



Frontline Classrooms Currency of Context for Student Engagement

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Abstract

Never before has the old adage, “Who is our audience and what is our purpose?”, been more necessary for educators than for our students. Why is your current context important to your teaching and learners? Your starting point for students under eighteen must consider the following complexities: whether you are well funded or political Band-Aids are of no help; how contemporary learner thinking and therefore behavioural responses reflect their own societal experiences; the current curriculum achievement standards and research data that drives our pedagogy. This means educators need to rise to this challenge to plan, resource and work within the current context of their own role. Planning language courses to be joyful, motivating and empathetic of students and the need to infuse opportunities for creativity now needs a teacher mindset to look outward and plan for the now. Classroom behaviours and needs are evolving more quickly than educator courses. Joining teacher associations, networking with educators in the field who have undertaken generalisable action research with their current students’ needs is a must to inform practice. Knowing and engaging your current student achievement standards and synthesising these with your findings on your own teaching context will enable your units of work to have students engage meaningfully. Empirical research reveals cognitive load theory, knowledge-rich content and 3D curricula managed with explicit teaching are precursors to student engagement while blended learning, a hybrid of current technology and best practice from traditional teaching enables student motivation. To meld your currency of context with the empirical evidence of effective pedagogy means manageable classes and progress in education.

Keywords: *blended learning, minors, engaged classrooms, learning strategies*

Enjoyable environments are the key to learning, otherwise attendance will decline and for those students who do attend, their ability to focus depends on the learning atmosphere. Contemporary classrooms are fraught with complexities, more so in public schools, (Cobbold 2025), brimming with differences in learning needs, learning styles, social emotional challenges, socio economic factors and sociocultural mixtures with a variety of norms, and then there are the personal needs of students. Although classrooms have always been complex, there's a recent sharper increase in anxiety in children, (Strixud and Johnson, 2025). Compounding those complexities are the impacts on teaching of current politics, the economy and funding. Furthermore, despite that the 1996 United Nations Declaration on Children's Rights recommends that, in education, a child's best interests are a priority, there are policies made by contemporary governments, based on economic factors, that disadvantage some students, so educators of those students need strategies to best overcome their teaching context to facilitate learning inclusively. Amid the challenges faced to engage students for motivated learning are research findings in cognitive load theory and neuropsychology to help guide educators to formulate best-practice planning for today's classrooms. Experiences of life as children today are very different than even a decade ago, in more ways than many people account for. The best way educators can enjoy engaged classrooms is to be aware and empathetic of this current context, to not only teach effectively, but for their own well-being in job satisfaction. “Who is our audience and what is our purpose?” are at the crux of achieving this. We teach our students to align the appropriate genre and pitch to who their audience are to achieve their purpose. That means, based on unspoken shared conventions, patterns and expectations, we create meaning, for others to comprehend our intended message. To reflect this onto teachers' work, as educators our starting point is to know all the aspects that impact our current context, research and understand them and leverage that knowledge to create inviting classrooms with lessons accessible to all of our students.

Knowing your students is the first step in creating a working relationship with them. Only then, will it be possible to design meaningful pedagogy with tasks that resonate with each student who begins to understand the reciprocal nature of the rapport you develop with them as student and learning facilitator. Currently in classrooms we have students not able to sit still, having a hard time staying



focussed with more and more diagnoses of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), along with those are children exhibiting similar behaviours and not yet diagnosed. These issues, occurring in correlation with post COVID-19 are being reported by many teachers, not just in Australia. Further research into why classrooms are presenting as such needs to be done. Our current students, in primary schools in Australia, have in prior years, been in lockdown during COVID-19 for a very long time creating great change in their day-to-day lives. Being at home locked in with all family members, doing schoolwork at home, homework at home being privy to many conversations, including the loss of jobs in the family unit, financial dilemmas as a result and even medical conversations, among others, has created a degree of anxiety amongst children that many people are not taking note of. Since Covid 19 we've had wars, and so many students have been aware of these conversations at home and on the news which affect their day-to-day lives. Interpreting these issues as a child without enough life experience may pose worry, or they may not wish to further burden their jobless, financially distraught parent with their own questions leaving lasting unease. In the meantime, dedicated teachers need to make themselves aware, whether it is post Covid 19 related, or otherwise, to put themselves into a position of building a trustful rapport that may yet overcome many of these issues to create a safe environment for learning. Empathy does not mean softness. Being allowed to work at less than their potential disengages students through boredom (Hattie, et al., 2021). Rapport with a teacher who knows the current working level of each student encourages learning engagement both with that teacher and working along with another who knows how. While a teacher as a facilitator of learning promotes students' outlook, not only with that teacher, but generally in their education (Raufelder et al., 2016). Focusing on activities that spark a state of flow helps students link enjoyment and effort with learning and self-satisfaction which drives motivation. Challenging tasks that ignite their interests and lead to stronger student engagement (Stixrud and Johnson, 2018).

