CHAPTER

7

Making Content Relevant to Students

ANN BAINBRIDGE FRYMIER

Miami University

A question that students bring to the classroom, but rarely explicitly ask the instructor is, "What's in this for me?" Students want to know how the material relates to them personally and why they should bother to learn what the teacher is presenting. Since we teachers typically choose to discuss in class what we believe to be the "most important" topics and concepts, everything seems relevant to us. This brings up a very important aspect of the relevance concept—it is a perception. Therefore, something that I perceive as relevant to me, you may see as completely irrelevant. Relevance is a perception the receiver has of the message and, as such, is influenced by message characteristics, personal characteristics of the receiver, and source characteristics. So if relevance is a receiver perception of a message that can vary from person to person, how is the teacher supposed to make the content relevant to everyone? Making content relevant to every student sitting in class (particularly large classes) is generally an unrealistic expectation. However, a teacher can utilize several strategies to increase the likelihood that more students will perceive the content as personally relevant. The focus of this chapter will be on issues involved in perceiving something as relevant, and strategies for increasing perceptions of relevance. These concepts will be discussed in terms of Keller's ARCS model of motivation, expectancy value theory, and Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model.

Keller's ARCS Model

If something is relevant, it is related and it is pertinent. Keller (1983) defines relevance as a perception of personal needs being met by instructional activities or as a highly desired goal being perceived as related to instructional activities. In other words, we perceive something as being relevant if we perceive it is related to our personal needs (e.g., needs for affiliation, control, achievement) or our personal goals (e.g., career goals). Relevance, however, is only one component of Keller's (1983, 1987) ARCS model of motivation. ARCS stands for attention,
relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. According to this model, before classroom instruction can be made relevant, the teacher must first gain students’ attention. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is clear that students’ attention is a necessary precursor to learning. If students do not pay attention, they will not be involved nor put forth an effort to learn. The second step is to make the content relevant, which satisfies students’ needs. Building positive expectancies, which Keller refers to as confidence is the third step. Confidence can be developed by communicating to students what is expected of them and that they can succeed at the task. The last condition necessary for students’ motivation is satisfaction. Students need to feel satisfied with the outcomes of their effort in order to continue to be motivated. Satisfaction is facilitated by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

**Expectancy-Value Theory**

The ARCS model and specifically the relevance component, draw heavily on expectancy value theory. Expectancy value theory proposes that individuals will be motivated to perform behaviors that are perceived to be personally satisfying and have a positive expectancy for success (Atkinson, 1978; Wong, 1998). Both a positive expectation for success and a positive value for the task are necessary for motivation to occur according to expectancy value theory. Students will be unmotivated to perform a task if they find the task to be unimportant (low value) or if they expect to fail at the task. To be motivated, a student must believe that he or she has the ability to perform the task successfully, that his or her effort will result in some outcome (e.g., grade, learning), and that the outcome has value. The concept of relevance is primarily related to the value component of expectancy value theory. When students perceive a concept or task as relevant, they see it as valuable, as having importance. Therefore, making content relevant to students is an instructional strategy that contributes to student motivation, however alone is not sufficient. As outlined in Keller’s ARCS model, there are other factors that contribute to motivation. Making content relevant must be combined with other instructional strategies that gain students’ attention, help them to feel confident, and help them feel satisfied with the class. The other chapters in this book provide numerous instructional strategies that help accomplish these goals.

**Elaboration Likelihood Model**

Relevance is also discussed in Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) delineation of the elaboration likelihood model. Petty and Cacioppo use the terms relevance and personal involvement somewhat interchangeably. According to the elaboration likelihood model, the extent to which a persuasive message is personally relevant influences whether a person will be motivated to elaborate on the message (carefully think about the message). Elaboration is a key factor in long-term attitude change according to this model. Similar to Keller’s model, Petty and Cacioppo
view relevance as a component of motivation. When people perceive something as being relevant, they perceive it as having value, and worthy of their effort.

Relevance and Learning

There has been little research on the nature of relevance or its relationship to learning. However, relevance has frequently been discussed as an important aspect of teaching. One reason that relevance has rarely been empirically examined is because it is so inherently logical that making content relevant for one’s audience enhances retention. The research that does exist indicates, for the most part, that relevance does make a difference in learning.

In one of the earlier studies, Newby (1991) observed first-year elementary school teachers and their classrooms over a 16-week period of time. The teachers’ motivational strategies and students’ on-task behaviors were recorded. Teachers’ motivational strategies were classified as attention gaining, emphasizing relevance, confidence building, or imposing rewards or punishments. Relevance strategies were infrequently used, only making up 7.49 percent of the total motivational strategies, however it was the only motivational strategy to be positively associated with students’ on-task behavior. Presumably, the relevance strategies helped students (who were in kindergarten through sixth grade) understand why they needed to perform a task and why it was important. They were given a reason for the task and were therefore willing to perform the task.

