

Beyond Worksheets, A True Expression of Student Learning

By Shawn McCusker

We live in a world where we are constantly connected to information. This vast ocean of information, the best knowledge of mankind — almost all of it — can be accessed at any time in just seconds. But simply being able to access information is not all that impressive. It in no way means that we can understand the information, evaluate it, or grasp its implications. Possession of facts is not learning. What *is* an important skill is the ability to sift through abundant information, identify what is valid and meaningful, then use it to create meaning and express it. This is why student creation is so important in the new economy of information.

Jason Dvorak, who was teaching a unit on “Sensation and Perception” in his high school psychology class, had planned to first lecture, then have his students evaluate visual examples that he created to represent each concept from the lesson. They would then decide as a group which concept they represented. But Dvorak’s classes had just been given iPads as part of a pilot program, and because the school’s emphasis was on student creation and making use of these tools, he knew that he had to reconstruct the lesson. In the new iteration, the students were tasked with research and the creation of their own unique visual representations of those key concepts. Once the images were complete, the students reviewed and evaluated them as a class, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each and suggesting ways to improve them. Throughout the lesson, Dvorak monitored the discussion, adding nuanced detail and keeping the focus of the discussion on the ultimate learning objective, but the real work was done by the students.

More often than not, the memorable assignment was one that allowed them to build and create.

This constructivist approach, as outlined by Dennis Jonassen in his *8 Characteristics of Constructivist Learning*, values hands-on and experiential learning that allows students to create multiple representations of ideas. The variety of examples that they create prevents oversimplification and allows students to address topics in their complexity. The emphasis on constructing knowledge, rather than reproducing it, is not only effective at revealing comprehension, but also the misapplication of concepts and ideas. In Dvorak’s class, the examples were not without their flaws. Dvorak used this reality to have a discussion that evaluated and identified the strengths — and just as importantly — the weaknesses of their work. In many cases, that happened without the teacher having to point out the misapplication since students were able to evaluate and give feedback during the discussion.

In the past, these types of activities were not entirely foreign to classrooms. The regularity with which they take place, the power of the creation tools available to students, and our ability to share these creations is what has changed today. The increasingly available classroom technology and the growth of student 1:1 initiatives means that students not only have access

to abundant knowledge, but also the ability to create and express their learning in powerful and creative ways. Today, student “expressions of learning” can take the form of videos, podcasts, songs, and a limitless number of dynamic and interactive presentation formats. Many of these opportunities transform learning from a presentation of information to the creation of art.

Far beyond filling out answers on a worksheet, these assignments allow for individual talents and personality to shine through. While it’s unlikely that you have ever heard a person say, “that worksheet changed my life,” most people have an assignment from their childhood that they remember with pride because it was meaningful to them. More often than not, that memorable assignment was one that allowed them to build and create.

Perhaps the most important effect of the new economy of information is the need to make sense of information that is around us. “In order to do this, students need to literally create their learning and demonstrate not just what they know, but what they can do.”

Source: <http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/04/beyond-worksheets-a-true-expression-of-student-learning/>