Learning that taps into voice and identity offers students active opportunities to express their opinions and make decisions regarding their learning (Rogers, 2005). When students’ voices and identities are invited into the classroom, they are involved in setting learning goals, pursuing questions of relevant interest, and finding ways to express and explore who they are. In essence, the learning is connected to students’ lives and their worlds.

**VOICE AND IDENTITY MEANS...**

- recognizing roles and responsibilities in learning
- making personal connections
- valuing personal knowledge and experience and valuing that of others
- contributing and welcoming new ideas
- recognizing personal biases and advocating for self and others
- recognizing how personal views and views of others affect thinking
- seeking opportunities for purposeful self-expression
- posing questions of personal interest
- advocating for choice in learning opportunities

“Students’ engagement in learning depends on studying topics that relate to their own lives. Students report feeling most engaged when they help define the content to be studied; have time to pursue areas of most interest; are encouraged to raise questions and view topics in new ways; have passionate, inventive, and respectful teachers; and sense that their study is open-ended rather than predetermined and predictable.”

Why access it?

Teaching practices that engage voice and identity in the classroom can support students in taking an active role in their learning. When students see themselves in the learning, they are more engaged and have a stronger sense of self, they have greater understanding of their strengths and needs, they have a greater sense of belonging, and they develop a sense of respect and self-worth in their abilities (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002).

While it is important not to treat adolescents as a single, homogenous group (Blanton & Wood, 2009, Alvermann, 2009), there are some key characteristics of adolescent learners. These include their need for sense of purpose and relevance in what they do. They also have a tendency to think more about who they are and to assume identities other than student. For example, teens may think about themselves as musicians, athletes, and employees. So, students may gravitate toward learning that they see as being relevant to their lives. “What students do in school needs to feel important to them and they need to feel important in doing the work. The feeling of importance is not merely a truism when it comes to adolescence. It is perhaps the central core of our work with them... It is a matter of creating and re-creating fresh and unrehearsed opportunities to make discoveries about texts, about language, about the world, and about themselves” (Appleman, 2007).

The relationship between voice and identity and literacy is interconnected. On one level, students’ abilities to use literacy to think, express, and reflect are enhanced when students can draw on their prior knowledge, experiences, values, culture and interests. So when students can relate what they are learning to something that is important to them, they tend to feel more competent and are likely to think more deeply. When students find relevance, meaning and interest, and when they see their ideas valued, students gain confidence in their thinking and develop their own voice (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

On another level, students use literacy to “contribute their voice” and “express their identity.” Students need to use literacy skills, for example, to listen to others (e.g., by focusing, making connections to personal thinking), take in a variety of perspectives (e.g., by identifying similarities and differences in points of view), and to communicate their ideas (e.g., by contributing an idea in a group).

“Students can and should participate, not only in the construction of their own learning environments, but as research partners in examining questions of learning and anything else that happens in and around schools.”

School Effectiveness Framework, 2010

Listen to Lucy West connect student voice and thinking. This video, part of the series Lucy West: Insights Into Effective Practice, is available at

http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/snapshots/lucy.html
HOW TO ACCESS IT

Ben Levin suggests that educators need to focus on what learners do, why they do it and allow learners the opportunities to shape their own learning (Levin, 2000).

Foundational to allowing students to shape their learning is building classroom communities that are safe and collaborative, and where students feel able to take intellectual risks. Students can have input in how that classroom community is created. Modeling how to self-assess needs and take on responsibility for learning provides students with an explicit “picture” of how to do this effectively and appropriately.

Creating inquiries that help adolescents connect their learning to personal and real world situations taps into voice and identity. Relevance is increased when students can apply what they’ve learned to personal decision-making, for example, making choices based on studying their ecological footprint or considering a purchase applying mathematical processes. These opportunities heighten relevance as well as deepening students’ understanding of the concepts and ideas under study.

Inviting students to co-construct success criteria and learning goals provides another way for them to shape their learning. It gives adolescents a sense of control, and it allows them to better assess themselves as learners and to see their connection to the learning. The Assessment for Learning video series “Learning Goals and Success Criteria” (AER GAINS, 2010) provides suggestions on how to include the input of students in determining and using learning goals and success criteria.

Some guiding principles for accessing voice and identity include:

1. Establish a classroom community where students learn from each other (Lewis & Del Valle, 2009).
2. Ensure that all voices are heard (e.g., using turn-and-talk, think time, collaboration) (Riviere, 2008, Lyle & Hendley, 2010).
3. Teach skills for active and accountable collaboration (Ritchhart, 2002).
4. Connect curriculum to learning goals that students and teachers jointly construct (Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009).
5. Plan time for students to dialogue with peers to explore, reflect, question and extend their ideas.

“Teachers should try to help students relate to academic information through their experiences, goals, and interests. Students can find personal relevance in all kinds of events in the world around them... making material authentically meaningful to each learner is crucial.”

Willis, 2007
Accountable talk is talk by students and teacher that responds to and builds on what others in the classroom have said. It is focused, meaningful, and mutually beneficial to the speaker and listener. “In a classroom filled with accountable talk, students... extend understandings by using the statements they have heard from their classmates to form new ideas” (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008).

In accountable talk, both speaker and listener use skills (e.g., ask questions for clarification, rephrase ideas, use appropriate body language and eye contact) and have responsibilities (e.g., share opportunities to speak, respectfully challenge ideas, come to consensus). Brainstorm these skills and responsibilities with students and post them in the classroom.

Generate with students the various purposes and prompts for accountable talk:

- Ask questions to clarify understanding (e.g., *Can you tell me more about...?*, *Would you say that again?*, *Can you give me an example of what you mean?*)
- Give a reason to support an idea (e.g., *This reminds me of... because...*, *I think this is true because...*)
- Ask for evidence when something sounds inaccurate or vague (e.g., *I'm not sure about that. Can you tell me why you think it's true?*, *Can you show me a place in the text that supports your idea?*
- Give evidence to support statements (e.g., *It says here...* (read a passage from a text that illustrates the idea). *Here is another source that says...* (read from another supporting source of information))
- Use ideas from others to add to your own (e.g., *I agree with... because his/her idea reminds me of...*)


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**REFERENCES**