In a different line of research, Frymier and Shulman (1995) developed a relevance scale that measured the frequency with which teachers used relevance strategies while teaching. The scale consists of twelve items and is shown in Figure 7.1. Students indicated how frequently their teachers used each of the strategies in the scale. What Frymier and Shulman found was that when teachers used the relevance strategies more frequently (as perceived by students), students felt more motivated to study for the class. Additionally, relevance accounted for variance in students’ state motivation to study after teacher use of verbal and nonverbal immediacy was taken into consideration. In other words, making content relevant contributed to student motivation beyond the contribution of teacher immediacy to motivation. (See Chapter 6 for a more thorough discussion of teacher immediacy.)

In a second study, Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (1996) found relevance to again be positively associated with motivation to study and found a positive relationship with affective learning and learning behaviors. Frymier et al. also found perceptions of relevance to be associated with student reports of feeling empowered. Students who felt their teachers made content relevant also felt empowered in those classes. Empowerment is a motivationally based concept, so it is very logical that making content relevant would be associated with feelings of empowerment. Affective learning refers to students’ attitudes toward the course and its content. So students who value the content and think the subject matter is...
important, would be said to have achieved affective learning. Chapter 1 in this book by McCroskey provides a more thorough discussion of affective learning.

In Frymier et al.'s (1996) study, students who felt their teachers were using relevance strategies valued the content more. Additionally, Frymier et al. found relevance to be associated with a variety of learning indicators. Learning indicators were measured by asking students to report how frequently they engaged in nine behaviors that were related to learning (e.g., I see the relationship of the course content from one day to the next throughout the semester). (See Frymier & Houser, 1999, for a full discussion of the learning indicators scale.) As teachers used more relevance strategies, students reported engaging in more learning behaviors. These three studies together lead us to the conclusion that relevance pays off. Making content relevant to students facilitates their learning. However, two experimental studies did not find a relationship between making content relevant and learning.

Based on Frymier and Shulman's (1995) findings, Frymier and Houser (1998) hypothesized that relevance would only enhance motivation and learning when accompanied by teacher immediacy. They believed that immediacy served to gain attention (Kelley & Gorham, 1988), and that if content were made relevant
in low-immediacy conditions, it would not enhance motivation because students would not be paying attention. They expected student motivation and learning to be the highest under conditions of high immediacy and high relevance. Frymier and Houser did not find support for their hypothesis. Student motivation and learning increased under high-immediacy conditions, but relevance had no impact on student motivation and learning. Frymier and Houser had difficulty manipulating relevance without changing the content and admitted that they may not have really manipulated relevance. It is impossible to know from this study whether the results were due to methodology or to the nature of relevance itself.

In a follow-up to Frymier and Houser's work, Behrens (1999) compared three relevance strategies suggested by Keller (1987) to a low-relevance condition. The three strategies were to link content to the present situation, past experiences, and one's future. Behrens manipulated the relevance of a short lecture on a topic that students would have little prior knowledge of (jungle survival) and little initial relevance to the class students were to imagine themselves in (this study was conducted before the TV show "Survivor" aired). Students were to imagine that they were in a class called "Peoples and Cultures of Latin America" and that the lecture they were to read was being given by the professor (no sex or rank for the professor was given). After reading the lecture, students were asked to complete scales measuring their learning and motivation. Behrens (1999) found no differences in learning or motivation among the four relevance conditions. The perceived relevance of all four conditions was very close to the midpoint of the scale. Students did not perceive the information in any of the conditions to be completely irrelevant (even though that was the goal of the low-relevance condition). One possible interpretation of these results is that the students perceived at least moderate relevance because a professor presented the information. Behrens suggests that students may assume that the content presented in class is important and therefore relevant. Future research needs to address both message and source characteristics that lead to perceptions of relevance.

