifelong learners who engage in the world around them. By giving students time to learn, constructing meaningful tasks, and teaching them how to become learners, educators can foster important skill sets that motivate students to learn and become autonomous thinkers who can become effective members of society and make a positive difference in the world.

Traditional teaching creates a learning environment that usually focuses on lecturing and testing. Creating today's successful students is about creating students who can succeed beyond the classroom and who have a personal investment in their learning. It is about creating meaningful connections between them and the content, and teaching them how to learn. Successful students are an amalgamation of essential skills; they are inquisitive and confident, they collaborate with others and participate in their learning, and they are independent thinkers. For learners to be successful, according to these criteria, educators must give them time to learn at their own pace and in their own way. One way for educators to foster this process is to have students learn the fundamental concepts at home, which would free up class time for enrichment activities to enhance learning, creating a flipped classroom, or blended classroom (a combination of the flipped and traditional classroom models). The flipped and blended classrooms give room for students to become more engaged in their learning and, thus, more accountable for their learning. It gives students time to perform and create authentic tasks for the learners to demonstrate understanding. Successful students will more likely become productive members of society, think critically about the world around them, and transfer skills to succeed outside the classroom.

Traditional teaching generally creates a learning environment that uses lectures and practice work in class, where the learners will take notes, do practice problems, and then write a test recalling information to show that they understand what was taught; however, the majority of students may not remember the material after they have completed the course. Traditional teaching assessments rely on recalling facts or solving problem sets to show that students have successfully mastered and learned a concept but reproducing information may not show learning. Traditional teaching usually teaches to a uniform set of standards for all students and does not account for the personal interests or goals of the students (Clarke, 2015). It focuses on assessments that do not necessarily assess students' understanding or their ability to problem solve. Traditional test scores show answers related to a specific type of problem, rather than conceptual understanding. Direct interaction with students is needed in order for the students to demonstrate conceptual understanding (Peck & Jencks, 1974). The interaction shows that students have acquired some understanding of the content in a moment of time. Tests are good only for students who are adept at test-taking, but for those who struggle with test anxiety or who are just not good test-takers, success is minimized. If traditional teaching is the only method of teaching, students will learn only to take notes, do homework, and recall facts.

Creating meaningful connections to knowledge will help students learn. Bloom's revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain puts remembering and understanding at the bottom of six hierarchical levels of knowledge and synthesising, and puts applying information at the top (Krathwohl, 2002). Students genuinely learn when they can master more complex problems that involve evaluating the material and forming opinions about it, or creating new meaning from the material (Pickard, 2007). If students can create meaning, they will more likely remember the

concept and apply their knowledge because they have actually learned it, authentically and for the long-term – not just for the test.

To help students be successful, learners must first learn how to learn. Learning requires meaningful connection and practice in order to remain in long-term memory (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2013). Students are more engaged when they take a direct approach to learning (Clark, 2015); and if students are actively engaged in their learning, there will be a stronger connection to their learning. Educators can actively engage students by helping them to use all of their senses, because learning is multisensory (Doyle & Zakrajsek, 2013). Students learn better and retain more when they can see, hear, touch, and do tasks that are related to what educators are trying to teach them. When toddlers are first learning about the world around them, they rely on all of their senses to make sense of things, and, as they grow and go to school, they receive more unisensory tasks – reading a textbook for example - than multisensory tasks; however, just as when they were toddlers, they still need all of their senses to make sense of the world. Educators need to provide learning tasks that enable students to retain the skills learned beyond the classroom. If educators teach them to use their senses by creating tasks that are more multisensory, students can learn how to make meaningful connections, and learn how to learn and thus become more successful students.

Essential assets for students to be successful, in school and outside the classroom, include being inquisitive, being confident, collaborating with others, participating in their learning, and being independent thinkers. Personalised learning is the most recent trend in helping students to attain these assets; they are more likely to become more successful in school, and more engaged in learning. Personalised learning builds personal skills and critical thinking skills in learners. It is less structured and gives students ownership of their learning (Buckley, 2014). Learning occurs at different rates within each of us and happens because of interactions with others (Clarke, 2015). In the first stage, students identify an area of interest. The teacher helps by continually pushing students to ask questions. Then the students converse with peers or others in their community, and research their question. These series of interactions help students to achieve learning of the content, and becoming confident and critical thinkers. Students need to care about what they are learning, and to do that they need be engaged and involved in order to learn (Clarke, 2015). Personalised learning is tailored to the learners and thus helps students to develop the skills needed to be successful in the world.

