

LESSONS LEARNED FROM LAMINATE FLOORING

Last summer, I learned how to install laminate flooring. Along the way, I learned a lot about flooring and how to deal with one of those large, retail hardware stores. But the majority of my learning was about improving teaching and learning.

On a sweltering day in July, I wandered the aisles of a large home improvement store. A thought hit me when I saw the flooring a friend had installed in her house: I needed flooring in a recent home addition. I'm no handyman, but after a persuasive discussion with a clerk, I bought eight boxes of "easy-to-install" flooring. I felt confident because my friend had installed the flooring quickly and easily.

The next day, I arose early, carefully read the directions, and immediately realized I didn't have the necessary tools. The directions had not provided enough information on what tools I needed. I realized this: Good teachers know that simply giving students directions is not enough for them to learn. Teachers must

provide the necessary tools for students to learn.

With a limited budget, I had to be creative. I borrowed a saw and proceeded to destroy half a box of flooring. I felt like a student facing a new learning task without guidance or connection to prior knowledge.

I wanted to be done in time to host a lobster bake five days away, so I persevered. As teachers, we know motivated students learn more easily. We must ask ourselves, "What motivates the student?"

After one day of "summer school" for flooring, I had made progress, but I was not "meeting the standard." I called the company and got advice. Sometimes an expert can assist a novice, just as a teacher with a deep understanding of a subject can mentor a colleague.

From this conversation, I discovered I lacked more of the tools needed to complete the job. Angry about the full box of flooring I'd already destroyed and the lack of tools, I returned to the home improvement store. My negative attitude and lack of confidence hardened with everyone

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around me telling me how easy this job should be. My attitude was impacting my ability to learn. I was reminded of struggling readers, whose self-perception can inhibit their progress. As learners, we need to feel we have all the supports necessary for success. I gathered a few additional tools and immediately felt more equipped to complete the task.

Next, I sought collegial support. I felt more confident once I had my father and my housemate helping me. I was reminded how powerful an approach cooperative learning can be. Although my father and I argued, we made progress after "talking out" our learning. Students who have opportunities to talk to each other influence the effectiveness of their learning. I continued to rely on the service representative to clarify my thinking. He asked me questions, deepening my understanding of the process just like the inquiry approach colleagues in schools may use.

Once I began to see progress, my confidence soared. My housemate provided the timely and positive feedback students seek from their teachers and peers with daily comments, such as, "Wow, it looks great!" and "You are making progress!"

Just as I thought I'd gotten it, however, I faced a new challenge: a closet and trim. I was reminded of students who have just internalized one skill when introduced to another. I felt like a student unable to do more than the first 10 problems on a page who then is asked to complete the whole section. Good teachers must balance "covering" the curriculum and mastering essential skills.

Allowing myself to consider alternative methods, I used some creativity to finish the project. I followed my own rubric, which was to have the flooring laid so there were no visible signs of it being incomplete and people were able to safely walk over it. I contemplated the question, "Should all students be held to the same standards at the same time, and who should agree to those standards?"

Throughout the endeavor, I was constantly reminded of the lessons all around us if we stop to reflect. In laying flooring, I was reminded of the need to seek help from other learners and advice from experts. I was reminded that when I teach concepts, I need to give students the liberty to find more than one way to answer a question. Motivation alone would not have spurred me to continue the project, but seeing and feeling success did. My experience provided me a keener understanding of how students learn and how I can promote effective teaching. ■



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