

Meaningful learning

1. This presentation takes us to explore the basic ideas behind meaningful learning. First we want to define the concept and make sure we are talking about the same idea. Meaningful learning allows students to acquire knowledge in a way that is useful for them. While discussing with teachers there is one common theme they highlight about their work: the blissful feeling of being successful in teaching when a student has an “a-ha!” – moment. In that moment learning is extremely meaningful for the student, and it often has been described like windows suddenly opening and seeing the world/ the problem with new eyes. What happens in reality is brain creating new connections and applying knowledge in a new context.

http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/Idea_Paper_34.pdf

2. So, what makes learning meaningful for you? Most people like to have options to choose from. Learning happens in [interactions](#) between the student and the content to be learned. In addition to interacting with the content of their learning resources, students also interact with many other things – environment, peers, teachers, staff, parents, media, social media, and so forth. Focusing their attention to the learning task is a choice every student makes, either purposefully or being unaware about choosing it. We teachers can increase the meaningfulness of learning by helping help students to choose wisely, but we certainly cannot force them into doing it. Forced interactions are of poor quality, and result in shallow learning when students perform tasks to fulfill the expectations, but don't engage with their thoughts and/or curiosity. Creating ways to provide choices actually serves two different purposes: meaningfulness perceived by students AND learning to make good choices.

3. What's in it for me is the question of each student. Please note, though, that I am not talking about entertaining students. My intention is to describe a learning environment where students cooperate and are accountable for their own learning. In Finland, where I come from, this measurement for successful education and student well-being is called as “kouluviihtyvyyys”, which approximately translates to school enjoyment, or [school satisfaction](#), but actually has some deeper connotations. School satisfaction is seen to be built of three components where physical school conditions

create one part, students' social relationships another part and the third crucial part is the means for self-fulfillment in school – following the categories of having, loving, being by [Erik Allardt](#). This view allows students to be active participants in their own education and life, instead of being held at outskirts of their own learning.

4. Learning and teaching are two very different functions and shouldn't be seen as the two sides of the same coin. Learning is highly individual and takes anything between 2 milliseconds to 25 years to happen, yet in educational systems we often expect students to complete learning tasks within a certain time frame. Catering for the different needs of our students should be first premise of meaningful education, not something we do if there is time or if they seem to need it. Communication in education must be reciprocal. This also presents the need for open and honest interpersonal relations between teachers and students, because that builds trust and helps students choose to become involved in their own learning. Communication and the [emotionally safe learning](#) environment enable students to learn more.

5. We should more diligently use tools for learning facilitation instead of sticking in traditional direct instruction and lecturing, because the time needed for learning is unique for each student. The interactions each student needs to learn well can vary from reading to discussions and projects, and from lecturing to engaging students in a learning game – and the guiding principle should be meaningfulness for the learner, because that guarantees [better quality learning](#). Facilitating self-paced and autonomous learning would be extremely easy with existing technology, so why don't we use our technology like that? I am afraid the answer is quite ugly: we want to control what our students are learning, and how they do that (and also measure their performance). So we are asked to teach everything and everyone in the same way, and wish our students would miraculously deep learn it all, and even find it meaningful. Then we reprimand students for not being happy and enthusiastic to learn, or at least work hard to memorize all the (sometimes unnecessary) information we pour onto them. We already have the necessary technology to do provide highly individualized learning, but are still somehow stuck in the cohort mentality.

6. Making learning meaningful for students requires teaching to have links to students' real-life. The younger the student is the more tangible the connection needs to be. [Deeply learned is transferable](#) and can be applied in other contexts and be connected to other subjects and other areas of life. Meaningful learning also allows students to be active participants in their learning. It allows students to take part in building their knowledge and responsible for their own learning. Usefulness comes from building on the previous knowledge and skills of the learner and seeing the need for the subject. Attaching a personal value to learning increases the intrinsic motivation to learn, and thus of course also yields better results.

7. The toolbox every teacher has should contain lots of knowledge of how learning actually happens, and how learning can be enhanced. We have already talked about learning facilitation, and how important it is. The feedback presentation is under another link on this same web page, Nina's Notes. There is also the reflective teaching practice presentation, which actually is just an organized way to think about your workdays. Continuous professional development is what you are doing right now: being interested in improving your teaching practice and finding information and sources to do that – unfortunately we don't yet have systems in place to give credit for professional development done simply because it interests us. Maybe one day the technology will be used for that. Acknowledging Personal learning networks certainly is a step towards the right direction. Most often PLNs are also the professional networks. Adding twitter feed or some other sources to keep us abreast of changes is often a good choice. I follow regularly [hashtags like #educhat](#).

8. To teach towards meaningful learning you must know your students and make [well informed choices](#). Please, acknowledge competence. Often meaningful learning and effective teaching are seen as synonyms. I understand the thought behind it, because after all teaching is futile if learning is not happening. But getting these two different phenomena -teaching and learning- productively intertwined in the classroom is a challenge all educators are facing, and correlations between the two should not be drawn in haste. Too often the view of teaching is limited to instruction, which in the worst case becomes a monologue: communication without interaction. Yet teaching is SO

much more than that! Meaningful teaching is interaction that makes your students learn in a meaningful way.

9. Meaningful learning strongly relates to students' increased [metacognition](#). Knowing how you learn is so important. Students' awareness of their own knowledge and their ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own learning makes them more involved in their own education – thus it is an important part of student well-being and school enjoyment. Collaboration and autonomy are both outcomes from good metacognitive skills, and it is easier for students to help each other in individual tasks when they are confident about themselves as learners. Metacognitive skills are also important throughout life and learning to learn should be included to all formal education, not as an additional subject, but as a byproduct of all classes.

10. Empowerment is an important word in all areas of education. Shared responsibility to reach the mutual goal is the first step in [empowerment](#) and open communication. As a learning facilitator, or mentor, I practice open manipulation: I tell my students that I am purposefully attempting on changing their perception about something. Grown up students find it funny, but also tend to think about it and then discuss or ask questions about it later, after they have had time to reflect upon it. Children get excited, because they sense the honesty behind the statement. They also feel empowered as they recognize the opportunity to choose, instead of doing something an adult just tells them to do. Every teacher should be empowered to know they can choose how they teach.

11. This is what pedagogy and andragogy are about: [supporting students' learning in a dialogue](#), individually and as a group, so that they each can be successful in their studies. I truly believe the best teacher being the one who makes herself (or himself) progressively unnecessary by empowering students become autonomous learners.