



So, if a book is not read, is it still a good book? If a doctor's advice is not followed, is it still good advice?

Design Lessons for Active Engagement

One of the most consistent predictors of student learning is the degree to which students are actively engaged in the teacher's lesson. It makes sense, even to the non-educator, that an inspired lesson never produces the intended result without an inspired response. As the saying goes, "It takes two to tango."

This type of interdependence is not at all unique to education. A best-selling author needs devoted readers or she won't be a best-selling author for long. A top chef must have patrons at his restaurant to delight in his creations. The doctor who can persuade patients to take their medicine will obtain better results.

So, if a book is not read, is it still a good book? If a doctor's advice is not followed, is it still good advice? In a pure sense, the answer is probably yes to both these questions. But in a practical sense, one has to wonder- what's the point? There is a sense of sad incompleteness when a good work, because of a lack of engagement, produces little or no result. Perhaps this is why our mothers demanded that we eat all the food on our plates. She said, "Children are starving in Ethiopia." I suspect what she meant was, "I invested a good bit of time and talent into the making of this meal. It would be a shame to waste it."

An observation... The most successful teachers tend to worry about both sides of this equation. Less effective teachers tend to worry about the side of the equation they can control- their side. Ineffective teachers tend not to worry much at all.

Here are some practical tips and insights for promoting active engagement:

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But, you can salt the oats!" It's true. One human being cannot force another human being to engage in anything. Human beings have free will. But teachers can greatly increase the probability that students will engage. Increasing engagement is a matter of influence and probability, not of insistence and certainty. Effective teachers try a variety of methods keeping an eye on the efficacy of each approach. They shoot for improved engagement, not perfect engagement.

Developing
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teacher



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These notes are supplements to "The Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory." The SOCL is a job-embedded professional development experience that grows expertise in classroom observation and teacher coaching.



The advantage of overt engagement is that it increases the probability that students will engage by making the engagement or the non-engagement visible.

Don't just invite engagement, plan for it. Teachers should plan their engagement strategies right along with their instructional strategies. A teacher might think... from 10:00 a.m. till 10:15 a.m. this morning I want to review/rehearse for the upcoming quiz by asking students sample questions and giving them some additional practice at answering. And also think... I'll do this by posing a question to the whole class, asking students to pause 15 seconds to think, then providing 15 more seconds for each student to write their answer on their mini white boards, then I'll say "show me." The first thought was an instructional plan, the second thought was an engagement plan.

Engagement can be overt, covert, or a combination of the two. Overt engagement produces a work product that can be verified—the teacher can see it, hear it, touch it, taste it, or smell it. The art teacher says to her class, "I want you to hold up your drawing and point to your horizon line." The results here are visible. Students could decide not to hold up their drawings, but it would be obvious and evident to the teacher. Covert engagement produces a work product that is internal, mental, or hidden, such that it can not be verified with certainty. The language arts teacher is reading a passage from a novel and asks students to imagine a scene. "Can you smell the wood fire burning? Is the wind in your face or at your back?" Students have their eyes closed and seem to be imagining something. The work is not verifiable, however. A student could choose not to engage and remain undiscovered. Overt engagement drives learning and so does covert engagement. Engagement of either type is positive and productive. The advantage of overt engagement is that it increases the probability that students will engage by making the engagement or the non-engagement visible. Not all engagement can be overt, but a healthy combination of overt and covert can greatly increase the probability of both types of engagement.

Engagement can be designed to be either mandatory or optional. Mandatory engagement requires overt responses mostly. The students' level of engagement is increased through an instructional design that elicits overt responses. Mandatory engagement is a function of the teacher's design for engagement and does not rely too much on the students' cooperation or motivation. Optional engagement provides an opportunity for students to engage, but stops short of asking them to do so overtly.

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Often the difference between a high-engagement and a low-engagement approach is very slight- just a few words or a bit of timing.

Optional engagement requires motivation and inspiration. Optional engagement leaves the moment to moment engagement decisions in the hands of individual students with little visibility or accountability. Therefore, if the teacher desires high engagement, it is necessary to accompany the instruction with a good deal of enthusiasm, motivation, or even a bit of entertainment. Mandatory engagement, on the other hand, relies on an underlying instructional design that encourages engagement through visibility and group accountability.

A simple questioning strategy... Instead of asking, "Robin, what state is just north of California?" A teacher might simply change the question structure to "What state is just north of California... (pause)... Robin?" This gives the opportunity for a bit of covert engagement from the rest of the class before Robin makes an overt response.

A Summary...

Instruction and engagement are interdependent.

Both overt and covert engagement are valuable and productive.

Mandatory engagement increases the probability of engagement through design. This puts a premium on the teacher's instructional design skill.

Optional engagement provides opportunities for engagement, but without visibility or accountability. This puts a premium on the teacher's ability to inspire and motivate.

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