Lesson 1: Significant Remembered Events

"Nothing will ever be the same!"
"We can never look at things the same way again!"
"This changes everything!"

These and other comments were heard over and over again after September 11, 2001. They are comments that surround what I call Significant Remembered Events.

It seems that more often than not lately, I find myself in a discussion with friends or family where the topic is what I call a "significant remembered event". One recent event I know will have an impact on our ideas about education was the Littleton student killings. Another that I'm sure will forever change our view of terrorism would be the Oklahoma bombing. These events make us conscious of ourselves as part of a larger work. Over the years, I have raised the question with both adult and student groups with very provocative results. Obviously 9-11-01 will stand out as a prime example of such an occurrence.

One such discussion began in a high school leadership workshop, back in 1988. We were sharing our memories of significant social and political events within each of our lifetimes. Of course, mine were the old standbys - the assassinations of the sixties, civil rights milestones, events from the Vietnam era, Watergate. The kid's memories were interesting and sometimes surprising. For example, I wasn't too surprised that many of them mentioned the space shuttle disaster; but I wasn't expecting them to mention the killing of John Lennon or the boycotting of the summer Olympics of 1980 and 1984 – but many did. The Olympics as a significant remembered event intrigues me, especially since we are approaching another Olympic year. The Olympic Games provide an excellent teachable moment, an opportunity to explore students' (and others') visions of how the world should be.

Another discussion of significant remembered events occurred in my dining room recently. I asked Marrissa Massey, a twelve-year-old visiting us from Texas, what events stood out in her mind as unforgettable, and why. She said she would never forget the impeachment of President Clinton. ("We depended on him and he let us down"). She mentioned the first trial of O.J. Simpson. ("So much time was spent figuring out what happened, and then they just let it go"). As she was leaving the table, she added with feeling, "Ah yes and I'll never forget the thirteen-year-old girl who invented a new computer language!".
Things You Might Do...

After watching the Olympic Games, students (family, friends) might be asked to identify their significant memories, how they felt about the event they remember, what it made them think, and what it made them wonder.

Of course, these same questions can be asked about current events in general or about some other noteworthy occurrence in particular, and of course, the recent events of 9-11-01 remind everyone of how a simple event can change our lives for better or worse.

When discussing the Olympics, the participants at the high school leadership workshop raised an amazing number of core global issues, such as terrorism, the politicizing of sports and other aspects of modern life (the boycotts), global economic inequities (countries that can "buy" good equipment, training, and even athletes), and the role of the individual in relationship to institutions (e.g., the athletes who train for years and are told they cannot go to the games because of a political disagreement). The recent attacks on New York City and the Pentagon raise even more global issues.

I think it’s likely that such a discussion will raise any number of issues about what it means to live responsibly today, because somewhere when thinking of significant memories, students will discover that they think the world "should" be one way and often find it is otherwise.

Lesson 2: When experts disagree

Suppose we disagree on a subject - reforming health care or maintaining a healthy diet. Chances are, no matter what view each of us holds, in today's world one can find an expert to support that position.

The fact that experts disagree has been a bonus to high school debaters and other contentious folk. It can, however, create some real discomfort for people who hope someone can tell them the one right way to think about issues. In an age of exploding information and complex global problems, a responsible adult needs to help the next generation learn to appreciate expertise as a useful resource in decision-making. And since experts will always disagree, a teacher needs to help students gain confidence in their ability to finally select their own point of view from conflicting opinions.

I came across an article about chess experts, in which an expert was defined as someone with an unusual skill level, knowledge base, and response time to a situation or task. It occurred to me that we often get confused about the role experts play in our society - treating them as the final authority who should produce a magic 'right answer' or, even worse, as the source of support for preconceived opinions or ideologies. If I'm trying to win a chess match, consulting an expert might be helpful. If I want to prepare a luscious banquet, I'd do well to find an expert chef.

However, when we start dealing with complex global problems, such recourse to experts can be dangerous. No single individual is going to solve the world hunger problem; there is no one expert who can bring peace to the troubled regions of the globe. In addressing global problems the experts serve us by providing information and recommended options. They offer alternative perspectives on the issue that come from the expert’s experience, specialized knowledge, and often the full-time commitment required for delving into a complex problem.

So what do we need to teach the next generation about experts? We need to teach them to value and make use of the unique perspective an expert can bring to the study of global issues. Students need to not expect an answer from an expert. They need to learn to be cautious when an expert is presented as one who can justify a single viewpoint rather than as one who can enrich the debate. And students need to
build confidence in their own abilities to understand and make decisions about the role experts should play in dealing with global problems.

