Designing Student Work: Generating the Needed Learning Production Behaviors

Years back, before I used the term student learning production behaviors, I was attracted to Phil Schlechty's mandate that we needed to "work on the work." The Schlechty Center continues that focus today in one of its ten System's Capacity Standards.

"STANDARD 3: DEVELOPING A FOCUS ON STUDENTS AND ON THE QUALITY OF WORK PROVIDED TO STUDENTS: ***"Throughout the school district there is a clear focus on students and on the quality of the work provided to students—work that students find interesting, challenging, and satisfying and that results in their learning what is expected by schools, parents, and the community."***

I landed on the term student learning production behaviors

when I realized working with performing arts instructors and athletic coaches that their planning for learning was focused on what the student would do to generate learning and less on what the teacher would do. Too often, I found that teachers were looking at a standard their students needed to meet and asking, “How should I teach this?” instead of asking, “What would students need to do to learn this?

Understanding the role of learning production behaviors changed my coaching observations and conferencing to focus much more on what students are doing. Is the student behavior I’m observing likely to produce the desired learning outcome? If you go to a fitness center and watch folks working out, you can probably predict different outcomes being achieved by watching the work being done. A trainer’s role is to maximize the payoff of a workout by providing the right “work” at the right time.

Similarly, I envision my goal as a teacher is to have the largest number of students engaged in the most appropriate learning production behaviors for the maximum amount of available time. Just like for the fitness trainer, the right work is often different for different individuals.

Schlechty caught my attention in a presentation he gave when he raised concerns about supervisors making comments about student engagement after a walk through. A walk-through might only capture surface-level behavior and not reveal the underlying motivation or engagement level of students. In a short walk-through visit, these can look the same.

- authentic engagement (when students are fully invested in their learning)
- strategic compliance (when students do the work just to meet requirements)
- ritual compliance (when students go through the motions with little real connection to the learning)

Here is an 8-minute clip of Phil Schlechty describing the engagement we need. While he presented this years ago, it remains a focus today for teachers to be exploring individually and collectively.

The standard from the Schlechty Center states that the quality of work provided to students should be work students find **interesting**, **challenging**, and **satisfying**.

When the quality of work meets those criteria, we should find evidence of engagement:

- Students are attentive
- Students persist
- Students commit
- Students find meaning and value

Those descriptions of quality work illustrate for me the challenge of designing work that is engaging. It is why early on I realized how examining students' participation in extra-curricular activities provided a good area of study. That thinking was just reinforced on a recent visit with my grandkids when my almost 17 year-od granddaughter rose from bed at 7:30 am on a Saturday morning to head to a 3 ½ hour volleyball practice. Then rushed home to change and head to a 6-hour job as a lifeguard.

She finds this work interesting, challenging, and satisfying and therefore is attentive, she persists and commits because she sees and predicts value in the activities. It's really a big challenge for teachers to design student work within our content areas that does the same.

As part of an Education Week series focused on building relevance into plans for learning, Janet Walton from North Carolina State University explores the importance of students finding connections between learning content and their own experiences.

“Connections give students the sense that learning is relevant—or relatable and meaningful—to them. Relevance can be personal, where academic content is related to students’ individual interests and backgrounds and to their educational and career aspirations. Relevance can also be contextual, where learning is grounded in situations in students’ own communities or in current issues and events. A specific type of personal and contextual relevance is cultural relevance, meaning that students’ sociocultural and sociopolitical characteristics are reflected in learning activities. Regardless of how relevance is viewed, however, the aim of infusing relevance into learning activities is to engage students not just intellectually but also socially and emotionally.”

“It is important to remember that what is relevant to students in one setting may not be relatable to students in another setting. Because of this, teachers should look for ways to adapt curricular materials to their own contexts and for ways to individualize learning for their students.”

As teachers and those supporting teachers, we have got to be authentically engaged in designing student work. We need to persist and commit to designing work that has meaning and value. Fortunately, that work is interesting, challenging, and satisfying for us.