

Student Well-being: A Collective Responsibility

John Almarode

Dialogue-based Classrooms

JOHN ALMARODE: In our classrooms as teachers we have an incredible amount of knowledge. Both pedagogical knowledge -- how to teach -- and then what it is we're actually teaching. We know a lot of stuff. And odds are we chose to be teachers both because of students but also because we liked what we were teaching. And we want students to feel the same excitement. The side effect of that is we often stand up in front of students to try to tell them everything we know, and we try to tell them everything we know about this topic before the bell rings today at 3:00. And what that does is it sets up an environment where I am the keeper of knowledge -- we are the keeper of knowledge and we're just dispensing it out to students. And that's a very monologue-based classroom. So, what we really want are classrooms that promote dialogue and student conversation for two reasons. Number one is it gives the student a voice. They get a say in their learning. The second thing is it allows them to process information and process their learning in a way that becomes visible to me as a teacher, and it allows me to use that information to make subsequent decisions in teaching. So, how do we create classrooms that are based on dialogue? We use the classic strategies that we've known about for years, but now we're going to use a more purposeful. I want the students to not only solve a math problem, but I want them to turn to their neighbour and explain how they solved the problem. I want them to write an essay or work on their essay, but then I want them to turn to their neighbours and give each other feedback. "How could you make the essay better?" I want students to talk about things in science. So, they watch a phenomenon take place or they watch a science experiment or a demonstration. I want learners to talk to their neighbour and interpret it and explain it and make predictions. In other words, I want them to bring the information that's on the inside of them out in the open so that we can sort out misconceptions where they might need additional support in their learning. And they get to talk about the content, which is exciting. One of the findings from cognitive neuroscience that I think is often overlooked in our classrooms -- but, again, can't be overstated -- is that the most effective way to move something from short-term memory to long-term memory is to tell someone what you know. It's the gossip principle. It's why gossip sticks around so long. It's what we talk about at the watercooler. So, why can't we take that information and that research and use it to our benefit? Instead of having them gossip about pop stars and pop culture, let's have them talk about content because they're most likely to remember it if they talk about it versus passively receive it from a teacher.