



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

March 2015 Volume XII Issue III

Closing the Engagement Gap



Bruce facilitating the **Leading the Learning®** workshop

As the students enter their classroom, they are alive with conversation and exuberant behavior. Most of the students are carrying their supplies, but a few are empty-handed. Several students are checking their cell phones, while two others have in ear buds listening to music. One boy is playing a hand-held video game while another stares out the window with a sullen look on his face. One girl looks like she's been crying while three other students are talking about a hallway altercation between several boys that had happened earlier in the day. Three non-English speaking students who are new to the class look a bit trepidatious and nervous. Some students are in their seats, some are still standing, and at the sound of the bell, four students quickly enter the classroom.

This scenario is a typical class on a typical day in a typical school. As the teacher looks around her room, she knows she is charged with teaching each and every one of these young people. She is well aware of the difficult task of closing the achievement gap. She also knows that this goal cannot be achieved until she addresses the engagement gap. As a result, her mission, should she accept it (and she does!), is to capture the attention and maintain the involvement of all her students in their learning endeavors; then, and only then, can the achievement gap be reduced.

As today's practitioners fully understand, teaching is a complicated, multi-faceted, and potentially exciting endeavor. When ideas click and plans come together, it is a memorable experience for students and teacher alike. As they make their unit and daily lesson plans, teachers know that they need to keep these key questions at the forefront of their thinking:

- What are the ways in which I can create a safe, non-threatening yet challenging environment that respects and responds to learner needs?
- How can I enable my students to engage in relevant and rigorous applications of learning?
- How does active learning and engagement promote the development and use of 21st century skills?

The purpose of this newsletter is to investigate the concept of engagement from different perspectives with the outcome being that teachers can add new ways of thinking to the development of their plans and the execution of their lessons.

Student Engagement is More Than Having Fun

When students are engaged, they are usually responsive as indicated by their excited voices and animated expressions. Students often have fun and truly enjoy themselves as the lesson progresses. In her EduBits blog, researcher and educator Kristin Phillips provides insights that can help teachers move beyond fun to creating situations where high student engagement occurs. In order to surpass the "just fun" factor, she suggests the following practices to keep the flow of the class moving in the right direction:

- Avoid potential confusion and down time by ensuring that students have sufficient background knowledge in order to complete the task at hand.
- Create “conditions of wonder” as students work by encouraging curiosity and/or student questions that may temporarily deviate from the lesson content.
- Devise group interactions where students refine their own thinking by engaging in a free exchange of ideas, especially ones that may not have one clear answer.
- Present information in story form that helps students create mental images, and thus, a deeper connection to content.
- Plan experiences that transcend busy work or “cool” activities to lessons in which students know they are engaging in important topics and developing their skills.

Student Engagement is Multidimensional

The **Glossary of Education Reform**, created by the **Great Schools Partnership**, defines engagement as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.” Additionally, “learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired and learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise disengaged.” Further, the partnership elaborates on the varying “complex forms” that engagement can take by describing the five different types of engagement teachers can consider along with strategies to address each type:

- Intellectual engagement: Teachers can give students a choice of the topic they wish to investigate, a problem or question they can explore, or the different ways they can demonstrate what they have learned.
- Emotional engagement: Teachers can employ a wide variety of strategies that elicit positive student emotions, promote a secure learning environment, minimize negative behaviors and eventually lead to academic success.
- Behavioral engagement: Teachers can establish routines or use cues to help students stay on task; they can also break up potential monotony by having students work in groups or move about the classroom to complete tasks.
- Social engagement: Teachers can place students in pairs or small groups where they discuss societal issues, present their work to their peers, or engage in friendly competition.
- Cultural engagement: Teachers can proactively make students from different cultures feel welcomed, valued and safe; as well they can plan learning experiences that “reduce feelings of confusion, alienation, disconnection, or exclusion.”

Student Engagement and Student Entertainment Are Not Synonymous

Although we want to stimulate student immersion, fascination, and even enthrallment in our lessons, a YouTube clip I recently viewed contrasted the difference between entertainment and engagement. It is an important distinction to make especially when we consider the outcomes we want to achieve for our engagement. The contrast is illustrated below:

Entertainment

Passive
 For enjoyment
 Short-lived
 Doesn't require relevance
 Escape from problems
 Using the creativity of others

Engagement

Active
 For learning
 Long-term results
 Meaningful and applicable
 Solving problems
 Using the creativity of the learner

Student Engagement Involves Activity and Ownership

Mike Schmoker, in his book *Results Now*, makes a strong case for the importance of active learning. He states, “If true learning is to occur, then students have to be at the very least participants in the process, and not merely products.” He distinguishes between teacher-directed learning and student-directed learning both of which may occur in a typical lesson. In his many classroom observations, Schmoker notes that although teachers may be working very hard to maintain student attention and engagement, “if a teacher wants to increase student engagement, then the teacher needs to:

- Ask students to do something with the knowledge and skills they have learned.
- Break up the lecture with learning activities.
- Let them practice.
- Get them moving.
- Get them talking.
- Make it so engaging that it will be difficult for students not to participate.”

Schmoker realizes that establishing such learning environments is a bit “risky,” but he encourages us to “keep trying, improving, and enhancing until we get it right.”

Student Engagement Results From a Repertoire of Strategies and Ideas

In order for teachers to establish and maintain environments in which students are truly engaged, they must develop a repository of strategies/ideas from which they can choose to plan learning activities. Just ASK, in our publications and workshops, has always been committed to the importance of establishing learning-centered classrooms. An excellent resource is Paula Rutherford’s *Active Learning and Engagement Strategies* which includes an array of over 60 strategies and exemplars teachers can employ. In her Just ASK e-newsletter *Making the Common Core Come Alive!*, available in the online **Just ASK Resource Center**, elementary principal Heather Clayton provides detailed insights about practices that involve students actively in their learning. In past issues available in the online library, Heather has addressed promoting a classroom culture for thinking, encouraging creativity in students, conducting productive class discussions, the importance of student reflection, the power of Socratic Seminars, teaching students the art of argumentation, and the use of RtI (Response to Intervention) to provide effective instruction for students who are struggling to learn. A third Just ASK resource is the *Just for the ASKing!* e-newsletter library which includes issues that address unlocking potential, fostering student resilience, engaging learning experiences, making 21st century skills come live, and closing the opportunity gap.

Student Engagement Requires Careful Planning

The teacher described in the opening paragraph fully understands that learning will not occur unless students are invested. They may cooperate for the moment so they can “pass the test” but learning will not last if students are not truly engaged. As the teacher made her plans, questions she might ask herself are:

- Surprise them with an introductory attention-getter
- Use props such as costumes, unusual materials, or creative use of technology
- Pose an intriguing question to get students thinking
- Connect the content to the world beyond the classroom
- Involve students in group work where they will discuss, reach conclusions, answer, or create products
- Have students move around the classroom in a purposeful, content-related activity
- Monitor the work of student groups by asking them thought-provoking questions and providing feedback on their work to date
- Ask students to read and react to a relevant and timely article
- At the end of class, direct students to complete a brief writing assignment summarizing what they had learned during the class
- Have students form an opinion based on data and present their findings to their group

As student engagement thrives and student learning improves, teachers will realize the satisfaction that their hard work and deliberate planning can deliver. How exciting, and even enthralling, that sense of accomplishment can be. Not only will the classroom be a place full of excitement and enthusiasm, but the teacher will be able to point to concrete evidence of student learning and achievement.

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