

Learning Logic

Teachers, student reflect on best ways to learn

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It's a given at school that no one likes work.

Homework, athletics and jobs.

Students complain throughout all seven hours about the workload they have that night or proudly proclaim they haven't finished an assignment due in 15 minutes.

Yet, no one complains about learning.

It's quite the opposite.

A common complaint among students is they're not learning.

Interest Level:

Sophomore **Kelsey Demel** said she likes learning, and she said she does extra research in subjects in which she's interested.

"When you like a subject more, you're more willing to put effort into it," she said.

Social studies teacher **Brian Mowry**, however, has a different opinion.

"It doesn't matter what the subject is if you can awaken curiosity," he said. "It doesn't matter if you're interested in the Middle East or interested in the trajectory of a ball. Human beings should be interested in learning, and if the subject matter focuses on learning, then it will be interesting."

Social studies teacher **Jason Peres** said the key to getting students interested is giving them freedom to choose how they want to display learning.

"What I find in education is that students want to know, desperately, and they want to learn, but they also want autonomy," Peres said. "So they want to learn about whatever is it they want to learn. Our struggle is we have an agenda, I have to make kids see the purpose and I have to give them autonomy."

When provided with more freedom, Peres said students will welcome learning what they are supposed to absorb. He also said this idea is relatively new.

"I think our school is very progressive," Peres said. "If you compare our school to all other schools, we do a lot more focusing on learning than most."

Classroom Vocabulary:

Mowry said students immediately shut down when they know they're going to be working.

"I can physically see a switch being

switched when the talk turns to 'You have a quiz on this,' or 'You need to make a project on this,'" he said. "I can see a huge disconnect and even a different mindset from learning to 'Now, it's about grades.'"

Because of this, Mowry said he focuses on learning in class. He said he believes students are interested and eager when it comes to learning.

"When I get to teach my elective courses, we really get to focus on just learning interesting things about other cultures, and kids get excited about it," he said.

However, Mowry said he has to give students the mindset of emphasizing learning and not working.

"I try to spend a lot of time at the beginning of the semester when I set up a class talking about learning," he said. "Learning is the goal — learning is important. I try not to use the word 'work.'"

Social studies teacher **Jason Peres** said he also uses a careful vocabulary when teaching.

"We don't use those words 'work' and 'homework,'" Peres said. "We use the words 'learning' and 'learning extension.' I wouldn't want kids to feel learning is work. It shouldn't be."

Teacher Involvement:

Another reason students don't like work and school, according to social studies teacher **Jason Peres**, is the lack of challenge.

"Kids don't like school when there's no challenge involved," Peres said. "The problem is students are at such varying levels that everybody's challenge index or their 'wheelhouse' of being appropriately challenged is going to be different, and that's where the teacher comes in."

However, Peres said keeping all students challenged to their appropriate levels can be a difficulty in itself, especially when done on a daily basis. This doesn't discourage teachers from trying, though.

"Every teacher got into this business to promote learning," he said. "I'm just not certain students have always picked up on it. There isn't one person at this school who thinks learning is a bad thing."

Mowry said most teachers would claim to emphasize learning over grades, but in order for the process to be effective, teachers must support their philosophies with their actions.

"Like anything, teenagers can spot phonies very quickly," he said. "I have to be more concerned with learning. I can never get on a kid because their grade's low."

Relevance and Impact of "Work":

When it comes to taking notes, writing essays or preparing for tests, Mowry said these classic elements of school aren't necessary to learn, but they are needed in order to succeed in college.

"Our entire system is not necessarily set up for learning as it is for getting your diploma or getting your degree," he said. "I always like to say if you're depending on this school to educate you, it's going to be a crappy education."

Demel said the work done in school is useful to learning.

"You have to do a little bit of work to learn, so I think a little bit of work students don't mind," she said. "It's excess work — that's when they mind it."

Peres said students don't always understand the meaning behind the work they are assigned.

"It is really difficult to learn something without any frame of reference," he said. "So, what kids might see as pointless, mind-numbing, busy work could actually be a way for them to build background knowledge. The problem is we don't always explain it well, so kids don't see a relevance."

Demel said she considers herself an avid learner and said homework is generally a disruption to her learning, outside activities and sleep schedule.

"With the hours I have to put into my extracurricular activities and the hours I have to put into homework, I usually don't get a lot of sleep, which doesn't help my learning or my participation in extracurricular activities," Demel said.

Demel isn't alone.

According to a poll by CBC.ca, only 20 percent of teenagers get the recommended nine hours of sleep, and nationwidechildrens.org lists homework as one of the top factors for that, alongside sports, activities and socializing.

"I think we should take work off the plate altogether," Mowry said. "Just lightening the workload itself might not have an impact on learning, but lightening the workload plus a

very strategic focus on learning as a culture shift would be huge for the way students learn.”

If the amount of work went the other way and increased instead, Mowry said more work would “demotivate learning.”

Peres agrees work should be limited, but this doesn’t always happen.

“Are we guilty of over-assigning things that kids don’t see a purpose for?” he said. “Absolutely. In my profession, I’ve always tried to regulate learning extension activities to only things I can really justify.”

Mowry also said a four-day school week would encourage learning. He said the day off should be a day for students to use the resources and teachers at school, like an eight-hour TCB — a time when students can ask for help or work on homework.

“That, in combination with lighter workload, more student-driven assessment and a more deliberate focus on learning, would help kids see value in learning and help kids become better independent learners,” he said.

Learning Forever:

Mowry said he thinks it’s important to be a lifelong learner, not just a lifelong student.

“When I’m 50 years old, I’m not going to be studying for tests and taking notes and annotating books,” he said. “I’m just going to be learning. It seems that students come to class waiting to be educated, which isn’t horrible, but it’s not great. The kids that will be more successful are the ones that go out into the world and demand to be educated by having experiences and taking risks.”

Sophomore **Kelsey Demel** said she thinks learning should relate to the outside world.

“Learning is being able to expand my knowledge of the world and the things in it and how to deal with the world and the living things in it,” she said.

Mowry said he always tells students to pursue learning elsewhere in addition to school.

“Teachers kind of hate it when I say this, but your education doesn’t happen here,” he said. “You have to get outside these walls and have a learning mindset in everything you do, especially outside of school.”