

Why relationships are so important in setting context and supporting learning

As I sit here on a rainy Thursday morning, enjoying a relaxing (if not a little boring) half term holiday, I can't help but think of my fantastic students. I do miss them. I miss seeing their faces look elated when they grasp a difficult concept, I miss hearing them laugh at my terrible attempts to draw a map of the UK under the visualiser and most of all, I miss hearing them debating with each other, using all of their newly found knowledge and emotion!

This got me thinking about the impact of relationships on teaching and learning. Do you have to have sound relationships to be a good teacher, or can you be an outstanding practitioner without necessarily having that close teacher / student relationship?

For me, context and relationships come hand in hand, they support me to be the best practitioner possible. As a citizenship teacher, context is crucial for good depth of understanding. When teaching about devolution, I can use this to explain why they have been following slightly different rules to teenagers in Scotland, due to the devolved powers of the SNP. When discussing Parliamentary Sovereignty, I can talk about how I submitted coursework and achieved GCSEs A-Cs, very different to how they will be awarded when their time comes, all due to the power that the government has, to make changes to the education system. I can get them into a steaming debate about up skirting and the sexualisation of women, before using that to explain how a law is introduced and passed in Parliament. This context means the subject becomes real to them, they can literally 'see' politics and law in action, thus strengthening their long-term memory.

What about relationships? Having close, professional relationships with my students is so important to me. It's a hotly debated topic for sure and of course I understand that my role is to be their teacher and not their friend, so I suppose I aim to be a friendly teacher, a meet in the middle if you like. My background before teaching was in youth work, a profession where relationships are absolutely everything in ensuring young people are supported to be happy and confident people. But in many ways, being a teacher is not so vastly different. Of course, there are more policies to consider, rules to follow and of course, exams to sit, but the relationships are still central to me.

Relationships support me with context and therefore support learning. If I know my students well and have their trust, this helps me to contextualise everything I teach at a deeper more personal level. These relationships have allowed me to have mature and honest conversations with my classes about race and law (e.g. racial demographics within the UK prison system) It's meant that students that have been personally impacted by furlough or changes in income support have been comfortable enough to raise this when debating the economical decisions made by the government. Students that have lived through war and humanitarian crisis in their home countries have spoken about their experiences when the topic of Human Rights is being taught. These are just some of the examples that spring to mind, that have all happened very organically when teaching

citizenship, but have all arisen due to the strong relationships in the classroom, both with myself and with each other.

So, for me, context is everything, but in the absence of sound relationships this can feel a little hollow.

I can't wait to be in the classroom again, I'm already thinking about how much citizenship they have lived through and experienced during these past few months and as their teacher, I feel honoured to play a small part in helping them to make sense of it all.