

8 Ways to Increase the Engagement in Your Classroom

Even on the very best of days we have a variety of learners with various levels of engagement in our classrooms. We may find a student who notices each tick of the clock and agonizes over every second. This type of student may comply with our instructions about the day's learning experiences, but frequently asks, "Is this for a grade?," "Is this going to be on the test?," and "What do I need to do to get this right?" This learner appears to have no interest in any tasks or assignments beyond getting them completed.

On the other hand, we may find a student who thinks deeply about the content, mentally representing the concepts in his or her mind, finding patterns with the concept, and experiencing pleasure in the new learning. Engagement is not a yes or no, up or down, in or out concept. Engagement falls along a continuum, just like the two learners described above. Learners' levels of engagement fluctuate from day to day, class to class, and even minute to minute, requiring constant monitoring and adjusting of the learning environment by the teacher. So, what exactly are we monitoring and what adjusting is needed in our classrooms?

Types of Engagement

First, let's look at how students engage in the learning. There are three types of engagement: emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Marks, 2000; Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008; Skinner, Kinderman, & Furrer, 2009). Within a given classroom, on any given day, the levels of engagement for each individual student fluctuate across these three types.

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Emotional engagement	<p>This type of engagement relates to how the student feels both in general and about the learning.</p> <p>For example, the learner feels emotionally safe in the classroom. The learner is vested in the content, lesson, or activity. He or she has bought into what is happening in the classroom and thus feels some connection to the learning.</p>
Cognitive engagement	<p>This type of engagement relates to what the learner is thinking about in the classroom. This type of engagement heavily depends on the specific strategy, task, or activity developed by the teacher.</p> <p>Ideally, the learner is thinking about the content, lesson, or</p>

activity and not something outside of the classroom.

This type of engagement refers to the actions of the student. What is the student doing? This is the most observable type of engagement.

Behavioral engagement

For example, the learner is completing the task or activity in the way it was designed by the teacher compared to a student that is off task.

As it turns out, engagement follows a hierarchy: emotional, cognitive, and then behavioral.

Emotional Engagement

First, learners must emotionally engage in the day's learning. How a student feels is real; it is the link to how they think! If a learner is not emotionally engaged because of events outside of school, an issue on the school bus or in the hallway, or because of something we said to them as they entered the classroom, we will be challenged to get them to think about the Newton's Laws of Motion, Manifest Destiny, Linear Equations, or the Elements of Writing Poetry. Instead, learners will slip into "survival mode" – their minds will focus on just getting it done or getting to the end of the task or school day. For example, if I am not emotionally engaged in analyzing a specific poem in senior English, I am not going to think about how the elements of poetry as much as, "Just tell me what I need to do to get this done."

Cognitive and Behavioral Engagement

When we are emotionally engaged in something, we are much more likely to think about it. This is cognitive engagement. Research into how we learn points out that we only remember what we think about (see Almarode & Miller, 2017). Therefore, getting learners to engage cognitively in their learning is paramount. Cognitive engagement, or thinking about something, moves us to action. If I am thinking about concepts or ideas, I am much more likely to take action. For example, if I am actively thinking about how landforms influence weather patterns across the globe, I am more likely to complete a task or activity related to the content. This is behavioral engagement. As classroom teachers, our jobs are to constantly monitor each level of engagement so that we can make adjustments when we find our learners slipping into disengagement.

So, what adjustments can we make to increase the level of engagement in our classrooms or specific content? In other words, how could you self-assess the likelihood that the days learning will be emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaging? In 2015, Antonetti and Garver published *17,000 Classroom Visits Can't Be Wrong*. In that book, they reported on data from, you guessed it, over 17,000 classroom walk-throughs. Embedded in the data were eight features of classroom tasks, activities, and strategies that were associated with sustained engagement. As learners fluctuate in their levels of engagement, we can make adjustments in these eight areas to re-engage those learners that have waned in their engagement, as well as sustain the engagement of other learners before they disengage.

Let us look at these eight characteristics:

1. Provide More Opportunities for Personal Response:

Does the student have the opportunity to bring his or her own personal experiences to the learning experience? Examples include any strategy or learning experience that invites learners to bring their own background, interests, or expertise to the conversation such as providing learners with the option to create their own analogies or metaphors, allowing learners to select how they will share their responses to a question (e.g., writing, drawing, speaking, etc.), or letting learners select the context in which a concept is explored (e.g., selection of a habitat, constellation, simple machine, or variables for an independent experiment). These examples have one thing in common: They allow learners to personalize their responses to meet their background, interests, or expertise.

2. Make Sure There Are Clear and Modeled Expectations:

Does the learner have a clear understanding of what success looks like? This characteristic refers to clear learning intentions, success criteria, rubrics, and examples. Do your learners know what success looks like, or are they blindly hoping to hit the end target that you have in mind for them?

3. Create a Sense of Audience:

Does the learner have a sense that this work matters to someone other than the teacher and the grade book? Tasks that have a sense of audience are those tasks that mean something to individuals beyond the teacher. Sense of audience can be established by cooperative learning or group work where individual members have specific roles, as in a jigsaw. Other examples include community-based projects or service projects that contribute to the local, school, or classroom community (e.g., conservation projects).

4. Increase the Levels of Social Interaction:

Does the learner have opportunities to socially interact with his or her peers? Although this characteristic speaks for itself, no pun intended, the value cannot be overstated. Providing learners with opportunities to talk about their learning and interact with their peers supports their meaning making and development of conceptual understanding.

5. Ensure Emotional Safety:

Does the learner feel safe in asking questions or making mistakes? To be blunt, if learners feel threatened in your classroom, they will not engage. Preservation of self takes precedence over the development of wave models to explain the movement of objects.

6. Offer More Choice:

Does the learner have choices in how he or she accesses the learning? As learners engage in content and process skills, we should offer choices around who they work with, what materials and manipulatives are available, and what learning strategies they can use. In addition, we should offer them multiple ways to show us what they know about the content and process in science.

7. Utilize Novelty:

Does the learner experience the learning from a new or unique perspective? Learners do not pay attention to boring things. How can we present content in a way that captures their attention? Remember, we don't pay attention to boring things. Examples of this characteristic include discrepant events, demonstrations, or games and puzzles.

8. Make the Learning Authentic:

Does the learner experience an authentic learning experience, or is the experience sterile and unrealistic (e.g., a worksheet versus problem-solving scenario)? For example, when working with habitats, are learners engaged in a task that requires them to create an imaginary animal and the habitat in which it would survive? This is not an authentic task and will not engage learners in relevant content. Instead, we can offer them a scenario around animals on the verge of extinction and have them address the changes to their habitat that would possibly prevent them from going extinct. Authentic!

As each of us strives to foster, nurture, and sustain learner engagement, we have to keep two main points in mind:

1. Engagement is a multi-dimensional idea that requires us to monitor learners emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement.
2. To sustain engagement, we have constantly monitor and be prepared to adjust the learning environment (e.g. the eight characteristics).

Engaging students in the essential knowledge, skills, and understandings is necessary for successful learning.

References

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