



Mark Feder explores the meaning of the term 'relevance' in international education

# Relevance, motivation and learning

**F**orty years ago, in the era of student activism, the word *relevance* was a rallying cry on campuses. Small colleges and large universities were forced to initiate various changes in curriculum and introduce courses never before offered for academic credit in response to student demands for courses that were more meaningful to them. In today's market-oriented world the term *relevance* is often associated with the material benefits an academic degree can confer on its holder. The more money a graduate can earn, the more relevant his/her education is deemed. Unfortunately, both of these notions of relevance obscure a more significant interpretation of the concept of relevance in education.

Commendable as the urge may have been in the 60's to make education more relevant, it was based on several fallacies and had some

unfortunate consequences. Some valuable classes – notably those focusing on the history and literature of the past – were frequently replaced by classes focusing on more contemporary material. One assumption was that something contemporary is, by definition, more relevant than something old. Not that contemporary material is bad, but is it necessarily more relevant? Another assumption was that relevance is a quality of the subject rather than the

relationship of the learner to the subject, and this distinction is a matter of great consequence to education.

If we imagine that there are topics that are relevant in-and-of-themselves, we are bound to be in error because of the great

variation in human beings and human experience. What is relevant to one person may be irrelevant to another. A teacher may, of course, attempt to impose on students a particular idea of what *should be* relevant to them. In fact, this is precisely what is done in most schools, from elementary to college, throughout the world. Classes, curricula and courses of study regularly dictate what is relevant. From the teacher who insists that students learn the names

of the presidents and prime ministers of all the countries of the world because it is relevant information, to the degree programs that promise to provide the training relevant to getting a high-paying job, we can see educators and institutions taking it upon themselves to determine »

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world around us. We, as humans, both live in and form part of this environment. We are affected by our environment, but we also affect it by acting on it and changing it.



what is and what is not relevant. While the information they provide may be important and valuable, it is not necessarily relevant to the students. *Relevant* means having a connection to an individual, and something does not become relevant just because someone else says that it is. The teacher's challenge – and probably the most important and most difficult part of teaching – is to make the thing being taught truly relevant.


The movie **The Freedom Writers**, based on a true story, demonstrates how a teacher can make something relevant to students and what kind of impact that can have on their learning and life. Erin Gruwell, an idealistic high school English teacher in California is faced with a class of hostile students viewed by the school system as hopeless and unteachable. Her success comes not from information she delivers to the students but

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from the connection she gets them to feel to people and events beyond their own limited existence. The students learn about history not because they are told it is important but because events in history become meaningful to their own lives, because a connection to their own situations becomes evident, because, in short, the topic has been made relevant. We might even say that the function of a teacher is not to *teach* a subject but to make the subject relevant to students so that they will want to *learn* it.

At this point, you may be asking, “What is the *relevance* of all this to language learning?” In fact, relevance is a crucial factor in all kinds of learning including language learning. Relevance is what motivates students to learn, and without motivation, there is little or no meaningful learning. Of course, the desire to learn a language in order to get a job or acceptance to

a college makes language class relevant and provides motivation. But that kind of instrumental motivation is very limited compared to motivation that stems from true interest and engagement in the subject. What is needed for that kind of motivation is a teacher with a deep interest in the subject and in the students themselves.

To learn a language or anything else, what a student should look for is not a school which emphasizes a curriculum full of items to be taught but rather one which provides teachers the freedom to reach out and connect and make learning personally meaningful and relevant. 



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