

STORIES FOR ADVOCACY

Students Motivated by Problem-Based Learning

As told by Robert Cole, St. Louis University to Suzie Boss

At an inner-city school that serves an ethnically diverse, high-poverty population, teachers have struggled to find ways to improve achievement. When the vice principal heard about an exciting learning activity taking place in a science class, she made a point to drop by to observe.

The bell rang, but students would not leave the classroom until the “answer” was revealed.

This was by most measures an “average” class, where the intertwining challenges were underachievement and a lack of student motivation. For the past week, the teacher had engaged students in a simulation activity relating to oceanography and the environment. Students had been taking part in role-playing activities that involved discussing real-world problems, analyzing situations from multiple points of view, and working collaboratively to research potential solutions. Their goal was to propose a solution that could “solve” a real problem. In the process, they had been mastering new academic content.

On the day the vice principal visited the class, the simulation activity was nearly complete. Students were about to find out whether they had succeeded in proposing a realistic solution for the problem they were investigating.

The vice principal couldn't help but notice a transformation. In the past, these same students had seemed disinterested and unmotivated. Now, they appeared completely engaged in what they were doing. The teacher mentioned that students seemed eager to come to class. In fact, when the bell rang to signal the end of the period, students stayed in their seats. They did not want to leave the classroom until the “answer” was revealed.

Watching this scene play out, the vice principal was left with an appreciation of how technology can open new avenues for learning. Although she knew that books and traditional methods of learning would remain essential, she also saw the importance of offering new approaches in the classroom. In this case, technology supported a problem-based approach and enabled students to manage their own research. The more students are engaged in their own learning, the more they will be able to learn.

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