

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Suha Jaber

Copyright 2018

A Paper Presented to the 19th Annual ISNA Education Forum

Rosemont, IL

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Abstract

Schools must give students the opportunity to take charge and allow students to step up and make a difference in their neighborhood and world. Teachers can transform classrooms with experiential learning that furthers students' curricular learning, develops life skills, and helps make a positive impact on the world. The session at the 19th Annual ISNA Education Forum will provide teachers with the steps, resources, and network to challenge students to take on local and global issues that empower them to take action.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Presenter Biography

Suha Jaber is the founder of Rising Leaders Academy, ranked top school in the district and one of the top 1% of schools in the state of Florida (Rising Leaders Academy, 2018). She served as the principal of Rising Leaders Academy for the first 5 years. In July 2017, Dr. Jaber became the Director, focusing on overall school operations, which include school programs such as Project-Based Expeditionary Learning.

Dr. Jaber comes from the state of New Jersey where she was a full time university instructor. She is ranked among the top 25 professors in the country out of one million according to a popular rating website by students. Business Insider named her as one of the best 25 professors in America. In addition, Princeton Review named her as one of the best 300 professors in the country. She received an Excellence in Teaching Award from New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) and was recognized for her accomplishments as a Course/Curriculum Coordinator.

Dr. Jaber holds two Bachelor's Degrees in Mathematics Education and Computer Science, a Master's Degree in Applied Mathematics, and a Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership with specialty in Curriculum and Instruction (Summa Cum Laude). She also completed courses in Gifted, Exceptional Students Education (ESE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). She is a certified Heroic Imagination Project workshop trainer, trained by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, and is certified in High Performance Collaboration: Leadership and Teamwork through Northwest University.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Statement of the Problem

Way too many students find school boring and lack motivation and perseverance. Instead of learning, they are stagnating, which puts them at increased risk of struggling academically and behaviorally (Engaging Schools, 2017). According to the National Research Council (2004), lack of motivation in students is a real and pressing problem causing students to be disengaged from school. Most students prefer to stay home and cannot wait for the weekend and vacations. Teachers often feel the same way.

Teachers need to find ways to engage students and instill a desire in students to want to attend school and to love learning. Students enjoy school and understand the purpose of what they are learning more when they take charge and create positive impact locally and globally. In addition, students become more encouraged when they learn that they are getting rewards from Allah (swt) by serving his creation, while completing their schoolwork.

Reeves (2008) defined student empowerment as “student ownership of learning.” Teachers can present curriculum content, and at the same time, empower students to tackle pressing issues like hunger, poverty, and environmental issues as they explore how they can make a positive impact and resolve these problems. Students take ownership of their learning by planning and carrying out local and global action to improve their communities and the world with the help of the teachers and administrator. Everyone in the school works together to make positive change, where parents can also get involved.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Review of Literature

Students embrace learning that is connected to the real world, where they can grapple collaboratively with compelling problems and develop creative, actionable solutions together (EL Education, 2017). When students apply skills and knowledge to real-world issues and make positive changes in their communities, they understand the purpose and relevance of their learning (EL Education, 2017).

For students to take charge of their learning, the teacher communicates to the students that they can and should be proactive in their education and creates a learning centered attitude where the responsibility is passed to the students, while the teacher points them in the right direction (BYU, 2018). No new curriculum is needed.

According to Sulla (2011), teachers should have three critical goals in the classroom: engaging students in learning, building greater responsibility for students, and increasing academic rigor. Engaging students means both hands-on and minds-on. Teachers must observe closely that the students are thinking deeply and understanding academically rigorous content, while applying it to the real world (Sulla, 2011).

Combining learning goals and community service enhances both student growth and the common good (Bandy, 2018). This can be done when students are asked to apply course context to community-based activities, giving students experiential opportunities to learn in the real world and develop skills of community engagement. Combining rigorous content with community service has a positive impact on student' academic learning and gives students a greater sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, moral development, greater interpersonal development, and builds leadership and communication skills (Bandy, 2018).

