

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Roger Martin – The Case for Real Life Problem Solving

ROGER: One of the challenges, I think, of education, and it gets more problematic as you get higher and higher levels of education, is making your teaching actionable on behalf of the person. So if you give somebody an idea, but they can't take action on it, maybe it's slightly better that they had the idea than not, but not a whole lot better. The way to make things practical and actionable is to actually have students work on a real-life problem that's meaningful to them. That way, they can learn the concept and not have to try really hard to imagine how they would actually do that in real life. They can, while they're learning the real problem, be practicing on something that's meaningful to them, and meaningful to their lives. And we think the learning will both be better, because they will learn by doing, and it'll stick, right? They'll always be able to relate to, here's what we did when we were working on a real problem that mattered to us. And the other thing is, it just aids in the motivation, right? All the "I Think" groups that I've watched do work, who all work on something that's meaningful to them, are just massively motivated. They want to get to a better solution. And the food bank would be a perfect example. They wanted to get to a better solution, because some of their families use the food bank. Friends use the food bank. They wanted to make the food bank experience better than it was now, and that provided lots of motivation. So motivation, sort of enconcing the learning, and making the learning less abstract.

One reason we used live cases for which there is no current solution, and they're difficult, seemingly intractable problems, is because actually, we are brave because we think our students are brave, and can do it. So often people use cases where there is a solution, where you can guide the students, and the teacher will feel, it'll be no problem, I know them how to guide them to a known solution. I don't think that's very brave. And I don't think it expresses a maximum level of confidence in the student. We choose a method that says, we believe in them. They'll be able to come up with something. They won't end three weeks, or three months of work feeling frustrated because they couldn't come to an answer, therefore the methodology doesn't work. Nope. We have confidence. They're brave, we're brave, and it works like magic.