



Effective Instructional Practice:

Using Content Relevance

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Content relevance refers to students' perceptions of the ways in which course content meets their personal or professional needs, interests, and goals (Keller, 1983). In the classroom, instructors create and use content relevant messages because it helps build connections with students that, in turn, gain and maintain their interest. Specific strategies can be used to make course content relevant to students, such as explaining how the course content relates to their future, how the concepts taught in class can be used in their daily lives, and how the course content is related to their existing knowledge (Keller, 1987). The extent to which you make your course content relevant has a tremendous effect on learning outcomes such as student motivation, student liking for a course, and student empowerment.

One way to approach content relevance is to use the ARCS model as you create class lessons and course curriculum (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006; Keller, 1987). The four categories in this model are (a) Attention, (b) Relevance, (c) Confidence, and (d) Satisfaction (ARCS). *Attention* refers to how well an instructor's message gains student interest. In an introduction to communication course, for instance, an instructor may say, "Communication is the number one skill employers want in their workforce." *Relevance* addresses the extent to which the content meets students' goals. For example, a discussion about family communication patterns may help students understand how to approach conversations with their parents or siblings. *Confidence* conveys that students have control over their academic success; it can be achieved when instructors provide

grading rubrics for assignments so that they understand instructors will evaluate them. *Satisfaction* addresses the extent to which students are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to engage in or repeat the behaviors suggested in a course. For instance, if students learn about conflict management strategies and then applies a particular strategy to manage a roommate conflict and the strategy work, then students are more likely to use the strategy to manage subsequent conflicts.

Using content relevance in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, student motivation and affective learning are positively linked to instructors' use of content relevance strategies (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Mottet et al., 2008). In other words, in situations where instructors use relevance behaviors, students are more motivated to study and they value their teachers and course content more so than when instructors do not use content relevance. When asked, students indicate that content relevance and interest in a subject area are the most significant factors affecting their motivation to learn (Millette & Gorham, 2002).

Second, instructor credibility is equated with instructor use of content relevance behaviors and students' comfort with instructor self-disclosure (Schrodt, 2013). This reason is noteworthy given that instructors often use personal disclosures to serve as examples and illustrations of course content to make course content more relatable to students' interests and needs. Hence, instructors who disclose personal information appropriately and help students see how course content is applicable to their lives are perceived as caring, competent, and trustworthy. Third, given recent scholarly attention to student entitlement, specifically framed around millennial students, Goldman and Martin (2016) claimed that content relevance “. . . may be more important than ever as

entitled students desire to know the immediate utility of the information they are learning” (p. 366). Although this claim is cause for reimagining the applicability of content relevance, it also highlights the difficulty with content relevance as it is a student perception and changes over time (Frymier, 2002). Therefore, instructors need to continually update the content in their courses and their knowledge of how this content can be related to diverse populations of students and their identities.

Five Tips on Using Content Relevance in the Classroom

1. Build rapport with your students and get to know their experiences and interests. Doing so will allow you to match student needs to course topics. Some ways to demonstrate content relevance are to explain how content builds on the knowledge and skills students already possess. You can also use information you learn about student interests (e.g., movies, music, travel) to create examples and analogies to explain course concepts (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006).

2. Model effective applications and enthusiasm for course content. To do so, have guest lectures (in-class or virtual) visit class to discuss how they have applied your course to their careers and personal lives. It is likely that these guests will model excitement for your course; in turn, you should consistently model that same excitement.

3. As instructors, we often view what we teach as being highly relevant, meaningful, and connected to our students’ lives (Frymier, 2002). As such, we are excited about our courses and this excitement can enhance content relevance. Yet, rather than telling students that our course content will be useful to their lives, get the message out to your students by asking *them* to demonstrate how the course content

will be useful to them in the future. One approach is to ask students to complete a visual mapping exercise where they highlight how the course will be useful to their personal or professional needs, interests, and goals now, three months from now, a year from now, and five years into the future.

4. To enhance perceptions of learner empowerment and engage in learner-centered teaching (Weimer, 2013), give students choice with regard to organizing their work and offer a variety of options for accomplishing tasks (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006). Allow students to select one of several semester project options or to choose a speech topic that is related to their anticipated careers.

5. Instructors can also increase perceptions of content relevance by remaining current with student culture. This currency may include the ability to use technology and integrate examples of popular culture into the classroom (Price, 2010; Frey & Tatum, 2016). Instructors can ask students to submit their popular culture interests at the beginning of the semester and can continue to add to them as students share more during the semester.

Assessing Content Relevance

To assess content relevance, do so by completing the 12-item Content Relevance Scale (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

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