Relevance/rationale

Although some students’ grades may be very high because they are effective at memorizing, the information learned for a test is soon forgotten if they have not learned it within an authentic context. The same occurs with less capable memorizers to an even more severe degree. Likewise when students are learning how to perform a process or strategy, they may create the illusion that they have learned how to perform the skill because they performed it correctly on practice activities such as worksheets, but soon lose their ability to perform the skill. Both of these common problems may be due, in part, to students’ failure to understand why they are learning what you are teaching.

A number of problems result when students do not understand the rationale behind what they are expected to learn. Among these are (a) the long-term impact of your teaching is tremendously reduced, and (b) motivation.

A common reason why students do not seem to retain their knowledge of concepts or facts you are teaching is that the instruction failed to help them understand the information in a manner that is personally relevant to them. More specifically, the information is not addressed from the perspective of how knowing it will help them better understand their world (why things happen the way they do, how things led to the way things are, what may happen in the future) or better understand or solve a real world problem. As a result, students fail to make connections to their own background knowledge or experience, and their relational understanding of the information is severely limited. Thus, students will remember new information long enough to meet an immediate demand (e.g., pass the test), but soon forget it because the deeper information processing needed to retain the knowledge never occurred.

Likewise, a common reason why students do not seem to retain their knowledge skills or strategies is that they are not also developing a knowledge base about the skill— that is, knowledge of why the skill will be useful to them when solving real-world problems, when it is appropriate to use the skill, when one wouldn’t bother to use it, when adaptations are appropriate, and so forth. In short, learning how to perform a skill is rarely sufficient. Students must also understand the relevance of the skill.
The second major problem associated with students not knowing the relevance of what they are expected to learn concerns motivation. In the absence of students understanding why they are learning something, motivation to learn derives strictly from their attempt to meet the social expectations of school. Here, motivation to learn often comes primarily from a desire to perform well (e.g., play the ‘school’ game) because of the social status or reinforcement it provides. Students who have a relatively high expectation for success can draw on this form of artificial motivation to cope with the demands of school, but students who do not have high expectations of success often cannot.

To motivate these less capable students, the most common strategy used is fear. That is, we create contexts where fear of failure is used to motivate students to work harder (i.e., if you don’t study harder, you will fail the test”). Failure is a socially constructed phenomenon that tends to be tied directly to social acceptance. In other words, the most common motivation tool we tend to use is the very tool least likely to work well for students with histories of failure. Because these motivation tools often fail to work, many teachers then turn to extrinsic forms of reinforcement (e.g., bonus points that can be cashed in for treats, no-homework certificates, etc.) that may be appropriate in some circumstances for children, but are rarely appropriate for adolescents. Few teachers are aware of the large body of research documenting the manner in which use of extrinsic reinforcers for older students can promote dependency, and external locus of control and actually increase failure! However, in the absence of providing authentic reasons for learning as a means to motivate students, fear and extrinsic reinforcement are the only tools available.

Specific Tips
The curriculum guides or standards of learning you are often expected to follow sometimes provide explicit statements about the relevance of the information or skills you are teaching. Unfortunately, these resources too often fail to provide this crucial information, so the steps below are offered to help you.

Effective Alternative
At the beginning of a unit and at the beginning of each lesson, as well as repeatedly throughout the lessons, (a) explicitly state the relevance of what is being taught in terms of how it connects to understanding our world, (b) ask students questions that prompt reflection in this context, and (c) engage them in activities that focus on the relevance of what is being learned.

To identify the relevance of subject matter you are teaching …
Step 1. Identify, as explicitly as possible, the goal or outcome of the lesson. Ask yourself these questions:
   If all of my students don’t learn anything else but this one critical, core idea, what would this idea be?

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What are the major dimensions, or main ideas, of this core idea that are critical for all of my students to understand?

What are the critical features (or specific facts) related to this idea that are essential for all of my students to learn?

Step 2: Ask yourself the following questions to determine the relevance of the concepts you are teaching (you may not be able to answer all of these questions, but answers to some of them will help considerably).

If my students have a well-developed knowledge base of the core idea of my lesson, what would be a phenomenon (something that is happening, has recently happened, or is a state of being) in our current world that knowing the core idea will help students better understand?

What is a phenomenon (something that is happening, has recently happened, or is a state of being) in our current world that is somewhat similar to my core idea?

What impact (direct or indirect) did the core idea have on our world today?

If my students have a well-developed knowledge base of the core idea of my lesson, what would be a problem in our current world that knowing the core idea will help students better understand?

If my students have a well-developed knowledge base of the core idea of my lesson, what would be a problem in our current world that knowing the core idea will help students solve?

To identify the relevance of skill or strategy you are teaching …

Step 1. Identify, as explicitly as possible, the goal or outcome of the lesson. Ask yourself this question:

As a result of learning this strategy, will my students will be able to …?

Step 2. Identify, as explicitly as possible, the relevance of knowing how to perform the strategy. Ask yourself the following questions:

What is a task or problem students currently encounter that being able to perform this strategy will enable them to successfully complete or solve?

Where (or in what context) will students likely encounter these tasks?

When would be the appropriate times for students to use this strategy to successfully complete the task or solve The Concern? When would students not bother to use it?

Why will the skill or strategy help students complete the task or solve The Concern?