

What Classrooms Can Learn From Informal Learning

By Terry Heick

Last updated Nov 6, 2015

🔥 542

f Facebook

🐦 Twitter



What Classrooms Can Learn From Informal Learning

by Derek Spanfelner, learnivore.com

I spent more than 5 years in public school classrooms, both urban and suburban, and while I saw a lot of educators working their behinds off and engaging kids in valuable, essential learning, I also saw a lot of kids that were disenchanted by what school had to offer. After years in the public school system, many of the students that need school the worst had been taught one irrevocable truth: learning was not for them. And not just because school was too hard or too easy, but because it was often at odds with their interests and desires.

And then, in just the past few months, I've had my eyes opened to the world of schooling that happens beyond the walls of the traditional brick and mortar education. Suddenly, I saw living rooms, parks, co-ops, libraries, churches, and community centers as steady, stimulating learning environments. I saw parents confidently addressing the educational needs of their children without necessarily having the formal training to do so (my good friend, Becky, is among them). I saw how certain learning methods and perspectives could yield the type of student that regularly scores above the national average on an array of standardized tests and feels empowered as a lifelong learner. But what exactly were these families able to do that was so different? And what could we as public educators borrow from these homeschool classrooms—or any non-traditional or informal learning environment—that would be of benefit in our own? Here are the five things that stand out.

5 Lessons Of Informal Learning For Classroom Teachers

1. Self-directed learning changes everything.

For the uninitiated, **self-directed learning** is an inquiry-driven approach whose end goal is to place the responsibility of what and how to learn on the student. In this model, the desired outcome is for the student is to approach a learning situation with an appropriate set of objectives, an understanding of the resources and strategies available to them, and a sense of how to accurately assess and validate their learning. SDL allows students to take control of their learning and put time and effort into studying what is of interest to them within an educational framework. According to a recent survey administered to a small sampling of homeschool families, they spend over half of the time allotted for education per week pursuing self-directed learning. That's a lot of time invested in doing something that is practically unheard of in public schools.

So how would this even work in today's secondary school classroom? With the strict division of disciplines that persists in today's schools, as well as the reliance on standardized benchmarking, testing, and grading, I can see public educators scoffing at the possibility of self-directed learning. Am I saying that we should put *all* kids in control of making authentic decisions about their learning? I am. It can be a frightening prospect, but that doesn't mean it can't and shouldn't be done. For practitioners of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (that's most of us), SDL is not too different in how students are guided through a process from dependency to autonomy.

Once students know the principles behind SDL, they may then begin applying them. Say you teach a Humanities class. Start by highlighting the questions that will guide every self-directed inquiry. Then ask students to choose from a variety of popular themes (here are 101 common ones to get them started). The first time you do it, you (as the teacher) should give suggestions based on each student's interests and provide a variety of options for resources, strategies, and assessment. They won't be able to do it alone, especially when they've spent their lives being asked to always have the one "right" answer.

Once they've had practice with the process, allow them to choose the texts and media they'll be engaging with, as well as the effective means and mode by which they'll be assessed. Provide feedback and guidance on every step of the process: the goals, strategies, texts, and assessments. Students will still have little choice of which subject area they may pursue and when to do it, but you'll be better preparing them to take on authentic life experiences of their choosing (internships, clubs, interest-based groups, etc.) with a sense of inquiry and purpose. Isn't that what school is for?

2. Flexibility empowers students.

Two key reasons why SDL works in a homeschool environment are flexibility and the opportunity for holistic learning. True self-directed inquiry isn't limited by subject area, class length/time of day or location. Lifelong learners, especially in the digital information age, aren't limited by when, where, and how they learn. And yet this is how schools operate.

Unfortunately, this will not change. What public educators can do, however, is work to erase the distinctions between subject areas. Just as SDL focuses on more than tackling a particular concept or problem, public school teachers should exercise flexibility and work to encompass numerous subject areas with any given piece of learning. The Great Depression isn't just fodder for the social studies classroom. It isn't just a fixed set of statistics on 8 to 10 pages of textbook. It's not just one family's story of struggle in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. It's not just the photography of Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans or a lesson on depth of focus in shooting portraits. It's not just a science experiment on aridity or a social experiment on the effects of subsistence and migrant living. It's all of these and much more.

No matter what subjects we teach, there are ways to erase the lines between disciplines and create a dynamic, holistic learning environment. Meet with your grade-level team at the start of the year and start brainstorming ways you can team-teach or coordinate multiple perspectives on a single theme or concept or problem. Adult understanding is not dependent on subject area; on the contrary, if we're looking to develop creative, outside-the-box thinkers, then it's our duty to transcend the boxes we've been put in as educators.

3. Individualized learning "fits."

Individualized learning is a key component of informal learning, initially because there is flexibility in who studies what, when. And by individualized, I don't just mean that, for example, homeschool parents are able to sit with their kids one on one or in a small group so that they can focus on facilitating instruction and providing timely feedback. Such a luxury isn't always possible in public schools, so we won't even go there. What is possible, however, is the creation of a more individualized learning experience. All too often, overburdened public educators provide one-size-fits-all lessons and assessments for our students, which invariably leads to the kids not targeted in our teaching to mentally opt out.

Enter differentiated instruction. Again, just like GRR, great teachers are already doing this for their students. It's more work, for sure, but it also ensures that objectives, procedures, and assessments are being created for multiple ability levels, multiple interests, and for multiple styles of learning and expression. Find out more about differentiated instruction and how to apply it in the classroom from *this excerpt by Laura Robb*.

4. Knowing your students is the best starting point for learning.

This is where teachers can be at a disadvantage, and homeschool educators have it the easiest. They know their students. In most cases, they birthed them and have been teaching them, officially or not, since birth. Public educators get a new crop of 100 to 200 students and must start over getting to know these kids year after year. This gives parents an exceptional advantage when it comes to understanding what kind of learners their kids are or which subjects they are passionate about or which obstacles they struggle with.

And yet there are so many ways to get to know your class; not only how they learn or who they are as students, but who they are as human beings. Start by conversing with previous teachers and with parents over the summer and then be prepared to ask good questions of each student and listen to their responses. Make your classroom a place to have conversations that are of significance to the kids, whether you are relating a text to the similar circumstances faced by their age group or discussing current events that have an impact on their lives. Give a lot of formative, no-pressure assessments and use them to inform your lesson plans. Differentiate instruction. If you do these and more, you may find that you begin to know your students as well as (or in some cases, better) their own parents do.

5. Learning through play is disarming and empowering.

Terry Heck explains:

“While receiving instruction in a formal learning environment, the tone of learning is a mix of nerves, confusion, directives, and compliance. And worse, instead of a direct line from learner to content, there is a triangle of interaction between the user, the content, and the teacher. “When learners “play,” everything shifts. Here learners are able to directly interact with content without the intrusion of monitoring, assessment, or having to decipher “teacher messages.” When this happens, there is more willingness to experiment, to understand, to follow curiosity, and to hold one’s self accountable to one’s own standards for achievement. One immediate effect of this is personalization of learning, for the learner, by the learner.”

See [here](#) and [here](#) to read more.

Conclusion

Try incorporating or expanding upon at least a few of these and you may begin to see those disengaged kids start to change their minds about school—or at least about what YOU can offer them as an educator, because the one thing each of these has in common is trust.

Trust that students can be masters of their own learning.

Trust that they are being amply prepared for adulthood.

Trust in a schooling process that speaks to each student's interests, readiness, and personal investment.

And trust that we as a public educators care about our students. Many informal learning environments, from playgrounds to think tanks to homeschooled families are already doing these things. As teachers, it's on us to learn as much as we can, no matter how informal the circumstances.

*Derek is the Director of Client Success at Learnivore. His passion and background are in writing and education and he's continually glad to have the opportunity to be involved with both as much as he is. If you'd like to be in touch with him, be sure to email him at Derek@learnivore.com; image attribution flickr user [larsplougman](#); *What Classrooms Can Learn From Informal Learning**



Experienced Teacher

Terry Heick

Founder & Director of TeachThought, humanist, technologist, futurist, failed philosopher, macro thinker extraordinaire.

[Professional Development](#) [Grow18 Teaching Conference](#) [Search](#) [Contact](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

[Policies](#)

© 2018 - TeachThought. All Rights Reserved.

Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our user agreement (effective 1/15/12) and privacy policy (effective 1/15/12). Your California privacy rights. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written.