Learning theories need to be considered in the melding of socio-relational aspects of teaching and scientific research to be understood by educators, to have the greatest impact on their teaching practice. Translating research findings into classroom praxis is a complex undertaking. It becomes a matrix between the variety of learning differences, neurodevelopmental readiness, socio-cultural elements, affective aspects and environmental impacts around which the science of learning, which speaks to a teacher's chosen pedagogies, is the art of teaching. Staying current on this knowledge arms a teacher with ways to engage the multiplicity of how and where students learn. When students feel a rapport through a teacher's empathy, an affective relational achievement (Goldstein, 1999), they are apt to want to learn. This happens when a teacher has understood the science of learning around student capabilities and the sociocultural impacts of motivation on each student's zone of proximal development (ZPD), (Vygotsky, 1978), arranging task work with a person who is more knowledgeable commonly known as scaffolding, to ensure that the task can be achieved by all. Motivation, as derived from success is often due to teacher rapport and expectations. Combine knowledge of student ZPDs with that of Merton's 1948 self-fulfilling prophecy, and teachers achieve what is known as the Pygmalion Effect. Once introduced to a theory, it is advisable for any teacher to do their own research on it, including current critiques, understanding that without going to the source of the theory they are subject to the medley of misconceptions of the original intent, passed down through a line of well-meaning educators telling only a part of the theory, or the intended theory needs melding with current theory to exact their teaching purpose with our contemporary students. Above all, for the greatest impact, stay current on their own context. The importance of the relational interaction modelled by teachers in the classroom should not be underrated in the support it brings to achieve the willingness-to-learn that empowers further learning, to higher-order thinking, motivation and engagement. Internalisation, for Vygotsky, (1978) bridges the gap between social interaction and cognitive development.

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Depending on what your teaching context is, will dictate the type of research, as an educator, you need to engage with to facilitate your own competence to engage your learners. Mindset (Hattie, 2012), as a teacher, is your armoury to understand why and how you can effectively interact with who your learners are and what they need through you as an authentic facilitator of their progress and to help students gain control of their own learning, toward autonomy (Strixud & Johnson, 2018). Your wellbeing as an educator will greatly benefit from this mindset and effort while your students' wellbeing as learners will equally benefit. For teachers of primary and secondary learners, teacher-focused evidence-based research will highlight what works in the contemporary classroom, bearing in mind that like-schools and school contexts and subject specific studies may better serve your needs. Websites such as SOS Australia (Save our Schools), (<https://saveourschools.com.au/home/>) allow for teachers to engage with a wide perspective on why certain decisions made in the school of their own context are driven by political and economic forces outside of their local context. Governments sometimes place an education portfolio in the hands of a politician who has little experience with the complexities of educating. Evidenced in Australia, that on one hand is among the highest in the OECD Better Lifestyle Index, while on the other hand, is second in teacher shortage (OECD, 2022). Varied reasons contribute, among them the inclusion in languages classrooms of students not yet linguistically capable in the standard language, due to intellectual impairment and therefore also limited levels of executive functioning who have little to no chance of engaging with the target language which flies in the face of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD. The students who have forced inclusion in the same classes as their peers in the name of 'inclusive practices' are at a distinct disadvantage, not having the ability to moderate the feelings of not belonging, not able to access the material on offer, to the point of needing a one-on-one teacher aide all day, financed from a school's budget. A philosophical conundrum for those teachers who also feel for the lack of appropriate education those students are not receiving at their own ZPD. This knowledge affords teachers the ability to work around the disruptions in classes caused by students forced to be included, by understanding the politics and being proactive to work around a limited budget rather than buying into media or other teachers' venting about the situation. Educational Psychology research enables a broader understanding of anomalous student behaviours as also being responses to something in their students' own lives. Neuroscience on language acquisition through learning development, the pressures of Cognitive Load Theory, (Swain, 2024) being both intrinsic and extrinsic, arms any teacher with a greater repertoire to design effective curricula and impactful activities.

Who your students are will dictate your pedagogical approach. The dynamics of each learning group are different. Is your learning group ready for Comprehensible Input (CI), or do you need to lead your students to understand how to process the language they hear (Van Patten, 2017). Or, as a Languages teacher do you need to first teach using the Growth Mindset Pedagogy (GMP), to position your learning group as language learners with an outlook to the possibilities of their own capabilities with greater control over their own efforts to drive their learning, having a reference to (GMP) set up, only then, if needed, refer to it, having taught trigger words to activate open mindedness and a reference poster in the classroom. Perhaps your learners are already capable of moving straight into Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), ready with adequate executive functioning, in control of their own focus and motivation. Some language teaching and learning phases, content and skills are better taught and learnt through a certain pedagogy while other learning outcomes are better achieved through an eclectic approach. Pedagogical teacher decisions are encased in the understanding of a variety of aspects of their own current context. How would you impart student learning intentions and success criteria or task and timing roles? Display them handwritten or as a poster on the whiteboard, project them on a TV screen, have students write them into their books, or on laminated cards during any task seem like simple teacher choices. This choice



would depend on a number of factors but, utmost, on who you are teaching. Among maybe twenty-eight different students, what is their current ability to start to focus or to remember, perhaps even to begin a task, knowing the first step following multiple-step explanations or do they need multiple exposures to the same skill and content, more than most? Some students will have validated diagnoses of learning differences, (which are often referred to as disabilities, a reference many teachers work toward changing for the benefit of each learner), while other students will present with such learning traits that are yet undiagnosed as parents often see their children at tasks different to the executive functions required of most classrooms (which a teacher will follow through with other professionals, once sufficient data is collected). Secondly, knowing your purpose or aim for the learning, and discussing and displaying it for your learners, is the next key to unlocking engagement. The student will then realise whether the skill or the content is the aim, and have a place to start. Knowing the ratio and types of these student tendencies, in any learning group, enables a teacher to align not only pedagogy that will enable student success but one that benefits all learners in the room. An example is the choice of Reciprocal Teaching, (Palincsar and Brown, 1984), a collaborative, student-centred pedagogy with purpose built grouping, initially, to maximise modelling of each learner role as a means to achieve individual student control over their own learning toward higher-order learning success, and hence greater engagement. As learning is mastered, regrouping allows for accomplished learners needing less exposure to move to extended learning, created as digital or hard copy booklets to differentiate from those needing more exposure on the standard achievements. AI as a teaching assistant allows this latter group resourcing to be achieved with a minimum of time. Games in education form a resonating joyous activity for contemporary students, fostering broader participation and greater engagement in learning (Jenner & Jebakumar, 2024).

Government policies and local politics affect the leadership decisions of the actual institution where you teach. Therefore, a teacher must be currently aware of this context to rationally process the budget and professional development limitations placed on a language teacher whose subject is not in the same sights as a context's standard-language literacy and numeracy funding to maintain a positive mindset toward leadership decisions regarding the practicalities of their own work. Systemic pressures cause an already complex teaching role to create workarounds for task resourcing on the frontline of classroom work, and simultaneously to upskill themselves, often at their own expense, both financially and timewise, as the school is not inclined to afford a budget for either courses or a replacement teacher for professional development release time of a language teacher. According to Hattie, (2012, p.181), a teacher's mind-frame, commonly known as mindset, is the foremost agent of educational change. This applies to learning in the classroom and it does not address the lengths teachers must go to educate politicians on the complexities of teaching and the importance of maintaining teacher currency to be professionally equipped in an era rapidly evolving technologically and maintain well-being. An educator's role is complex. For a dedicated teacher to have their students' best interests at heart, to have the capacity to design and implement current curricula which resonate with contemporary students through a variety of task innovations and activities including technology, so that students engage and learn through their efforts, means coping with these extra political dimensions, pigeon-holing them, yet not forgetting them, to free mental space to enable their own professional and happiness in their work. Many teachers are leaving the profession, not due to mental weakness, but the undue time and financial pressures forced upon their own family units if they wish to stay current, relevant to their students and continue to be a teacher.

Blended Learning combines traditional face-to face methods with online activities and content. Rather than a theory of teaching or learning, it is a pedagogical method which has gained traction since Covid 19. During the pandemic school closures teachers already competent in the use of technology in classrooms. Through necessity teachers created more variety and engaging modes of blended learning to best achieve their learning outcomes. Many of us shared what worked when teachers with less technology access reached out. Those teacher networks persist and are growing as the method allows for flexibility in learning. Absences from illness to travelling are often problematic for school teachers and the affected students and blended learning allows teachers to more easily close those gaps in learning. Greater access to the curriculum for some students with social-emotional regulation, dysgraphia or visual impairment, among learning challenges can also be a bonus to education among other useful educational applications to close gaps in learning. This approach lends itself to Systems Theories as it integrates, the learner, teacher, institution, content, technology and environment. Students can gain instant feedback through AI generated analytics or teachers can utilise analytics to compare face-to-face results with online interactions. Following an online activity AI can recommend suggestions of next steps for any student. The art of the human teachers' ability to develop rapport combined with the advantages of online activities enhances a teachers' ability to eke out, with AI



assistive technologies, their optimum pedagogy design, including differentiation to keep all learners engaged.

In this age of rapidly developing technologies, changing societal behaviours toward technology and the impacts and implications that has for teachers to stay in front of their way forward in educating our future generations, teachers need to develop a forward looking mindset. This involves understanding the work before us, our students' needs, the politics of the moment, the research that guides teachers toward best practice, learning theories, educational psychology systemic and local political pressures and our own family needs. Overwhelm with such a complex set of affects upon teachers' work is understandable. However, collaborating, knowing where to find the educational guidelines of your own context, the research that supports our choices and the knowledge of our students and contexts, keeping in the forefront of your mind that students are in classrooms today, needing what we have designed for their own learning is key to our own well-being. Pigeonholing all that we don't need in that classroom today and enjoying the progress and visible learning that we have facilitated is complex and rewarding. Teachers cannot be the disconnect between who our students are, what they need and how they learn. Developing student mindsets and our own that knowledge is power for teachers to facilitate integrity, motivation, enjoyment in learning and future proofing our students to become autonomous, lifelong learners is at the core of what we do.

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