**To help students (or anyone) practice dealing well with experts**

Pick a topic of interest and then have students brainstorm a large list of experts that could be consulted. Then have each student pick five or ten that they would consult and have them explain their reasons. Also talk about the reasons for not consulting those whom everyone omitted.

Pick an issue - euthanasia and abortion are favourites. Have the students find opinions from two experts who disagree.

A good way to help students gain a perspective on expertise is to survey the class to find out the kinds of expertise various students have available. You may be amazed to find rock hounds, competitive bikers, and budding botanists in the most unexpected corners of your room.

**Lesson 3: Believing vs knowledge**

If experts can disagree, then it is no surprise that the rest of us get into arguments. It is helpful to make a distinction between believing and knowing. No one argues the fact that two plus two equals four. The truth of arithmetic does not depend on information gathered from the world. Two plus two equals four even in a universe with only three objects. But what about global warming? Here we have experts and everyone disagreeing about the nature of the problem, as well as the solution. What is the difference?

The discussion of global warming is based upon incomplete information, which is then interpreted, and formulated into beliefs. When we decide which beliefs appear to be true (for us), other ideas are discarded as false. The beliefs we accept become our 'knowledge' and it may be important for us to convince others that we are 'right' and they are 'wrong'.

**To help students (and others) to appreciate the difference between believing and knowing**

Pick a topic say, the use of NATO forces to pacify the Balkans (or a more up-to-date issue) and ask the class or group to start information-gathering. Particular attention needs to be paid to the source of information. Is it reliable? Is it slanted? Is the information complete? What additional information might change one's beliefs about the subject?

Conduct a debate on the issue with wording like, 'Should NATO forces be used in Yugoslavia?'

Follow up the debate with a round-table discussion of the topic. The purpose of this format is not to prove anyone right or wrong, but to shift the information for what is known versus what is believed.

**Lesson 4: Similarities and differences**

An Elderhostel participant told me about an intriguing experiment that illustrates an interesting diversity in the way people see the world. One of the first steps in promoting multiple viewpoints is becoming aware of our own perspectives and patterns of thinking.

In the experiment, people were given any two objects to compare, from the traditional apple and orange to a dinosaur and an automobile. My friend reported that some perceptual patterns emerged.
Some people usually saw differences; others tended to see the similarities; and a few of the people saw both. The patterns generally held regardless of the items being compared.

The experiment raised some questions. What might account for people using one of these perceptual modes consistently? What learning or experience determines our way of comparing? Is seeing both similarities and differences the best way to approach the world? If it is (and I think it is), can people learn to see both as a natural way of reacting? What motivates people to see only one or the other, and how might they be motivated to see both?

A second activity might be a discussion about the following question; ‘What are the advantages to seeing both similarities and differences?’ In the world today there are many instances where comparisons occur. For example, countries are compared to each other, and the Third World is compared to the First World. Do these comparisons focus on similarities, differences or both? Have your class practice seeing both similarities and differences with some new pairs of objects.

Finally, have students identify the comparative pattern in a current international situation. Then have them describe the situation using different comparative patterns. For example, if they mainly see the differences between European and Asian cultures, they could practice seeing the similarities also. Or, if they mainly see the similarities between Australia and America, they could identify some important differences.

Another type of approach would have students (friends) seated in a circle. The first task is to have the participants identify some respect in which everyone is like everyone else in the circle.

The second step is for everyone to identify some respect in which he or she is like someone else in the circle. The third task, of course, asks everyone to identify some respect in which she or he is not like anyone else in the circle. Three to thirty people can participate and I predict that universal truths about human nature will become evident through this process.

Here’s how you might conduct such an experiment in your own classroom (living room, etc)

Select some pairs of items to be compared. Start with objects that fall within the animal, vegetable, mineral categories. Don’t start with ideas or concepts.

Whether you have a few students respond in front of the class or have everyone involved in small groups, the question that everyone should answer is, 'How do these two items compare?'. It is important that you do not mention the words 'similarities' and 'differences' in giving the instructions.

Have the students responses recorded. Then repeat the experiment with another pair of objects. After you've done this three or four times, divide the responses into two categories; similarities and differences.

To help the students understand the particular pattern that they demonstrated in the experiment, have them answer the following question; ’What are my reasons for perceiving things the way I did?’. They can list their answers in writing or share them in discussion.

