
Creating a Hierarchy

When trying to develop a walk or talk, it can be frustrating to know where to begin. You can ease your frustration by asking yourself two questions:

- 1) What do you want the students to know?
- 2) Why?

This gives you a good starting point. You can usually think of a myriad of whats: erosion, animal life, trees, etc. But are all subjects purposeful? And for the ones that are purposeful, do they all carry the same weight?

Probably not. There are some topics to be included, others excluded. Among the included topics there is a hierarchy you develop to order the importance of the various topics.

To help you develop a hierarchy of importance, you may ask yourself where your topic falls amongst the following categories.

A) **Basic understanding of the key concept:**

These are the basic concepts that you have decided it is important to know, if only to increase their knowledge of the world around them.

Ex. I understand that animals have adaptations, which means that they have special things on their body which help them fit in with their environment.

Ex. Erosion is when water or air carries away a material.

Ex. There is a food system in which every living thing on Earth plays a part.

B) **Curiosity**

Curiosity is material that it may be interesting to know, but is not vital to know for the student at this time.

Ex. Turtles eat duckweed.

Ex. Turtles leave their young; Ducks stick with them.

Ex. This bird says Chicka-dee-dee.

C) **Importance to the student**

Importance to the student usually addresses a question like: What should we do?

Ex. Keep our waters clean if you want to fish or drink good water.

Ex. Rust is a type of weathering which means the car is literally, breaking down.

Consider this when you want to buy a car.

Ex. Reduce the amount of waste you produce because if you don't, you will swim in it years later.

Usually there is some importance to the student to be had. And if there isn't... consider why you are talking about this topic to begin with.

Now, how to develop a hierarchy:

How many of you have heard a student say: “Why are we learning this anyway?”

-Importance to the student weighs most heavily.

-Next, you must provide your students with enough basic concepts for them to understand the importance of topic z to them. That is to say, in order to understand that they should reduce their waste, they must first understand the basic concept: there is no where for it to go.

-Next, you must provide enough of the curious information so that the students can understand your basic concepts: our landfills are filling at x rate...., that empty tissue box will sit in the landfill for y amount of years...

If you have any extra time on your walk/talk, you may add in other curiosities to maintain situational interest. However, a talk/walk should never be completely based on any assemblage of random curiosities. It should have a point—which goes back to starting with importance to the student.

On the trail:

To put this into use, first take some time before your next walk and write out the issues that might be important to the students you will teach. Or, refer back to the priorities and goals described on the unit web page and other handouts for guidance.

For example, with the 1st grade Aquatic Life Unit:

Grand importance: Keep watered spaces clean because they benefit you. Watered spaces also benefit animals, and animals benefit us, too.

Basic Concepts: There are animals that live in and around ponds and watered spaces.

Drinking water comes from fresh water sources.

Curiosities: We have geese and ducks and small water bugs here at River Bend.

Other situational interest curiosities: Geese and ducks and bugs are here because they are adapted to this ecosystem.

Then, figure out a way to give life to all the big ideas above with your students at River Bend. Ex:

Grand importance: Play migration game.

Basic concepts: Look/listen for animals at River Bend. Look for signs of animals.

Curiosity: Notice which specific kinds of animals we have here.

Situational interest curiosities: Notice the adaptations of the animals here at River Bend.

P.S. None of this information, other than the concept of situational interest, can be found in any book. This information is based upon my personal experience in over six years of Education. You may use it or discard it as you wish, but I suggest trying it first.