

Embrace Rigorous and Relevant Expectations for All Students

The Common Core State Standards' focus on rigor and relevance means that all teachers must take the time to ask themselves these questions about their current instruction:

1. Does my lesson plan require students to use higher-level thinking (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation)?
2. Is my lesson plan interdisciplinary and practical? Does it engage students in real-world problem solving?

The object is to prepare students for college and career. If students do little more than paraphrase texts, answer basic comprehension questions, or write personal narratives, they will not be sufficiently versed in the skills and strategies they need for adult life.

Supporting Active Learning and Independence

Explicit teaching is all about explaining the "what" students will learn, "how" they will learn it, and "why" they will learn it — its importance and value to them. Explicit teaching is a process, one designed to prepare students for learning, help them understand the steps of their learning, and lead them to the metacognitive state of knowing how they have learned so that they can repeat it. This final stage gives them the independence to proceed with learning on their own. Explicit teaching can be used with equal efficiency in math or science, social studies or physical education, ELA or music. It is often presented as a four-step process, as indicated here:

1. **Set a purpose.** The teacher finds a way to motivate students so that they buy in to the learning process. To achieve this, a teacher needs to know his or her students — what they know and what interests them. With this knowledge in hand, it is then possible to build their background knowledge by presenting new information, as necessary, and stimulating students to recall what they already know, based on facts and experiences they have already accumulated.
2. **Explain the topic.** The teacher then moves on to explaining the new topic or skill. In literacy, this might entail explaining how to analyze an author's purpose or how to identify the central idea of a text. Again, this is primarily the teacher's work.
3. **Model the skill.** Next, the teacher models the task or provides an example and helps students work through it. For example, the teacher might examine a text with students, pointing out clues that indicate the author's purpose.
4. **Provide practice.** At this point, the teacher begins to cut the students loose so they can explore, learn, build knowledge, and become independent learners.

One more step might be included here: reflection. This step involves prompting students to think about the process they have completed and helping them understand both what they've learned and how they learned it. Reflection can lead students to realize that they can duplicate this process on their own to become active, independent learners.

Some experts refer to this process as Gradual Release. The teacher focuses the lesson by explaining the skill or topic and showing how it is done. This is the "I do it" stage of

learning in which all the work is done by the teacher. Then the teacher provides guided instruction — the “we do it” stage — by prompting, questioning, and guiding students through the completion of a task to develop their understanding of the skill. Next comes collaborative learning, the “You do it together” stage, which further releases students to do their own learning. During this stage, students work together to analyze a problem, discuss it, and figure out a solution by working with their peers. Finally, students are cut free and challenged to learn independently by taking on a task and completing it on their own. This is the “you do it alone” stage. No matter what term you use, however, this process is effective in moving students from directed learning to independent learning.

Engaging Students in Active Learning

Often, the most difficult parts to implement in this process are the final stages — the ones that shift students toward independent learning, or Quadrant D learning. Nonetheless, moving students into Quadrant D work reflects more closely what the Common Core State Standards require of them. Whether students will need to take the SMARTER Balanced or PARCC Assessment, they will have to think more deeply and demonstrate their knowledge and abilities at a higher level than was required in the past.

Too often, students are accustomed to thinking of themselves as sponges who are in class to absorb what the teacher tells them and then hold on to that knowledge until it is wrung out of them on a test. Students with this mindset regard themselves as passive learners whose only goal is to regurgitate what they have absorbed before they quickly forget it. The key to making students independent learners, though, is to change their mindset about their role. To determine how you can make students more active learners, consider the following questions:

- Are students passive learners who allow teachers to do the “heavy lifting” that ensures learning?
- Do students have a sense that they are responsible for their own learning with the assistance of teachers?
- Are students compliant workers who follow directions and produce factual material presented by teachers?
- What is necessary to shift toward a learning partnership between students and teachers in which students take on a greater role in their own learning?

According to Allison Zmuda (2008), the following beliefs prevent students from assuming a more active role in their learning:

1. Rules of a classroom and a content area are based on what the teacher wants.
2. What teachers want me to say is more important than what I want to say.
3. The point of the assignment is to get it done.
4. Once an assignment is done, it is off the to-do list.
5. If I make a mistake, my job is to replace it with the right answer.
6. I feel proud of my work only if I receive a good grade.
7. Speed is synonymous with intelligence.
8. Once I get too far behind, I will never catch up or pass the course.
9. What I am learning in school doesn't have much to do with my life — but it is not supposed to because this is school.

One clear challenge for teachers is to move students from being passive to active learners. However, teachers need to review their own instructional and classroom practices to determine what role they play in creating passive learners in the first place. The International Center's *WE™ Survey Suite* is designed to collect data on student and staff perceptions regarding both learning and relationships in their school. These data are crucial for helping teachers know what students really think about the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom.