

Are Your Students Engaged? Don't Be So Sure

By David Price

It might be time we re-thought student engagement. Are we measuring the right things? Are we taking disengagement seriously enough? January is a time for resolutions. Perhaps educators, in 2014, need to resolve to better understand student engagement, challenge the myths around it, and make it a higher priority in their relationships with students.

Let's deal with the issue of the importance of engagement first. A [recent longitudinal study](#) of Australian students has published conclusions that every government minister for education should heed. Tracking students over a 20-year period, researchers found that the more children felt connected to their school community and felt engaged (rather than bored), the greater their likelihood of achieving a higher educational qualification and going on to a professional or managerial career, over and above their academic attainment or socio-economic background. In other words, an engaged child from a low socio-economic background will have better opportunities in life than a disengaged child from a more privileged background. This is a crucial message for ministers grappling with the inequality gap.

But for these findings to translate into actions, we have to re-think what we mean by engagement. For too long we have confused engagement with compliance or, worse still, "fun." This confusion has led to a number of myths distorting how we act, and what we look for, in the classroom.

Myth #1: "I can see when my students are engaged."

Don't be so sure. Those who have switched off are often only the visible tip of the disengagement iceberg. The ones below the surface could be "invisibly disengaged" — complying but not engaging. A great empathetic principal once told me of her shock in discovering that one of her best students (in terms of behavior and achievement) had been bored every day in school.

"But why didn't any of your teachers spot this?" she asked.

He replied, "I learned how to fall asleep with my eyes open."

Students are learning to modify their behavior in class so that they appear to be engaged while, in reality, they've intellectually checked-out.

Myth #2 : "They must be engaged — look at their test scores!"

In a culture driven by test results, it's understandable that teachers should assume that students must be engaged when their grades improve. But this culture has given rise to a relatively new phenomenon: the disengaged achiever. I speak from personal experience, being the father of two bright sons who got good high school grades, but they reasoned that

the control and direction over their learning that they sought was best achieved by leaving formal education and continuing to learn socially, outside school.

Myth #3 : “They must be engaged — they’re having fun.”

The wise-cracking, charismatic teacher might look great in the movies, but that doesn’t always lead to deep student engagement. Humor is important, of course, but students need intellectual stretch — shallow engagement isn’t enough. Seymour Papert coined the phrase “hard fun” to describe learning activities that absorb and challenge students, because they have rigor, relevance and stretch.

So, if we recalibrate what we mean by deeper, more challenging, forms of engagement how do we achieve it? Current research suggests that there’s no single magic ingredient. [Another important study](#), published at the end of 2013 by University of Pennsylvania and University of Michigan, indicates that success is likely to be found in combining a number of motivators: agency, choice, purpose and relevance:

“Opportunities for decision making or freedom of action are less important than the extent to which the decision making and action opportunities available reflect personal goals, interests, or values.”

The revered Indian philosopher and educator, Sri Aurobindo, knew a thing or two about engagement. His three principles for learning still serve as an important guide in designing engaging learning:

- Nothing can be “taught” — engagement precedes learning, so students need to actively buy in to their learning, in order to bring discretionary activity to the process (that is, above and beyond the required outcomes)
- The mind must be consulted in its own growth. Activities need to personally matter to students, tapping in to their values and passions.
- Work from the near to the far. Make activities relevant to the world students inhabit, but build in intellectual stretch to take them beyond their cognitive “comfort zone.”

So, we know engagement can’t be done to students; we are realizing its importance in improving the life-chances of some of our poorer students; we now know it’s a lot more than just compliance.

Our challenge, in 2014 is this: Can we become designers of learning, rather than deliverers of worksheets? Can we create opportunities for learning which simultaneously inspire, challenge and deepen students’ innate love of learning?

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