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Method

The session at the 19th Annual ISNA Education Forum provides principles and practices to help teachers implement real-life, project-based learning that promote literacy and integrate curricular content with a bigger purpose of just learning but also serving. These projects also help students build communication skills, student character, and community/environmental responsibility. Teachers structure learning around real problems where learning is often in settings outside the classroom and the school building.

When students take charge and apply the learning to real world, they gain leadership skills, which include collaboration, teamwork, public speaking, service learning, critical thinking, and much more that will be covered during the session. The session will cover project-based models such as Expeditionary Learning and WE Schools, which empower students to be active citizens who complete projects that contain service learning. With such projects, teachers help prepare students for global citizenship in an increasingly complicated and interconnected world. Curricula that prepares students for global citizenship is cross-disciplinary, which ties closely to environmental stewardship and social justice (EL Education, 2017).

The session will focus on four steps to assist students take charge, which include investigation, where students explore topics related to real-world challenges. Then, students develop an action plan to implement their service-learning project. Next, students take action by implementing their action plan. Finally, students present the results of their service-learning and celebrate their achievement with the school community, which includes the families.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

The student projects will include research, fieldwork, and service learning that are very carefully planned to have a clear set of learning goals built around a compelling topic, guiding questions, and learning targets. Students are encouraged to step up and make a difference in their neighborhood and world at large. They are reminded that no matter how small, young, or far they are, they can make a positive impact on the lives of people because they take charge. The session will include the planning from the kick off of the project to the celebration of learning and service.

The session will also include Quranic verses and hadith that teachers can share with students about serving others and Allah's creation. The projects integrate multiple subjects that include Islamic studies, reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The session focuses on teaching in the 21st century, where students become lifelong learners who will make a positive contribution to the world.

The session will be presented using a PowerPoint presentation and resources provided to the attendees. Each attendee will be given a folder with more information and examples of projects where students take charge. If time permits, attendees will have the opportunity to start designing a draft project for their students and receive feedback from the presenter. There will be steps to start the projects from looking at the standards to be covered to the final celebration of learning, where students will share their work and activities with the community. The presenter will also provide her contact information for the attendees to communicate with questions or assistance after the session and conference is over.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

Practical Implementation

Students will be more motivated to work when they know the goal they are working towards and see the value of what they are learning applied to their academic lives (Carnegie Mellon University, 2015). Teachers should start by explaining to students how the course work and skills they are learning will relate to future courses in high school, college, and the workforce. This will enhance student motivation. In addition, teachers should also relate the learning to the students' professional interests.

The session will help teachers implement the EL Education method. EL Education (2017) has an approach to learning and teaching, which is focused on being challenging, active, meaningful, and develops character. EL Education, formerly called Expeditionary Learning, was born out of a collaboration between Outward Bound and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Harvard Outward Bound project was established in 1987 to increase experiential education at Harvard, while increasing academic rigor to Outward Bound's work in schools (EL Education, 2017).

EL Education (2017) has 10 design principals that will be reviewed during the session. The first principal is the primacy of self-discovery where students undertake tasks that require perseverance, fitness, craftsmanship, imagination, self-discipline, and significant achievement. "A teacher's primary task is to help students overcome their fears and discover they can do more than they think they can," (EL Education, 2017). The second principle is the having of wonderful ideas, where students are provided with time to experiment and make observations. The third principle is the responsibility for learning, where learning is both individual and as part of a group. The fourth principle is empathy and caring. The fifth is success and failure, where it's important to be

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

successful, and at the same time, to learn from failures in order to persevere when things are hard. The sixth principle is collaboration and competition, where students are encouraged to compete, not against each other, but with their own personal best. The seventh is diversity and inclusion, which increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others (EL Education, 2017). The eighth principle is the natural world, where students and staff make a direct and respectful relationship with the natural world and become stewards of the earth and future generations. The ninth principle is solitude and reflection where students and teachers need time alone to explore their thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas, while exchanging them with other students and adults. The final principle is service and compassion where students and staff act like a crew not passengers.

