



Title: Assumptions are Dangerous

I am a teacher of English and S&E and I am in my fourth year teaching. As part of Learning to Learn, a colleague and I have been working closely with a group of disengaged boys. These boys are not the disruptive abusive kind, but rather the kind that sit at the back of the class not doing any work, but not disturbing anyone either. These students have elected to become “passengers”, largely uninterested in anything other than the bell that signifies recess, lunch or home time. They often have poor organisational skills and seem to struggle to remember to bring even the most basic equipment to class. To put it simply, they seem to have stopped caring about their education and are marking time, waiting for it to end.

My colleague and I have a class of 15 of these boys and it has been our job to motivate them to improve their attitudes towards their education, future and themselves. I believe that we have succeeded in many ways. The students, on the whole, are keen to attend, have favourite activities and have made improvements in both behaviour and outlook.

I feel that by far the most interesting part of my learning journey has been finding out how much these students do not know. At the start of the programme we did many literacy and numeracy tests which showed that a number of the students had significant learning difficulties. While it wasn't a surprise that some of the students were receiving low test scores, it was a bit of a shock to find that at least three of the 14-15 year old students had reading ages below 10. These tests also showed that a number of students didn't have literacy or numeracy issues, yet were receiving poor grades anyway. It became clear very quickly that we were looking at two very different kinds of disengaged student. The student who could do the work but didn't want to, and the student who perhaps tried to do the work, but couldn't because of basic literacy and numeracy issues.

My colleague and I set to work providing interesting and engaging curriculum for both these types of students, finding that hands on competitive tasks seemed to work best. For example, learning to spell words is boring, but splitting the class into mixed ability teams and turning it into a competition for imaginary points makes it infinitely more interesting and engaging. We have also made extensive use of Technic Lego, computer software and sports equipment in an attempt to make learning more engaging. Students will moan and complain about learning basic arithmetic, but will plead to be able to play Blackjack.

There is an old saying that goes never “ASSUME” because it makes an “ASS” out of “U” and “ME”. I have found this to be particularly true when dealing with our group of boys. These students have interesting “gaps” in their knowledge that a typical teacher would assume that they should have. An example of this arose when I was attempting to teach the students how to build bridges using Technic Lego. One student spent over an hour and a half attempting to build a simple arch. The other students were building complicated suspension bridges, but one student was still on page one battling to build an arch. It turned out that this student had somehow missed out on how to interpret three dimensional images when represented on two dimensional paper. A different task revealed that another student was unable to address a letter because he did not know his home address. So I guess I have learnt that with some students it is never ever safe to assume.