If your class is highly motivated, you could have them take quiet (almost meditative) time and think of as many answers to the question as they can. You'll probably be able to watch and tell when people have thought of answers. After a few minutes, let them share any responses they want with the group. The thrust of this approach is to avoid the quick answer and encourage students to think in depth.
Lesson 5: The whole story

We want to explore a common myth - the myth that newspapers tell the whole story. For example, the local paper in Taos printed a story about tourism in northern New Mexico. In that story the reporter quoted me as saying that tourism is bad, but I put an important condition on that remark. I made the case that accepting tourism without any reservations (no pun intended) can be destructive to a community. For instance, tourism raised land values beyond the means of most of the community, increased traffic problems outrageously, and fostered the idea of a people's culture becoming a commodity.

Having my ideas misrepresented wasn't a serious problem, but what if my freedom or my livelihood had been affected by what I had or hadn't reportedly said?

When an article is written about me I know it's almost never the complete truth. A host of objections occur to me. I feel misquoted, that the story focuses on the wrong aspects of an event, or that significant information has been omitted.

On the other hand, when reading an article in the same paper, one that looks at an incident or situation that doesn't involve me, I tend to read it differently. I seem to accept that report or story as the truth, the 'whole' story. Why?

Susan Sontag, author and film director, says, "Every medium creates a primary illusion". A newspaper's primary illusion is that it presents the 'whole' story. Students who are conscious of this can be more critical in their reading of the newspaper and less likely to accept what they read at face value as representing all that needs to be known about the incident or issue.

Activities

To appreciate the illusion of the 'whole story' more fully, have students (friends or family members) bring in a current newspaper story and then list ten questions they still have about the event that the story doesn't answer.

Take a local news story and have everybody in the class collect additional relevant information that is not in the newspaper. (Have them make sure that their information is verifiable in some fashion and is not rumour.) For example, students could telephone the parties involved to get their versions. Check with the mayor to see if she was quoted correctly.

Have students visit an event that is likely to be the subject of a news report. Have them compare their perceptions of the event with the newspaper coverage. On what did the paper focus? What did it leave out? Why?

Lesson 6: The shape of the world

Once a photograph of the earth, taken from the outside, is available... a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose. - Frederick Hoyle, 1948

Uncovering worldviews is a tricky business. Students are smart, and they tend to tell us what they think we want to hear, when in fact most of us are committed to presenting different views on global issues and would really like students to identify their own view points and perspectives. I have found two activities that really help people see their and others' worldviews.
Further note: Both of these activities can be used with great effect in the home (or, potentially, in a workshop or other type of gathering). A picture really can be worth a thousand words! Do you suppose a group of African students will place Australia in the center of their map of the world?

THE EARTH

The Earth is where I live
The Earth is where you live
The Earth is full of fun
The Earth is full of spirits
The Earth is full of animals
The Earth is special
But the most important thing is:
You live in it!
by Felicia L. Martinez, grade five

Activities

First, ask everybody to take a minute and draw a picture that represents the current condition of the world. Then put the students into groups and give each group a big piece of newsprint and lots of coloured texts. Tell them they have to create a picture that represents their group’s version of the shape of the world and that incorporates at least one idea from each participant. No one can be left out of the final picture.

Note: Each time I do this activity, I am moved by the beauty and thoughtfulness of the pictures that are created. I find that groups build community quickly by identifying with their pictures and that, when I leave the pictures in view, students refer back to them to illustrate and clarify their exchange of ideas. As they discuss and gain new insights into particular global issues, I ask them to consider how their new understandings fit into the world picture their group had created.

Another simple and effective activity: give pairs of students a large blank piece of paper and ask them to draw a map of the world from memory. (If this seems too daunting, they might start with drawing a map of their town, state, or country.) When they have finished, begin discussion of the activity by asking them how they felt as they tried to remember the map of the world. Then give them accurate maps to compare with theirs and discuss such questions as:

What did people leave out?
What did they misrepresent greatly?
Why do they think they made the mistakes they did?

What did the activity reveal to them about both their knowledge and their feelings about various parts of the world? (For example, do they find any evidence that they care more about their own country than other parts of the globe?)

Lesson 7: The student as expert

Our interaction with youth constantly reminds us that their intelligence and understanding about the global society is outstanding. It enables them to propose creative and wise ways to improve world situations. So I was excited to read about the results of a Save the Children experiment that allowed youngsters to address the problems of their community because their experience confirmed my own.
Save the Children conducted a "child-focused baseline research study: to assess the socio-economic situation of five rural and four urban communities on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast". The process involved youth, children and adults. Here's a part of the story of the children of Riojalandia, one of the communities:

The techniques and activities to involve the children and youth in the study were simple, inexpensive, and fun. For example, the children were asked to draw pictures, using colored markers (a prized possession for any child in these communities), to describe problems in their community. They drew pictures of every conceivable problem from the dangerous speeding buses along the road near Riojalandia, to the environmental hazard of waste disposal in San Luis, to unemployment.

Afterwards, the children presented their findings through their drawings to the rest of the community at a special meeting. The result was nothing short of inspiring. The adults were literally shocked at how astute and knowledgeable the children were about the community’s problems. They were also proud of the way the kids handled themselves and were grateful for what they learnt from them. The children demonstrated very clearly that they, too, have needs and are affected by problems and difficulties in the community.

(From Role Playing in Riojalandia by John Starosta and Janet Torsney, Lifeline, published by Save the Children, 54 Wilton Rd., Westport, CT 06080.)

So often with our good intentions, we do things for instead of with children and youth. We lose track of the fact that children who have access to the uncluttered perceptions of childhood can bring to the exploration of any issue, including global ones, the unique expertise of youth. We need to recapture our interest in being with young people and our appreciation of their ability to be with us equally - when we do that, as in the case of the children of Riojalandia, everybody wins.

Activities

Certainly if you work with young people (or with any age for that matter) you could engage the students in community problem-solving through the activity described above. Later, the same approach could be used for global problems, and students could identify the connections between local and global issues.

An activity that I have used with success is bringing a group of students to my 'Issues in Education Conference on Youth Leadership'. They take part in a fishbowl activity in which the young people sit in a circle surrounded by the adult participants. The adults give handwritten questions to the inner circle; the young people read the questions and respond to them. The main rule in this activity is that the adults can only listen; they do not talk. (At the end of the session, the students ask them some questions so the silence is broken at that point.)

I can imagine using this activity with staff members, but I think you would be most likely to get frank responses from students who don’t have to face the participating staff in a classroom setting, for instance student consultants from another school.

Any time you are looking for people to sit on a responder panel, not just a panel on youth issues, remember to include youthful expertise.

Note: As I was writing this, I came upon a front-page article in the local newspaper that illustrates the importance of youthful expertise. A chapter of the Council on International Relations invited high-school students to comment on NATO's campaign in the Balkans. The issues raised by these young people included some very tough questions: e.g., the world is filled with crises (Africa, Southeast Asia, South America), what criteria do we use to prioritize? Why is Kosovo more important than Indonesia? Can bombs ever be part of a humanitarian mission? What role was played by the profit motive in NATO’s deliberations and how could we find out?
The adult members of the Council were surprised and impressed by the depth of the students' perceptions.

**Lesson 8: 5,000 Cultures; 180 Nations**

Often we hear things about the world that surprises us. Recently, I was listening to an anthropological talk with a group of teachers, and she mentioned that there are over 5,000 cultures in the world today. I was startled and impressed by her information. After I thought about it for a moment, I realized I had been so surprised because her facts didn't fit with some of my deep-seated ideas about the nature of our global society.

Statements like these call attention to the fact that we often relate to the world in a way that discounts or overlooks particular global realities. These kinds of statements are significant for two almost paradoxical reasons. First, they're important because they help us build a clearer picture of the world. Second, they're important because each one reminds us that our current perception of the world is probably inaccurate and ready to be revised by the next startling fact we hear.

It's worthwhile to help students seek out and play with the kinds of perception revisers mentioned above. The classroom is a great place to consciously remind teachers and students that we too often deal with the world in terms of unconscious, presumptions, and unexamined notions about the world and how it works. Young people who learn to review their perceptions in light of new information are better equipped to continue learning and growing throughout their lives. They won't need to be stuck with a freeze-frame world-view that stopped the day they left the classroom.

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**Activities that can be enjoyed in (or outside) the classroom**

You and your students (family) can start your own 'believe it or not' or 'would you believe?' bulletin board. Whenever you find one of these startling tidbits, check with your students to see if they are also surprised. If they are, you can help them examine the nature of their surprise by suggesting that in relation to the new information they complete the statement, "I always thought ..." You can help them to suggest changes that seem desirable in light of the new information. Then have them make lists of questions the new information raises for them. (For example, if there are 5,000 cultures, where are all these cultures? Did there used to be more? What is the difference between a culture and a nation?) Finally, if the world is really that way, what does that tell us about how we relate to the world? Do we need to make some changes? Does this information change the way we think about the topic?

Send your students on a surprising fact search. Newspapers, the library, interviews with parents and teachers are obvious sources. When they have completed their search, have them compare facts. Are others surprised by the facts they found? What are the favourite surprises?

A few more perception revisers

According to the Roosevelt Centre, the average Central American eats less meat in a week than the average American cat.

According to World Eagle, 51 percent of the world's population lives in only five of the world's 180 nations. (They are China, India, Russia, USA, and Indonesia, by the way.)

Harper's Index (June 1999) tells us that, on average, four rocks from Mars land on Earth each month.

Harper's Index (April 1999) quotes the amount that the world has spent on Star Wars merchandise since 1977 as $4, 500, 000, 000.

Lesson 9: Do we mean what we say?

I worry sometimes that we've become so accustomed to the disparity between what we say and what we do that it's almost impossible to think dearly about what's going on in the world.

We've all had the experience of being late for an appointment. The phone rings as we reach the door, we pause, turn around, pick up the receiver, and tell the caller we "have a moment". Of course, this "moment" stretches to ten minutes at which point we are grinding our teeth and seeing double.

A colleague was kind enough to drive me to the airport. I had not driven with him before, so was thoroughly shocked to discover that he preferred eye-contact with me to watching the traffic (as he flew past or around every vehicle in sight). He asked if his driving made me nervous and I said, "Not a bit". Subsequently, he has offered to drive me twice a month and I'm still stuck with 'not a bit'.

A friend asks me if I'm interested in Y2K issues. I reply, "Of course". She e-mails me all 160 pages of the US Senate report.

Sometimes difficulties arise out of a simple misunderstanding. How long is 'a moment'? How interested is 'Of course'? Sometimes a 'little white lie' leads to problems when the situation evoking it becomes repetitive. (How differently I would have responded to my colleague, the race car driver, if I had anticipated many more trips to the airport!) In any case, those kinds of situations could be avoided by taking a little more care to say what we mean.

We shouldn't be too hasty to judge people as hypocrites if they don't always appear to say what they mean. Sometimes, the discrepancy is appropriate. Even your least favorite politician might be occasionally sincere. In a world where trust is low, integrity is lacking, and community bonds are weak, more care must be taken to mean what we say and say what we mean.

All in all, we can make our world more livable by thinking clearly about the connection between what we say and what we mean.

- Students (friends, family) might enjoy sharing experiences where there were discrepancies between what was said and what was meant (done).
- There are many instances when I wished people acted like they meant what they said. Perhaps you might explore the following possibilities with your students.

Activities

If my banker really meant it when he says "We want to do what's good for you," what would happen?
If the football coach really meant it when he says, "My most important job is to help build the character of these young men", would things be different?

If our premier really meant it when he said, "Education is the first priority for our state", what would happen?

People say to me all the time, "No one really wants war". If that were true, how would the world look?

I'll bet by now you've thought of a lot of examples of your own that would work in this format, and I'm certain that your students can come up with a great many similar ideas.

Lesson 10: The world seems to get larger and smaller at the same time

My daughter, Lisa, took a speech course in high school. In one speech I especially liked, she explored the idea that the world is getting larger in many ways while at the same time it is getting smaller. Here is an example from her speech:

Every day, something happens in the world that affects each and every one of us. The world plays an important part in each of our lives. Robert Hardey, a noted global educator, explained it this way, “We live in a number of contexts - family, community, occupation, and nation. We affect and are affected by what happens in each of these and we try to understand their workings. We also live in the world. We affect and are affected by what happens in the world and we must try to understand its workings.”

The world is smaller because it only takes me 12 hours to reach my friends in Japan. It is larger because of the innumerable languages each nation has.

'Small' and 'large' are two simple words that can help us examine the growing interconnectedness of the world and the impact of this interconnectedness on the lives of our students.

- We could learn a great deal about our students' perceptions of their world by having them share how they see the world getting larger and smaller.
- How about having them contrast ways that it’s becoming both simpler and more complex?

Related Poetry

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour
-from 'Auguries of Innocence' by William Blake

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.
-Lord Tennyson