After learning about EL Education's 10 design principle, attendees will learn how to take their students on a journey of learning that includes fieldwork and service to the community. It starts by looking at the standards for the grade level and deciding which ones will come to life. For example, if 3rd graders are learning about energy in their science class, students will not only learn the standards but also conduct fieldwork where they learn about it in the real world by visiting an energy location. They can visit a solar energy location and learn about alternative forms of energy that help the environment by reducing the use of nonrenewable energy sources, such as natural gas. Then they can come up with ideas and projects of their own to help save energy. This is where teachers allow students to take charge and be creative and innovative. After much research, reading, writing, and hand-on applications, the students complete their project about saving energy. They are encouraged to integrate mathematics in their expedition

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

projects. Their project must include a reflection and portfolio with the work they have completed. Finally the students will present their work to the community and stakeholders. The students may present their work to the mayor, commissioners, or school board and provide their idea on how to help the community and world at large save energy. This is just one idea of a project on energy; they are many ideas that teachers and students can come up with using the state standards to create positive change and allowing students to take charge and gain lifelong skills in the process.

There are numerous free programs and movements that support bringing people together and giving them the tools to change the world. One movement is called WE Movement, with millions of people working together to shift the world from “me” to “we” (WE Charity, 2017). WE Schools transform classrooms with experiential service-learning. Through educational resources and service campaigns, students further their curricular learning, develop the life skills for success, and make a positive impact on the world (WE Charity, 2017). Students gain an understanding of the root causes of pressing issues like hunger, poverty and access to education, as they explore how they can make positive impacts. They also plan and carry out at least one local and one global action to improve their communities and the world.

WE Schools is a unique, four-step program in more than 12,300 schools and groups across North America and the UK, which challenges young people to identify the local and global issues that spark their passion and empowers them with the tools to take action (WE Charity, 2017). The four steps of WE Schools are:

1. Investigate and learn – Students explore topics related to a real-world challenge or opportunity.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

2. Action plan – Students develop a plan to implement their service-learning project, including one local and one global action.
3. Take action – Students implement their action plan.
4. Report and celebrate - Students present the results of their service-learning initiatives.

Teachers can start by looking at their science and social studies standards and decide with the students which standards they want to bring to life and act upon, just like the energy example provided on page 8. They will then explore those standards in depth, complete projects, fieldwork, and service, while integrating other subjects, such as reading, writing, and mathematics.

School leaders and teachers create an interdisciplinary curriculum that provides multiple opportunities for students to build global skills and knowledge while building character. There are many character education programs that can be integrated in all the projects, such as the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Stephen R. Covey (2004) outlines seven habits to help students success at school and in their lives, which include:

Habit 1: *Be Proactive*

Habit 2: *Begin with the End in Mind*

Habit 3: *Put First Things First*

Habit 4: *Think Win-Win*

Habit 5: *Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood*

Habit 6: *Synergize*

Habit 7: *Sharpen the Saw*

Teachers and school leaders want to design learning experiences that enable students to make positive contributions to the world. This can be done by connecting students to the world beyond school through meaningful fieldwork, experts, and service

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

learning (EL Education, 2017). Students apply the knowledge they learn in the classwork and use the natural and social environments of their communities as sites for purposeful fieldwork and service. It is important for the students and educators to collaborate with local business, professional experts, and community members with firsthand knowledge of the issues students are studying.

Service learning goes beyond charitable acts to also include rigorous academics, such as developing a recycling plan for city which does not recycle. Teachers incorporate service learning into projects not lessons not just as an add-on but as an integral part of learning (EL Education, 2017). It is also important to connect service learning to character education, which include kindness and caring. The service learning projects must benefit the community, which can be centered on important issues such as social justice and protecting the environment.

