



To Connect Students to Standards-Based Content



We have worked with students interested in Korea, vacuum cleaners, screwdrivers, fences, chickens, James Bond, stop signs, churches, weathervanes, triangles, remote controls, dragons, and basketball. Any of these interests, no matter how obscure or unusual, can be used as part of a standards-based curriculum. For example, one student, Freddie, loved to “do the calendar.” Part of the reason why this was so central to his life was that he had spent 6 years in a self-contained classroom where students of all ages engaged in a calendar exercise daily. Therefore, when we started working with Freddie, his favorite activity was studying the months of the year and answering questions about the holidays and special events (e.g., Independence Day, Christmas, First Day of Spring).

Although this interest in the calendar was not hurting Freddie’s education, it also was not helping him to grow as a learner. To enhance Freddie’s learning and to challenge all students in his sixth-grade classroom, we developed a calendar activity appropriate for older students. All of the students in the classroom knew the days of the week and the months of the year, but none of them knew that December 7 was the anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor or that the date of the spring equinox can change from year to year. The teachers had all of the students work in small groups to find important dates related to history, science, literature, and math. Freddie was responsible for presenting the event-of-the-day each morning. All students—including Freddie—learned something new, and Freddie was thrilled to have a calendar activity incorporated into the daily schedule.

In addition to tapping into a learner’s knowledge base, teachers might also target special skill areas. In a study of inclusive classrooms by Kasa-Hendrickson and Kluth (2005), a teacher, Ms. Holder, used one of her student’s areas of prowess as a tool for connecting her to standards-based social studies learning:



I want her to realize that she is very good at doing some things on her own. So I asked myself, “What is Shantel good at on her own?” Puzzles. She is great at puzzles. I knew another teacher had this magnetic puzzle globe so I asked if I could borrow it. Shantel needs to learn about Europe. It is impor-



tant for her to have the same academic experiences and I might as well incorporate what she is good at to do it. (p. 9)

Not only was Ms. Holder able to find classroom time for Shantel to work on the puzzles she so loved but she also found a creative way to push her student into complex content by using a skill that the learner prized.

The instructional decision made by Ms. Holder might be applauded by Temple Grandin (2006), a woman with autism who wished that her teachers would have understood the connections that could have been drawn between fixations and academic content. One of Grandin's fascinations as a teenager was sliding doors and, as an adult, she explained how this interest might have been exploited to improve her education: "If my teacher had challenged me to learn how the electronic box that opened the door worked, I would have dived head first into electronics. Fixations can be tremendous motivators" (p. 2). She went on to share that teachers should use fixations to motivate instead of trying to stamp them out. Grandin's sentiment is similar to one that we often share with teachers: "Don't squash interests, exploit them!"



ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR CONNECTING STUDENTS TO STANDARDS-BASED CONTENT VIA INTERESTS OR PASSIONS

* * * Search the curriculum for natural areas to teach about the student's favorites. If the student loves vacuum cleaners, this topic can be quite easily featured in a unit on inventions. If the student adores dolphins, you can discuss them during lessons on habitats or ocean life. And if the student values Sherlock Holmes, this topic can be explored not only during reading or English classes but also during studies about deduction, problem solving, or literary genres.

* * * Look at the standards for the learner's grade level and determine how you can adapt them to a student's needs by using his or her passion. For instance, we know a U.S. history teacher who taught the standard "Explain the United States' relationship to other nations and its role in international organizations" by using an analogy of the Super Friends cartoon characters. This learner was able to understand and even explain the role of the United States in the United Nations after he was shown a visual aid comparing this relationship to the one that Aquaman, the Wonder Twins, and Superman have with the Justice League. Consider ways in which any standard might seem less abstract and complex by using such comparisons.

* * * Consider how you can change your instruction to meet the needs of students with specific and significant areas of expertise. Can you comically imitate a favorite person, place, or thing when trying to emphasize a point or give directions? Can you use the students' interests in your lectures or whole-class discussions (e.g., "A car and a CRH 5 bullet train started from the two different towns at the same time . . .")?