Integrated Curricular Approaches in Reaching Adult Students

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Abstract: In the field of adult basic education, there are two strategies that have been found to be of particular value to student learning: multiple intelligences and purpose-based learning. However, putting these learning theories into practice is not always as easy as an educator might at first believe. Adult basic education teacher Dylan Emerick-Brown reflects on his own teaching philosophies and learning strategies to share what has worked effectively in his classroom to improve student enthusiasm and retention of knowledge. It is the combination of utilizing the multiple intelligences naturally preferred by students, individual to individual, and connecting the lessons to the students’ everyday lives—fostering purpose in the curricula—that turns a classroom into an effective, open learning environment.

Keywords: multiple intelligences, purpose-based learning, adult basic education, learning theory, teaching strategy

What is a GED? If we ask our students, most would start off with, “It is a piece of paper that...” And this is where it gets tricky. What does it actually do? It is more than a piece of paper but less than a golden ticket into college or the job of your dreams. It is something in between.

I tell my adult students, who attend an adult literacy nonprofit in North Philadelphia, it is what you do with your GED that matters. My students range in age from early 20s to late 60s. They bring a plethora of background knowledge, experience, and personalities, making for an incredibly diverse population. This diversity is also represented in these adult learners’ preferred learning styles. I find two teaching devices most effective in the classroom: multiple intelligences and, what I call, purpose-based learning—fostering purpose in the curricula by making it relevant to the students’ lives.

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The theory of multiple intelligences, developed by psychologist Howard Gardner in the late 1970's and early 1980's, posits that individuals possess eight or more relatively autonomous intelligences. Individuals draw on these intelligences, individually and corporately, to create products and solve problems that are relevant to the societies in which they live. (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, & Gardner, 2011, p. 2)

These intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Purpose-based learning is more of an umbrella under which fall integrated curriculum, project-based learning, and problem-based learning. In education, whether the lesson is problem-based, project-based, or none of the above, it must be purpose-based.

In 2006, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke-Morrison conducted a study of high school students indicating “nearly half (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting. . . . four out of five (81 percent) said there should be more opportunities for real-world learning” (pp. iii-iv). These are my students, and I see them for the people they want to become. I get to share in a remarkable period of their lives.

I do not use an assessment to determine the types of learners in my classroom. Rather, within the 1st week, I utilize various lesson styles on a single topic to appeal to learners' preferences and witness which students show inclinations to particular intelligences. As Armstrong (1994) stated,

There is no “mega-test” on the market that can provide a comprehensive survey of students' multiple intelligences . . . The single best tool for assessing students' multiple intelligences, however, is probably one readily available to all of us: simple observation. (p. 35)

As the class progresses, I may amend my teaching style if students' proclivity for a lesson style was falsely identified. It is a highly fluid process.

A perfect example of success in the classroom was when my students solved the national debt crisis. We started with an open discussion about what students knew about debt, balancing budgets, and the national debt crisis. Next, I gave them a handout designed to split monthly income, necessary expenses, and luxury expenses, and calculate the monthly budget for each student. Kinesthetic learners loved the hands-on nature of this lesson. Linguistic students enjoyed the discussion on personal budgets. Logical students appreciated the organization of data.

Comparing their personal budgets with the national budget, I taught them some basic economics. The lesson concluded with a projected interactive national debt puzzle provided by *The New York Times* (Carter, Ericson, Leonhardt, Marsh, & Quealy, 2010) showing a bar at the top of the page representing the national debt and, below the bar, everything Congress was considering cutting. As items were cut from the budget, the national debt bar filled in. As in any democracy, I needed a majority of votes from the students to cut something from the budget. They debated, compromised, and sometimes learned graceful defeat. By the end, the national budget was balanced, and the students felt refreshingly accomplished.

This lesson reinforced addition and subtraction of decimals and whole numbers, signed numbers (debt), verbal debate, economics, and American politics. At the same time, the students unanimously agreed that the lesson was both entertaining and educational. By the end of the day, they were all committed to voting in elections and wanted to budget their personal households. The combination of multiple-intelligence-designed instruction with purpose-based learning anchored their newly formed knowledge to already established knowledge, helped the students sustain their new knowledge, fostered enthusiasm in the classroom, and fulfilled the primary function of education—to prepare students for real life.

One thing I cannot emphasize enough is the value of discussion before and after the lesson. During discussion, students ask questions and diversity shines through their experiences. This part of the lesson requires higher level thinking, as they apply what they are about to learn or what they have learned to their real lives. In this application process, they make connections and share perspectives. If one of their perspectives clicks with another student, where my teaching failed to connect, then the discussion has truly fulfilled its purpose. As Boyd (2004) said, “through the process of discussion and dialogue, students in
My students come from a high poverty environment in which dropping out of school is common, yet enthusiastically go to school, ready to learn, every day. By relating the lessons to their lives, they do not feel like they are being talked at, but rather talked to. They engage in conversation and take ownership of their education. My students talk about voting in elections and helping their children with their homework for the first time, and make plans to better their future and the future of their families. I am reminded of my own grandfather whose parents had elementary school educations. He overcame incredible odds to not only graduate from high school, but from college as well. He used his education to become a teacher, then high school principal—a trend of putting education first that wove its way through the generations to me. Not until after teaching adult basic education, did I thank him for breaking the cycle of generational poverty in my family, giving my mother—and as a result, my brother and me—a more advantageous life. This is why I teach adult basic education—not only for my students but also for their generations to come.

So, I leave you with a challenge to take active ownership of your classrooms. We need to have a professional discussion about how to effectively incorporate individual and collective student experiences, as well as lessons geared toward multiple intelligences, into already established curricular goals. Understanding our students learn through instinctively preferred intelligences and connecting our lessons to their real lives are timely endeavors requiring practice, student participation, intentionality, and persistence. However, the results are indisputably evident in the enthusiasm of the students and retention of learned knowledge. The condition of our nation's schools is evidence enough that we are not taking advantage of the resources available to us. As teachers, we must lead from the front.

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References


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Dylan Emerick-Brown is an adult education teacher in North Philadelphia, adjunct instructor for the Florida Institute of Technology, and the editor-in-chief of the online literary magazine Splash of Red. Providing prosperous opportunities to his community and fostering a sense of individualism and accomplishment to his students drive his aspirations. To this end, his students have interviewed numerous acclaimed writers, he speaks at state and national conferences, and he developed the website PurposeBasedLearning.com—an online community in which educators can ask questions, provide solutions, and share knowledge about fostering purpose in classroom curricula to relate lessons to life.