Below is another example of a first grade project where students take charge:

1st Grade Project - We Recycle (Rising Leaders Academy, 2018)

Summary:

Our first graders are learning how they can make a positive impact on both our community, and our school. One of the ways that my students constantly bring up amongst themselves is recycling. They will learn about why it's important to keep the Earth healthy. They will also learn about recyclable materials and ways that we can reuse things to save the earth from mounds of trash. The town we live in does not have recycling facilities for plastic and glass, so part of our expedition will be to learn about plastic and glass recycling specifically, and to petition the Mayor to make this happen.

Guiding Questions:

1. Why is it important to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle?
2. What are ways that I can educate my friends and family about what can be recycled?
3. What are some ways that I can Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle myself?
4. Why is it important to have facilities for all types of recycling?

Learning Targets:

1. Students will learn the definitions of reduce, reuse and recycle, as they pertain to a healthy environment.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

2. Students will find ways that they can reduce waste, reuse items, and recycle appropriate materials.
3. Students will learn how facilities recycle waste into new materials.
4. Students will learn ways that they can help by recycling.

Case Study 1: How Much Trash in a Day?

Students will calculate the amount of trash each student produces in one day. I will have each student collect his/her individual trash for one day, and at the end of the day we will see how much each of us have collected. Each student will go through the garbage that they have collected in their individual sack and will separate into piles that can be recycled, and piles that are simply garbage. This will allow the students to see how much trash they produce and how much can actually be recycled.

Case Study 2: Plastic Recycling.

The students will learn about plastic recycling. We will watch videos about what plastic recycling centers do, and what the recycled plastic is used for. We will also talk about how our town does not have plastic recycling centers. Each student will write an individual letter to the mayor discussing why is it important for our city to have plastic recycling and will ask him to do something about it.

Service Learning Projects:

5 W's of Recycling

In this project, the students be in groups of 4. They will take the information that they have gathered about recycling and create posters that tell the 5 W's of Recycling (who, what, when, where, why, and how). These will be hung around the school to advertise our venture to the other classes and teach all the students in the school about recycling.

Pick Up Days

The 1st graders will give each class a recycling box they decorated so the students in the whole school will place their trash papers in it throughout the week. The 1st graders will collect weekly and recycle. The asked a truck to come to school weekly to pick up the trash papers and take it to a recycling center outside the city.

Letter to the Mayor

1st grade students will learn about the importance of recycling glass and plastic. They will take this information, and all of them will write three-paragraph letters to the Mayor of our city. These letters will discuss the importance of recycling, and ask him to consider placing these facilities in Panama City.

Experts: Salvation Army talked about the things that they reuse to help others.

Fieldwork:

Students will go to the Salvation Army, where they will see how things are reused to benefit the less fortunate. The Salvation Army takes donations of things and uses them to help clothe those who may not have the clothes they need, or they sell them at their retail store and use the proceeds to help provide food, clothing, and shelter to the less fortunate. The students will see this in action. They will also visit a nearby park on this same day. They will help clean up the park and enjoy the clean environment they are helping to create. They will also clean around the school and school play area.

STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE of THEIR LEARNING

References

- Bandy, J. (2017). *What is service learning or community engagement?* Vanderbilt University: Center for Teaching. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-through-community-engagement/>
- BYU (2018). *Helping students take responsibility for learning*. Retrieved from <http://ctl.byu.edu/tip/helping-students-take-responsibility-learning>
- Carnegie Mellon University (2015). *Students lack interest or motivation*. Retrieved from <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-lackmotivation/lackmotivation-01.html>
- Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. New York: Free Press.
- EL Education (2017). *Core practices: A vision for improving schools*. New York, NY: EL Education.
- Engaging Schools (2017). *Why engaging schools?* Retrieved from <http://engagingschools.org/why-engaging-schools/>
- National Research Council (2014). *Engaging Schools*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.
- Reeves, D. (2008). *The learning leader/Leadership for student empowerment*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD Educational Leadership.
- Rising Leaders Academy (2018). *Rising Leaders Academy*. Retrieved from www.RisingLeadersAcademy.org.
- Sulla, N. (2011). *Students taking charge*. Retrieved from www.eyeducation.com
- WE Charity (2017). *We schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.we.org/we-schools>