4. RE-IMAGINING RELEVANCE IN EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Educational relevance. If we had the ability to look into the brains of practicing teachers we’d see this notion rolling steadily through cells in the frontal lobe. Looking for relevance allows us to interest our students. It allows us to coerce them into learning something new or, at least, something the powers-that-be consider important for them to know. If we stopped brain-watching and instead listened into a typical seminar for pre-service teachers on curriculum and planning, we would also encounter this term. It is the plight of the teacher to help students connect with topics. Faced with this task, looking for relevance seems like the logical thing to do. By connecting students with something – by “hooking” them as teachers so often call it – we assume that we are more likely to be able to teach them and that they, in turn, will be more likely to learn.

This chapter commits some educational heresy. I want to argue that this conception of relevance is not as useful for learning as we think it is. Looking to relevance and feeling confident that it, in conjunction with the kinds of objectives-based approaches to curriculum planning that run rampant in our schools, is most important is actually a recipe for educational disaster or, in the very least, boredom (but isn’t boredom in the classroom synonymous with educational disaster?). Following a brief discussion of the pedagogical limitations of relevance I will indicate, with an example, how we might more successfully engage students in learning.

Some Limitations of Relevance

There are at least four problems with looking for “relevance” as a means of engaging students in learning.

First, looking for the relevance of a topic in relation to the students’ lived experiences connects back to the widespread belief in education that we should start with what students know in order to engage in learning. I would hazard a bet that many students are in fact tired of what they know, of their daily experiences and would much rather encounter and envision for themselves other possibilities. In short, relevance doesn’t allow us to begin with what students can imagine as being possible.

Second, the notion of relevance often seems to be defined in utilitarian terms. So, for example, we encourage students to learn something because it will serve
a particular social purpose; it will help them to participate in the workforce (the “get a job” argument), be an active and responsible citizen (the “Canadians should know something about the history of Canada” argument), or appropriately interact with their peers (the “learn this skill and you will be a better communicator/friend-reader/writer” argument). My point is not that these reasons are totally unimportant, but more that the utilitarian significance of a topic is not necessarily something that engages students on an emotional level. Indeed, some of the future-oriented reasons we associate with relevance have little immediate importance to students. In order to connect with students of any age we must think about topic in emotional terms; the emotional significance of a topic is a means of engaging the imagination of the child.

Third, the conception of relevance we often talk about in education isn’t easily found when it comes to some topics. Consider, for example, mathematical concepts or historical knowledge. How does one apply relevance to particularly abstract topics without somehow compromising the complexity of the topic? (I’m thinking algebra here!) How does one teach historical topics such as Ancient Civilizations when relevance is the guide? Sure, one could identify the different ways in which Algebra infuses students’ daily lives or we could trace the influence of certain features of the Roman Empire through to the governance we have today. The problem is that both of these ideas dilute something of the ingenuity of the mathematical concept and the vividness of the historical era. The challenge for teachers is to engage students in meaningful and memorable ways while maintaining, as much as possible, the wonder inherent in the topic itself.

Fourth, seeking relevance connects to the widely-held belief that good teaching requires “hooking” students. The idea of connecting students with a topic is not the problem; indeed, the necessity of this connection is what I’m arguing for. The problem with thinking about how to “hook” a student – besides the obvious image that evokes of some poor student hanging limply from a line like fish out of water or, perhaps less gruesome, some poor kid with a large cane hooked around its neck – is the belief that this is an initial requirement for learning. One “hooks” the students and then one gets on with teaching. This kind of thinking fails to acknowledge that all learning requires emotional and imaginative engagement. Engagement – defined here as when we feel some emotional connection in response to a topic and, often, our ability to imagine possibilities is evoked – lies at the heart of learning. So rather than a hook, we are seeking to create learning experiences that engage students’ emotions and imaginations in more profound and long-lasting ways.

Think for a moment about a really memorable learning experience you had in your elementary or secondary school years – perhaps an activity you did. What was it? What knowledge was gained through this experience? What we tend to most often remember from our past educational experiences are those times when we were most emotionally and imaginatively engaged. Unfortunately, many things we learned in school are not memorable for us. Take this a step further, teachers, and you have your reality check: without engaging your students’ emotions and imaginations in learning, much (if not most) of what you teach your students will be forgotten.