

Why do we have to learn this?

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I'm already running out of snappy answers to this question and we're only a month into school. But as annoying as this whiny inquiry is, I have to admit that it's a fair question. After all, who wants to learn something that seems useless? I don't; so I guess I shouldn't expect my students to.

I want them to see that what they are learning is important, useful, and yes, even exciting. Unfortunately there is this culture barrier between us. My culture (the adult world) wants the students to become valuable contributors to society. Their culture (the smarter-than-adults world) wants to have fun. Teachers worry about students being able to communicate clearly when they graduate. Students worry about being able to communicate with each other in math class. We need some common ground: bridges between school and society.

In my search for thoughtful answers to the "why" question, I've discovered three important bridges between the students' culture and ours: fun, relevance, and the natural world. I've also come across two programs that I think employ these bridges exceptionally well: Alberta Conference Outdoor School and Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound.

Fun

When we make learning fun, school becomes more fulfilling for the students and the teachers. My wife, Kerry, is a wonderful teacher and she taught me this important lesson. She makes her students work hard, but those little grade 1 & 2 students love her. She still gets regular letters from students, now in grades 3 and 4, that she taught a year and a half ago. Kerry has a wonderful way of making learning fun. Sometimes it's setting up a tent and a "campfire" in the classroom to gather around with marshmallows and stories. Other times it's taking a break from bookwork to play a game. Even mundane things like cleaning the room become exciting as students race to pick up the "lucky scrap." What better way to bridge the culture gap than with a smile?

Relevance

Along with the "why" question, often comes, "I'll never use this when I get out of school." Working with community members on real projects can dispel this misconception. Students at Lacombe Outreach School built a skateboard ramp for the local county recreation facility. Expeditionary Learning students at King Middle School submitted architectural designs for the proposed Gulf of Maine Aquarium. Another Expeditionary Learning school had students survey the residents of an inner-city neighborhood and use the information to plan and propose a renovation project for a vacant lot in that community. What a terrific way to show students the connections between their education and the world around them. Establishing relevance builds a crucial bridge between the students' lives and what we want them to learn.

The Natural World

The classroom God built is filled with amazing things just waiting for discovery. We all live in the same world; that's a bridge that already exists. Too often I neglect this bridge and keep my students inside so they can read about outside. True, they may start complaining when you first make them go outside (especially if you call it a hike), but they soon let their guard slip and start discovering wonderful things and asking important questions. The natural world is full of real relationships and wonderful

demonstrations of cause-and-effect that we can all learn from.

Outdoor School

Kevin Kiers spearheaded the first Alberta Conference Outdoor School last year. I was lucky to have the chance to work with Kevin and Isaac Zayachkowski on this project. Kevin's science class is an amazing example of education outside the four walls of the classroom. He implemented this concept on a larger scale in this weeklong, conference-wide learning experience for grades 5 & 6. Alberta Conference Outdoor School deftly utilized the bridges of fun and the natural world.

Students and teachers spent the week at Alberta Conference's camp, Foothills, to learn a little bit more about God's amazing world. They rotated through learning stations in pond life study, forestry, and river flow analysis in the mornings. Afternoons were filled with animal tracking, canoeing, owl pellet dissection, nature crafts, wildlife games, and team-building activities. While the teachers and parents were pleased with the educational aspects, the students were even more excited about the social side of the week.

I taught the river flow analysis each morning. It was truly great to see students laughing and smiling as they measured the volume and speed of the river. Never have I gotten such enthusiastic participation in math class. Even the students who were initially wary of getting wet were happily splashing through the river, tape measure in hand, by the end of the class. After this experience, I want every day of school to be more like this in my classroom.

The Alberta Conference Outdoor School's pilot program proved to be a great success from the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents. Plans are in the works for another one this spring. This is a development in Adventist schools that makes me proud to say we are capitalizing on the unique qualities of our situation.

Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound

Expeditionary Learning is an exciting new model for schools developed by Outward Bound and a team of educators. It is built around in-depth studies on a single theme or topic, with a special emphasis on working with community members and service projects that tie into the curriculum. I think that Adventist schools and teachers should be taking a very close look at this model of education. This type of program would work well considering our mission and the size of our schools.

While these bridges won't eliminate the "why" question, they can help us to give better answers. Let me know about any bridges you know of, because I'm still looking.