Intellectual Capital

Middle-level students have many distractions in their lives. Getting their attention—even for 10 straight minutes—can be a challenge for any teacher. The best middle-level teachers are always planning ahead on how they will help students focus on the unit, topic, or activity.

The key to enrolling students into responsible participation is to tap into their motivation for learning. Ask yourself: What can they relate to? What’s in it for them? To enroll your students into a given subject, you need to build bridges into their lives.

Students gain understanding by connecting to prior knowledge and experiences. Their intellectual capital consists of everything associated with the topic of the lesson—the information they have gathered, the vocabulary they know, the concepts they understand, the experiences they have had, and their symbolic language.

We all have worked with students who did not have the intellectual capital to understand what we were teaching. They had an insufficient bank of intellectual capital. Not connecting to, or even developing, students’ intellectual capital so they can make meaning of new content is a common mistake. For example, success with fifth-grade concepts is dependent upon well-established third- and fourth-grade intellectual capital. Without it, students are academically handicapped.

The concept that meaning is made when new learning connects with existing intellectual capital sheds light on the importance of ensuring student mastery of the content we teach. Every vocabulary word, math concept, cultural understanding, or scientific fact enriches the student’s bank of knowledge and is essential for future learning. The importance of building a rich supply of intellectual capital cannot be overstated. This knowledge bank is fundamental to comprehension, problem-solving, analysis, and reasoning.

As teachers improve their abilities to tap into existing intellectual capital, it is useful to start with these guiding questions:

“How do I discover and learn my students’ prior knowledge and experiences?
What is in my students’ intellectual capital?
How is my class content associated with my students’ prior knowledge and experiences?
In what ways can I build bridges to events, thoughts, or feelings extracted from their home, social, athletic, musical, artistic, recreational, or academic lives?

After you have answered these questions, apply the following strategies for discovering—and building on—what you have learned about students’ intellectual capital.

Build rapport. Great teachers and principals make it a point to be in the hallway when students are filing out of class. They remember students’ names and something important to them, for example a student’s favorite hobby or something exciting a student has seen or done. When we communicate on a human level, we build trust and students feel valued. In return, they are more likely to share who they are, what they know, and what they think.

Create hot sheets. These can contain information about which singing groups, music, and video games are currently hot with kids. When kids feel like we know their world, they are more likely to communicate with us. Educators can share these lists with one another and collaborate about ways they can use these items to make their lessons more relevant to students’ lives.

Attend events and talk about them. Do your students attend local sports team events or is there a concert coming to town that they’re excited about? When students see us outside of school at events that they enjoy, they see us as more relatable. Additionally, when we know their world and connect to it, students are more interested in what we have to say. We don’t always have to attend these events so much as know about them and ask students what they thought about them.

Follow pop culture. Focus on understanding what your students think about and are “in to,” including knowing their favorite heroes and stars, what they’re reading, who’s popular and why, and their biggest concerns. Be mindful of displaying “judgment eyes” as they share with us. We’re trying to gather information so that we better understand their world, not shut them down.

Apply what you’ve learned. When introducing new content, connect to your students’ bank of knowledge and experiences. The more often we can relate new information to past experiences, the more likely students are to picture what is being taught and remember it. For example, introduce a math equation and relate it to a play or a move in a recent basketball game or compare a story in American history to a more recent national event that has impacted everyone.

Enrolling begins with relationships, which are strengthened each time we seek to understand our students’ world and connect our content with their prior learning and experiences.

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Your students’ model behavior:
- Leadership
- School spirit
- Respectful behavior toward others
- Volunteer work in the school and community

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Your students’ efforts and achievements with this attractive pin that they will wear proudly

Inspire
Your students to strive to be better citizens and contribute to school or community

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