The results of these last two studies may lead you to question the importance of making content relevant to students. However a close look at the studies indicates that the problems are more likely due to measurement and manipulation issues rather than to conceptual issues. Frymier and Houser (1998) probably did not sufficiently manipulate relevance. In all likelihood, relevance did not affect learning because the manipulation was too subtle to have an impact. Behrens also had trouble manipulating relevance, however in post-hoc analyses he reports students' perceptions of relevance (two different measures of relevance) were correlated with both motivation to study \( r = .41 \) and \( r = .52 \) and with affective learning \( r = .61 \) and \( r = .45 \). When students perceived the material as relevant they reported being more motivated and having greater affective learning. The problem was that he could not reliably manipulate relevance. Both Frymier and Houser (1998) and Behrens (1999) tried to manipulate relevance by changing message characteristics. Other factors such as source characteristics, environment, and student characteristics may also influence relevance. Future research needs to examine these other factors in relation to relevance perceptions.
Strategies for Enhancing Relevance

Keller (1987) provides six types of strategies for enhancing content relevance, which includes experience, present worth, future usefulness, need matching, modeling, and choice. One thing all of these strategies have in common is that they require teachers to have some knowledge and understanding of their students. This is particularly true for the experience strategies. Experience strategies include, "State explicitly how the instruction builds on the learner’s existing skills," "Use analogies familiar to the learner from past experience," and "Find out what the learners’ interests are and relate them to the instruction" (Keller, 1987, p. 4). These strategies require a teacher to know something about the students’ past experiences, skills, and interests. There are some classroom situations where this is quite possible and maybe even fairly easy to accomplish. Small classes that are somewhat homogenous are best suited for relating content to students’ existing skills, past experiences, and interests. For example, if you are teaching an advanced organizational communication course where everyone in the class has had the same prerequisites and is in the same major, these students have some common experiences that can be related to the content.

The future usefulness strategies are well-suited for a class where students have similar career goals or reasons for taking the class. These two strategies are "State explicitly how the instruction relates to future activities of the learner" and "Ask learners to relate the instruction to their own future goals" (Keller, 1987, p. 4). For example, business majors enrolled in a required public speaking class would likely have similar career goals. Using examples showing the relevance of public speaking skills to the business world would likely be effective for a majority of the students.

The more diverse the classroom, the more difficult it is to choose a strategy that will help all students perceive the content as relevant. In highly diverse classrooms, the choice strategies may be highly effective. There are two choice strategies, "Provide meaningful alternative methods for accomplishing a goal" and "Provide personal choices for organizing one’s work" (Keller, 1987, p. 4). By giving students choices in how to achieve a learning goal, students can find their own connections between the content and their personal needs or goals. This brings us to a broader strategy not discussed by Keller.

One general approach is to have students determine why and how content is relevant to them. Giving students choices in completing assignments encourages them to make the content relevant to their own needs and interests. For example, if a learning objective for your class is to learn a particular theory such as Baxter’s (1990) dialectic theory, an assignment could involve students applying the theory to a relationship of their choosing. In completing the assignment, students have to relate the theory to a situation that is important to them. The student generates the relevance in this situation. One important note: Teachers need to take care to help students apply the theory to appropriate situations, so that the theory is indeed useful and relevant to the situation.
Keller (1987) also discusses the strategies of present worth, need-matching, and modeling. Present worth is basically telling students why the content is relevant and important. Need-matching involves attempting to link the content to specific student needs such as the need for affiliation, need for power, and the need for achievement. The strategy of modeling involves using individuals such as alumni or tutors to demonstrate or model the value and relevance of the content. Keller also suggests that the instructor model enthusiasm for the content. To learn more about relevance strategies and the ARCS model as a whole, see Keller (1987).

Another way teachers can encourage students to make content relevant to their own needs and goals is to ask students to do so. First, present the content you want students to learn such as Monroe's motivated sequence. Once the concept has been defined, ask students why it is important to know this or how this information could be used. The teacher can also play devil's advocate and ask, "Why should anyone care about this? What difference does it make?" Such questions require students to justify for the teacher, themselves, and their classmates why the content is important and relevant. This strategy pushes students to figure out for themselves how the content relates to their own needs, goals, and interests. Students may also be more willing to accept the reasons given by their peers than the reasons given by the instructor.

Difficulties with Relevance

The primary difficulty with the concept of relevance is that it is a perception. This is a problem because it is so easy to assume that others perceive things the same as we do. As teachers we tend to see what we teach as being very important and relevant. We may even believe that what we teach is relevant to everyone regardless of his or her position in life. When we are this enthusiastic about our courses, it is easy to forget that others may not see the relevance of what we teach. We have to continually remind ourselves of this fact and make an effort to employ strategies that will help students see the relevance of what we teach.

Another related difficulty with relevance is that students' goals and needs change over time. The strategies and assignments used one semester to make content relevant may not be very useful one or two semesters later. This is particularly true if you draw on current events to demonstrate relevance. Not only do we need to continually update the content in our courses, but we also need to update our knowledge of how the content relates to a variety of people. Being knowledgeable about student concerns, lifestyles, and interests is important to the task of making content relevant, and this information is constantly changing.

