

rel-e-vance *n.*

1. Pertinence to the matter at hand.

Relevance is a term used to describe how pertinent, connected, or applicable some information is to a given manner.

Relevance

Ethos of Learning

“I often say to my geography students they are learning dinner table conversation starters!”

Alex Wallace , Assistant Head

Why are we doing this?

Schools constantly ask themselves: How can students meet high academic standards if they do not believe in their ability to do so? How can they learn if they are not academically engaged? How can they set and reach academic goals if pupils do not see the purpose in doing so?

Relevant, meaningful activities that both engage students emotionally and connect with what they already know are what help them to remember facts. With no reference point and no interesting information to glean, it is more than likely to go in one ear and straight out the other.

Recent studies¹ link personal relevance and emotional engagement to memory retention and success. Students need to enjoy learning and connect the new information with previously acquired knowledge. Without that, students may not only become quickly disengaged and forget, but they may also lose the motivation to try. In short, if a student does not believe a particular activity is interesting, relevant or within the scope of his or her capabilities, it is probably not going to sink in.

Why do I need to know this?

A report produced by National Foundation for Educational Research² for the Wellcome Trust examined whether young people were able to make the direct link between studying science and their own futures.

Students were in general agreement that a good understanding of science could improve future career prospects. Students with well-defined career aspirations, for example in medicine and teaching, believed that science education was of critical importance. Those who were undecided about their career path still identified the potential value of science education but more in terms of keeping their career options open, increasing their range of skills and enhancing their future job prospects.

The study also highlighted a range of views about the relevance and future value of science education and other subjects to life outside school. There was a general consensus that Maths and English were the key subjects at school, with English being identified as slightly more useful than Maths. Understandably, students suggesting that science had a greater potential value than other subjects were predominantly those with clearly defined career paths requiring scientific knowledge.

When will I ever use this in the real world?

A generation ago, most students went to university for the sheer love of learning. They wanted to become better educated, to 'find themselves' intellectually as well as personally and believed that study would be its own an end in itself. Today, we are told, everything has changed. Degrees have become an expensive investment in a future career, admittance to a graduate recruitment programme and a better paid job i.e. a means to an end.

So what has happened to the love of academia? True, many students now study degrees that are more vocational. Nevertheless, the numbers reading traditional subjects, such as history, English literature and the natural sciences are holding up. In fact, many universities still regard themselves as seats of pure learning.

The annual careers study *What Do Graduates Do?* shows that approximately 70 per cent of graduate jobs do not require a vocational degree. Furthermore, in addition to good academic results, employers also placed great value on generalists who were flexible in their approach to learning and able to take on new skills.

One caveat to the above is the perception that arts, humanities and pure-science faculties provide little assistance to their undergraduates in obtaining work experience or providing more vocational support, something which is deemed essential in today's job market. Whilst there is some truth in this, traditional degree courses are starting to move with the times. History syllabuses are introducing practical modules, such as statistics; undergraduates studying English may get the opportunity to work on local newspapers; and music students are taught entrepreneurship, since many will become self-employed.

If students are to enjoy academic, social and personal success, they need to be engaged in their learning and appreciate the relevance between what they learn today and who they want to become tomorrow. So studying for the love of the subject is not just relevant, it can pay too.

Ethos of Learning

According to our most recent Learning Review audit, relevance was not regularly observed. However, there were some great examples of its use.

In my eyes relevance links many other areas of the Ethos of Learning together. Relevance is a key cog when considering engagement. If a student cannot see the relevance of their learning then it is difficult for them to be motivated by it. As classroom practitioners we have a responsibility to bring the learning to life. I often say to my geography students they are learning dinner table conversation starters! I challenge my Sixth Formers to listen to the news and think how they could link each item to their A-level studies. Of course my subject lends itself well to the idea of relevance but other subjects have that ability too.

To get students fully engaged we need to ask them why we are learning these topics; "What do we need algebra for? Why is it important to know why light refracts? Why do we

need to know about the Magna Carta?" These are the questions the boys should be thinking about.

They need to work out the importance of their learning. Learning should be about, enquiry, mystery, challenge and problem solving. By asking the students the relevance of their learning, I would suggest that we get greater engagement. As a staff this is an area we will look to continue to develop next year.

What can parents do to develop such skills?

I believe parents can really engage with their sons about the relevance of their learning. Don't be afraid to ask them why they are learning certain topics, can they see the relevance of their learning. See if they can justify it and if they can't, can you!

Sometimes showing your son the links to his passion can help. For example, a young lad struggling and becoming disinterested in Biology could be reinvigorated by seeing how Biology is such an integral part of sport studies. The relevance of a topic/subject may also link to an end point. For example, showing your son the importance of Maths should they wish to become an engineer.

Relevance is an important motivator for our young men. I also think that challenging your son on the relevance of their learning could lead to some really interesting discussions. It could of course open a few hornets nests too!

For further information on the Ethos of Learning please refer to the RGS website: rgshw.com or Alex Wallace, Assistant Head, arw@rgshw.com

¹ Cognitive neuroscientist, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang & Professor Matthias Faeth, Harvard, *Mind, Brain, and Education: Neuroscience Implications for the Classroom; Nature; Science.*

² NEFER & Wellcome Trust Report 2011, *Exploring young people's views on science education.*