Giving students time to learn helps to engage them in their learning. One of the ways to give students time to learn at their own pace is using the flipped or blended models of teaching instead of the traditional model of teaching. The flipped model focuses on students learning the lessons at home and using the class time for enriched activities. Blended models use a combination of flipped and traditional teaching methods, utilizing class time for lectures when necessary. Traditional teaching methods focus on lecture and practice in the classroom, where students have limited time to take in new concepts, try them out, and then move on to the next concept. There is little time to process information. In the flipped and blended models of instruction, the instruction part takes place at home via videos and other lessons assigned by the teacher, and class time is spent in engaging in active learning (Clark, 2015). The videos and lessons have students learn at their own pace and in their own way at home, stopping the instruction as needed and giving them time to take in and process information. If students have questions about the concept, they have time in class to have them answered, or they can access a variety of other resources to answer the question or to acquire a different perspective on the concept (Gerstein, 2012). The flipped and blended models are approaches that help students to learn at their own pace; if students learn at their own pace; they may be more motivated to learn, becoming more engaged in their learning (Christensen, 2010).

When instruction is done at home, class time can be used to answer questions, initiate peer collaboration, and engage in enrichment activities, all of which increases student engagement and communication (Clark, 2015). Today's students are sociable and use technology for both

communication and learning needs. The flipped and blended models create a space wherein students can interact with peers and teachers, and wherein students can develop collaboration, communication, and interpersonal skills. Educators can create tasks and discussion groups based on learner needs that will enhance these skills and actively involve the students in their learning. Most students want to connect to others; the personalised classroom becomes a more social environment wherein students build stronger relationships and become engaged in their learning (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). When they make these meaningful connections, they reflect on what they are learning and reconstruct as necessary, showing true understanding (Gerstein, 2012). Because the knowledge and fact parts of the learning are done at home, the enrichment activities provide a way for the students to understand the concepts and learn skills that they will need to move beyond school, such as teamwork and communication skills.

The flipped and blended models create a unique situation wherein the accountability of learning shifts mastered a concept, rather than reproduce knowledge on a test (Kirvin, 2015). Students need to be accountable for their learning because, in order to participate in class activities and discussions, they need to have participated in the video and lesson instructions at home. Educators can also help students by creating tasks that get the students involved. If students have to respond to a peer in a blog or do an entrance slip at the beginning of class, they are made more accountable for their work because they will have to demonstrate they did their homework.

Authentic tasks and assessments create more successful students because they are interested and engaged. Authentic tasks and assessments require students to demonstrate understanding beyond the content by synthesizing the content and applying it to real-world problems. They inspire curiosity and challenge students, engaging students into wanting to learn (Clarke, 2013). Traditional teaching creates problems for students to solve, but the students may be disconnected from the problems because they either have no interest in content or they can not relate to the content because they have not experienced it. When students have to learn about a topic that is far removed from them, it is an “artificial” task (Clarke, 2013, p. 25). It is meaningless to them because they can not foresee the importance of the topic (Clarke, 2013). They can not become engaged if they are disinterested or have no connection to the topic. Authentic tasks create more successful students because they are engaged and want to learn.

Society and educators want students who “think outside the box,” who can think creatively and innovatively to solve real-world problems and to contribute to society. Test scores can not show creativity or mastery. They can not show how a student thinks or how successful students have been at learning (Peck & Jencks, 1974). Being a productive member of society requires more than recall; it requires a person to acquire knowledge and then apply it. Students must learn to synthesize information and create solutions in order to problem solve. Performance tasks and assessments are a better way to show understanding and learning (Westerman, 2014). Students demonstrate they will be contributing members of society because they think beyond recall and facts, and are more creative in solving real-world problems.

Critical thinkers are creative and engaged, and consequently become more successful students. In order to be critical thinkers, students must analyze information, evaluate it, make judgments about what is important and what is not, and create and act on a plan for applying it where it is needed (Krathwohl, 2002). The best way to do this is to engage students in a topic they are interested in and have them create the way that they demonstrate their learning to the educator. If students can demonstrate they have mastered a concept, that shows true understanding (Gerstein, 2012). They have shown they are engaged, creative, and, thus, critical thinkers.

Creating today’s successful students means teaching them to succeed outside the classroom walls, beyond content and facts. Successful students engage in the learning process, construct meaningful connections between the content and the world around them, and are

curious, confident, independent, and team players. They think critically, deconstruct previous knowledge, and apply it to new surroundings in order to solve real-world problems.

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About the Author

Terry Knight is a graduate student at Brandon University and employed with the Brandon School Division teaching secondary mathematics. Terry is an avid lifelong learner who believes that positive change in our world begins with a single student, and that every student has the potential to change the world.