It is a whole lot easier to avoid thinking about whether students see the relevance of what we are teaching, however it is a whole lot more satisfying when students believe our class is really important.
Improving Your Teaching

Where does relevance fit into the bigger picture of teaching? I previously stated that relevance alone was insufficient, that it needed to be combined with other instructional strategies. We can use Keller's ARCS model as a guide to understanding additional instructional strategies we should use to be effective teachers. The first step in Keller's model is attention. Verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors are very effective means for gaining students' attention (see Chapter 6). It is difficult not to pay attention when the teacher is making eye contact, smiling at us, calling us by our first name, and using vocal variety. Using appropriate humor (see Chapter 10) is another useful strategy. However, as Wanzer points out in Chapter 10, if humor does not come naturally to you, you should probably avoid using this strategy.

The second component of Keller's model is relevance and the third is confidence. Confidence refers to developing positive expectations among students. Recall that in the expectancy value theory, motivation occurs when students value the activity and expect to succeed at the task. So strategies that help students feel that success is likely are important. This does not mean that you need to make your class easy or give everyone a good grade. Students need to feel a sense of control, that they have the necessary tools to successfully complete a task. Being clear (see Chapter 7) is important so that students understand what is expected of them. Clarity also facilitates understanding of the content so that it is used correctly in assignments. While immediacy is useful in gaining attention, it is also useful in building confidence. Highly immediate teachers are approachable. Students feel more comfortable asking questions of immediate teachers. When students feel free to ask questions, they are likely to clarify assignments and content, which makes them more confident in their ability to complete assignments successfully.

The last component of Keller's model is satisfaction. This component focuses on how to maintain and increase students' motivation. If students' hard work and accomplishments go unnoticed, or worse, punished, motivation will wane. It's easy to recognize and reward students who do well. It's much more difficult to find appropriate ways to recognize and reward students who are less successful. First of all, it is important to remember that grades are not the only rewards that teachers have to offer. Everyone likes to hear the words, "Good job" or having one's improvements noticed. Even silly things like stickers, smiley faces, or "Good Job!" at the top of a paper can make students feel good about their efforts.

Our success in enhancing satisfaction lies largely in our ability to give constructive feedback, nonverbal and verbal, oral and written. The general rule of thumb is to always find something positive to say about a student's performance. Sometimes this is a real challenge, but we need to make the effort to find something positive to say. Second, remember that receiving feedback makes people feel vulnerable. People respond differently to vulnerability, but a common response is to be defensive. Be prepared to deal with this response and avoid becoming defensive yourself. Earlier, I said you need to be clear to help build
positive expectations. Being clear in your grading criteria is also important. In addition to being clear, you need to be specific in how and why the student did not meet those criteria. Receiving negative feedback is less frustrating if we understand exactly what we did wrong. A fourth suggestion is to focus on behavior and not on personal characteristics. Describe the behavior and avoid making inferences about the student’s motivation, ability, or personality, i.e., “You had two false starts and lost your place three times during the speech” versus “You weren’t prepared for your speech.” Lastly, communicate to students your desire for them to succeed. If students believe you are pulling for them, they are more likely to view your feedback as constructive and be less defensive. If students feel you are against them, they are likely to blame you for the poor grade, rather than take responsibility themselves. While giving feedback to students is probably one of the most tedious and difficult aspect of teaching, it is also very important if you really want to help students learn.

Teaching is a complex activity that involves many skills and abilities and is constantly being influenced by the students and the classroom. Keller’s ARCS model provides a useful framework for assessing our teaching. I have identified a variety of communication behaviors that can be used to improve teaching. These behaviors can be used and adapted in a variety of ways. There is not a single model or set of behaviors that make up “effective teaching.” Good teachers come in many flavors. Strategies such as relevance, immediacy, and humor can be used in many different ways to facilitate student motivation and learning.

Conclusion

When students perceive course content and activities as relevant to them, their motivation is likely to increase. When students are motivated learners, they put forth more effort and in most situations will learn more. When teachers take the time to learn about their students and then find ways to link students’ needs, goals, and interests to the content, a greater number of them will perceive the content as relevant and important. As suggested in Chapter 2, it is often necessary to use a variety of strategies, since some students will respond to some strategies but not to others.

Making content relevant is an important component of effective teaching, but it is only a single component. Using relevance strategies with verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors gains students’ attention, enhances perceptions of relevance, and helps build confidence. Being clear in presentations and handouts also helps students feel confident with the material. Finally, it is important to give special attention to the feedback you offer students. If they feel there is no chance of succeeding in your class, it doesn’t really matter how relevant you make the material or how many times you smile and make eye contact—they won’t be motivated learners. When giving feedback find something positive to say, be descriptive, be clear and specific, and be supportive.
REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


