James M. Lang (2016), in his advice column in The Chronicle of Higher Education, urges instructors to help students connect course material both with their everyday experiences as well as to topics within and across courses and disciplines. This process of thickening up of connections can lead students to formulate their own ideas and see greater value in their work. In How Learning Works, Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010:49) lend support to this approach. They point out that the very experience of learning unfolds differently for instructors and students due to the complexity of our knowledge or the number and density of the connections we have developed among particular concepts, facts, and skills.

CONNECTIONS THAT LEAD TO EXPERTISE

There are a number of activities instructors can adopt that will enable students to become more productive learners. Lang suggests implementing the “commonplace book,” an exercise used by early readers and scholars to remember the various passages, thoughts, and ideas they encountered. This activity can easily be adapted for students enrolled in face-to-face, web-enhanced, or online courses. Several times a week, students can be prompted to connect issues and themes from their courses to something that happened outside of class or at home. These connections can be explored on paper, on a course blog, or in social media.

While we might be tempted to believe that social media has nothing to do with higher education, Jesse Stommel (2015) persuasively argues otherwise. Stommel explains how the constraints of Twitter, the 140-character limit, encourage participants to think about an idea in a way they otherwise wouldn’t. This makes Twitter what Stommel calls an “emergent space.” The boundaries and limitations of the platform encourage a kind of playfulness that is attractive to many of our students. Several times a week, you might invite students to share connections they have observed or discovered with photos posted to Instagram or in comments posted on Facebook or Twitter. Course-specific hashtags can allow instructors and students to stay connected to one another as they enhance their ability to connect course material to experiences outside the classroom. By building enthusiasm for reflective practice, instructors can help students make the kinds of connections that will permit them to better retain and use what they learn.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THESE TOPICS, BEGIN HERE: