

Engagement In Learning: Finding The Depth Beyond Diligence

by Bruce Beirsto¹

In order to develop the deep understandings, lifelong skills and personal dispositions that they will require to thrive in the complex, fast-paced, pluralistic and increasingly interdependent modern world, students must be actively engaged in their learning. Students should be sufficiently engaged in learning to look for the meaning that lies beyond the information they receive and strive to connect what they are learning to what they already know so as to achieve a harmonious integration. Mere compliance, no matter how diligent, is no longer sufficient to enable them to fully grasp, find fulfillment in, and make a contribution to, the world as it is now and will be in the foreseeable future. Therefore, we must find ways to better stimulate and deepen students' engagement, and this quest begins with understanding exactly what is meant by "engagement in learning."

Conceptualizing Engagement

Engagement can be thought of in terms of what a teacher does to students—to engage someone is to occupy the person's attention or efforts. Alternatively, it can be thought of in terms of students' experience—to be engaged is to become involved, interested or engrossed. These two senses of engagement parallel the notions of teaching and learning, the latter being the objective and the former merely the means. This is sometimes overlooked when people talk about "engaging activities" such as allowing for student choice, using technology or employing problem-based learning activities. Such strategies may well increase on-task behaviour, but that does not automatically imply engagement, which requires a commitment by students. Thus, when seeking to understand engagement it is best to focus on the students' perspective in terms of the nature and degree of commitment they feel. This emphasis on the students' personal experience is consistent with the etymology of the word—coming from the French, *engagé*, which is to make a pledge or be committed to something; in this case, their own learning.

Students may engage with, or be committed to, their learning to varying degrees. They may simply comply with direction and complete their assigned work, or they may also take a personal interest in it. That interest may lead to an appreciation of the value and relevance of the topic, which may cause them to seek a personally fulfilling level of mastery beyond what is strictly required to complete the assigned task. In some cases the learning may change not only their understanding but also their personal perspective on, and assumptions about, the topic, and possibly even their more general worldview. Therefore, engagement should be discussed not merely in terms of its presence or absence but in terms of its degree and quality.

Doug Willms notes in his discussion of PISA data that engagement has not only behavioural aspects, such as attendance and completion of work, but also psychological aspects, which he describes as "a *disposition* towards learning, working with others and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students' feelings that they belong at school, and in their

¹ This conception has benefitted from an unpublished article on student engagement by Roland Case, Stefan Stipp and Garfield Gini-Newman of The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC²), and from discussion with Roland Case.

participation in school activities.”² Building on this distinction, the Canadian Education Association defines social, academic and intellectual forms of engagement respectively as “meaningful participation in the life of the school,” “active participation in the requirements for school success,” and “serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning.”³

This expanded conception enables a more nuanced consideration of how engagement can be stimulated and supported. It also reminds us that the quest for engagement is not just a matter of finding ways to ensure that all students “do a good job” by working diligently to fulfill others’ expectations of them and thus achieve academic success, but rather motivating them to strive for an understanding of important concepts and issues within the curriculum for reasons of personal integration and satisfaction. Hard working students who complete all tasks well and strive sincerely for “success in school” may be simply filling their heads without changing their minds.

The following model further parses the concept of engagement by proposing four distinct levels that elaborate on the academic and intellectual dimensions previously described by CEA. Although social engagement in school life outside of the classroom is a significant factor in student learning, it is not included in this model because the purpose of the model is to enrich discussion of ways in which instruction can stimulate deeper engagement in the curriculum.

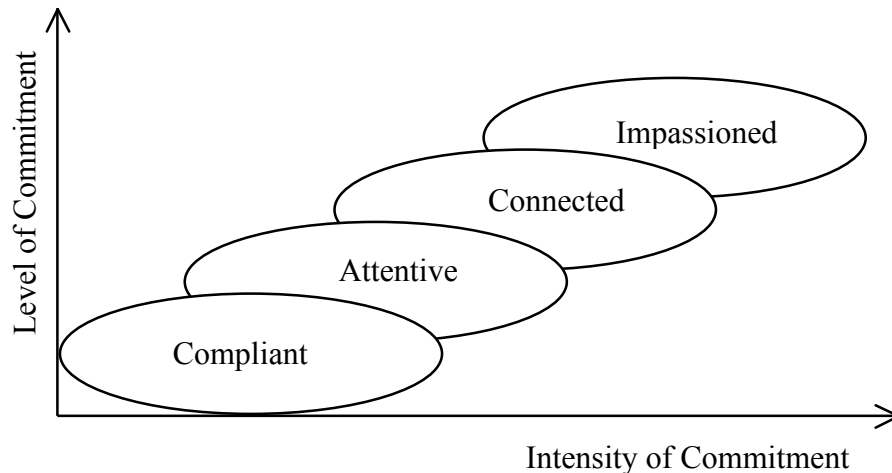


Figure 1: Types of Engagement

In Figure 1, the vertical axis represents increasing levels of personal commitment to learning as four overlapping types of engagement: Compliant, Attentive, Connected and Impassioned.⁴ The four levels of engagement proposed in this model represent qualitatively distinct stages but they

² PISA is the Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted with 15-year-olds in 65 countries by the OECD. For Dr. Willms’ discussion of the results, see <http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pdf/0306.pdf>.

³ See http://cea-ace.ca/media/en/WDYDIST_Concept_EN.pdf.

⁴ Since non-compliance may be thought of as *dis*-engagement rather than a type of engagement, it is not represented. However, it should not be ignored. Non-compliance (whether expressed as apathy or antipathy) arises from a student’s perception of shortcomings in the learning environment and may both help to understand both that particular student’s needs and how to improve things for other students.

are part of a continuum of engagement, much like the colours of the rainbow are distinct aspects of a continuous spectrum. The transitions are gradual rather than discrete and any particular lesson may include all four types of engagement by students.

Each type of engagement may exist at varying levels of intensity as represented on the horizontal axis, from perfunctory compliance to passionate inquiry. The distinction between the intensity and level of engagement is fundamental. Although, teachers and parents are generally pleased when students do their work carefully, strive to achieve good marks and seem to be putting a genuine effort into their school work, this *intense* engagement should not be confused with *deep* engagement. The former is characteristic of a good student and the latter of a powerful learner.

This conceptualization is not derived from structured research but rather proposed on the basis of personal experience, and is not presented as an objective fact but as a potentially useful model that can stimulate and support discussion about ways to improve student engagement. Other conceptualizations are possible and may also be useful. Thus, the reader is invited to critique and embellish or amend this model as deemed necessary or found to be helpful.⁵

In its most basic form, engagement in learning involves participation in and completion of assigned tasks. This compliance may range from reluctant to willing and is characterized by the fact that the teacher or the instructional materials define expectations and the student follows. If the student develops a personal interest in the topic or activity, engagement may become actively attentive, the student may begin to provide personal impulse to the learning based on that interest and go beyond the specific direction and expectations of the teacher. Here too, this attentive level of engagement may range from mild to intense, but it tends to be volatile and its continuation may depend largely on the instructional materials and the teacher's behaviours. Continually having to stoke student interest can be a tiring business for teachers and can result in students expecting to be entertained, potentially diverting teachers from pedagogy to performance. This serves neither teacher nor student well. Thus, attentive engagement is best driven by compelling learning activities rather than the teacher's charisma.

Attentive engagement can lead to significant learning, but there is an upper limit unless the learning activities become meaningful to the student in such a way that she begins to appreciate the connection and importance of the learning for her personally and/or for the world at large. When that connection is made, the level of engagement begins to move beyond immediate interest to a more durable and significant form and the student is liable to assume increased responsibility for her learning and thus to depend less on the teacher for motivation, direction and scaffolding.

Connected engagement is more intense and can lead to deeper learning than attentive engagement because it is personally meaningful to the student and it may not be entirely circumscribed by the learning activities designed by the teacher, but only when the student begins to be motivated by internal interests and desires, and fulfilled by the experience of learning itself rather than by the expectations or praise of others, does impassioned and self-sustaining engagement take hold.

⁵ For example, the Level of Commitment axis might alternatively be seen as an axis of motivation running from external to internal, with equal weight at approximately the point of transition to connected engagement.

Hopefully, all students will at times be impassioned by their learning, but it is neither necessary nor realistic to assume that such full engagement is always achievable. If school life is such that periods of reluctant compliance are rare, attentive engagement is the norm and connected engagement is regularly experienced then overall student satisfaction and achievement will probably be high. Schools should, however, also help individual students to both discover and develop their personal interests and talents in the course of a school career so that they become passionately engaged in some learning at some times. Finding areas of personal passion is important not only to their developing sense of identity, but also to creating an appetite, and the skills and dispositions, for lifelong learning. The more often this occurs, the better, but each student's passion will be different and no student will be passionately engaged in everything.

Stimulating Engagement

Increased engagement cannot be imposed through something a teacher does *to*, or even *for*, a student. It is only achieved when there is a partnership *with* the student, and between students, so that learning is co-constructed. This partnership is enabled by supportive relationships, enabling resources, stimulating opportunities and helpful guidance.⁶

Respectful, supportive relationships between the students in a class and between the students and their teacher provide the safety and encouragement without which students are unlikely to take the necessary intellectual and emotional risks to learn. Physical resources, but more so intellectual resources (e.g., instruction in thinking, communication and self-regulatory skills), enable this learning to occur. Generally speaking, with the exception of instruction in self-regulatory skills, these foundational elements are in place in Canadian classrooms. We will focus our attention, therefore, on the stimulating opportunities and helpful guidance that breathe life into the learning potential that they provide.

Membership in a supportive classroom community and access to necessary physical and intellectual resources are sufficient for most students to comply with assigned tasks, and probably to be relatively willing about it. In fact, according to Csíkszentmihályi, even at this base level of engagement students can be positively energized by the experience of “flow” if they are given very clear instructions, the degree of challenge in activities is well matched to their skill level, and they receive immediate, informative feedback.⁷

However, teachers know that generally speaking they must also pique student interest in order to sustain their compliance and stimulate active attention. Most have an extensive personal repertoire of strategies for doing so, ranging from debates to discrepant events and contests to community projects. Students' interest increases when they have some influence over and choice within learning activities and they appreciate, and are motivated by, being allowed to use different methods to acquire information and demonstrate what they know.⁸

⁶ The notion that relationships, resources, activities and guidance are the critical factors in a healthy learning environment is based on the work of The Critical Thinking Consortium, which originated in British Columbia and has developed its model working with educators across Canada, in the United States, Britain, Israel and India.

⁷ Csíkszentmihályi, Mihaly (1990). *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

⁸ This is often referred to as a Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and was first defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990's to support inclusive education. See <http://www.cast.org/>.

There is a well-tilled field of effective practices that promote attentive engagement and are widely, if not universally, employed. There is, however, no such thing as “best practice” since what works well in one context may be less effective in another, and thus the quest for engagement involves constant adaptation and innovation more than the perfection of a particular technique. Teacher professionalism lies in the artful selection and skillful use of effective instructional practices that are well-matched to student needs and abilities.

More intense engagement is beneficial but it will not automatically lead to deeper engagement. Willing compliance only changes to attentive engagement when personal interest emerges and intense interest only extends into connected engagement when students appreciate the significance of what they are learning so that they move from being curious about it to also caring about it.⁹ This can happen spontaneously in some cases, but the chances are much increased if teachers recognize that it is important for students to care about their learning and thus help them to understand why they should. Interestingly, students in the Canadian Education Association (CEA) *What Did You Do In School Today* study commented that they did not want their teachers to make the work easier, they wanted them to make it more meaningful.¹⁰

Finding meaning in one’s learning (i.e., being connected) requires it to be relevant, but there is much more to it. Not all that is relevant is important and some relevant things are far from important. Thus, teachers need to help students appreciate the significance that lies beyond relevance. Students may also be inclined to find learning meaningful if there is a strong rapport with their teacher or the student is anxious to satisfy parental expectations, but these and other external motivations will also not result in connected engagement. Specific attention by the teacher to explaining the importance and implications of what is being learned is required. “You will thank me later,” won’t do as an explanation of why students should care about what they are learning. To stimulate connected levels of engagement, teachers need to help students discover not only the significance of individual learning activities but also the purpose and import of their studies as a whole.

The transition to impassioned engagement is the most complex and idiosyncratic. It depends upon the student finding both pleasure and fulfillment within the learning, even when it is arduous and occasionally frustrating. The teacher may introduce the student to learning opportunities, provide encouragement and acknowledge achievement, but it is a purely personal matter whether the student finds joy in the particular endeavour. Whereas it is reasonable to aspire to bring all students to a connected form of engagement on a regular basis, they will probably experience impassioned engagement less often and those occasions will be different for each student.

Of course, students are unlikely to find every lesson deeply meaningful or personally fulfilling. Some knowledge just has to be acquired and some skills just have to be practiced. However, a teacher can embed foundational knowledge acquisition and basic skill development within a more meaningful context and/or authentic task. When the mundane aspects of learning occur for

⁹ *Significance* may not be the correct idea here. It may be that what makes students care is their perception of the *possibilities* that exist for them to learn about, participate in and contribute to the world around them.

¹⁰ See http://cea-ace.ca/media/en/WDYDIST_National_Report_EN.pdf p. 5.

a clear purpose and are seen to contribute to increased capacity for more compelling inquiries, they acquire significance and therefore become more engaging.

Currently, there is much discussion about the potential for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to improve student engagement. Undoubtedly there is such potential. Unfortunately, beyond the general premise that it will stimulate student interest, or perhaps encourage them to be “more involved,” seldom is there any detailed explanation of what specific educational benefits ICT will provide or how and why it will engage students more deeply. It is beyond the scope of this article to enumerate the great potential that ICT could offer, but if it is used simply to entice students through its popularity within youth culture and ‘gee-whiz’ technical elements then not only is that benefit liable to be somewhat unstable but it will be limited to intensifying students’ engagement rather than moving them to deeper engagement.¹¹ Increasing the intensity of student engagement is certainly useful, but it would be a shame to squander the considerably greater potential for ICT to also deepen engagement.

It is crucial when attempting to deepen engagement, that educators awaken students’ personal appreciations and the resulting internal motivation. Carrots and sticks intended to motivate students may increase the intensity of engagement in some cases but will not induce deeper engagement and runs the risk of decreasing intrinsic motivation and thus being detrimental in the long run.

The Canadian Education Association makes the following suggestions about practices that promote engagement.¹²

- Actively build social cohesion in the classroom and employ classroom management techniques that create a trusting, respectful, low-risk environment for students.
- Plan instruction with the specific intention of opening the disciplines to genuine inquiry that will help students to construct understanding in addition to acquiring knowledge.
- Use learning activities that require and instill deep thinking, immerse students in disciplinary inquiry, are connected to the world outside the classroom, have intellectual rigour and involve substantive conversation.
- Use assessment not just to gather data for evaluation but also to help students collect their thoughts, articulate what they have found, and speculate about where they might go next.

¹¹ Employed thoughtfully and strategically, ICT has the potential to allow educators to escape from batch processing and the tyranny of time by developing multi-dimensional models of instruction that permit learning to be personalized to student interests and abilities. This, however, also requires fundamental changes to curriculum and assessment, greater capacity for and inclination to self-regulated learning by the student, and new facilitative approaches to instruction by the teacher. These changes will require explicit, extensive and sustained support. Simply adding ICT to the current methodology will probably have a limited and evanescent effect. A very useful perspective on the potential for ICT can be found at <http://ali.apple.com/acot2/>.

¹² See http://cea-ace.ca/media/en/WDYDIST_National_Report_EN.pdf pp. 33-37.

Classroom practices that follow this advice and involve students in interesting learning activities that are meaningful to them increase the likelihood that they will progress to deeper levels of engagement. As the final recommendation above suggests, the chances are further increased when students have the benefit of helpful guidance. Guidance includes advice that a teacher may provide about a subject, skill or process, but the most useful guidance is formative feedback from well-designed assessment, which has been termed assessment *for* learning to distinguish it from the assessment *of* learning that results in a summative evaluation.

The benefits of empowering feedback are well understood, but one aspect bears restatement—the effect on motivation. This is particularly important because at all levels engagement is determined by the student and reluctance to engage will seriously undermine a teacher’s attempts to encourage it.

Motivation (or forethought) is the pre-decisional part of an action cycle that also includes volition (or follow through and persistence) and reflection (or attribution and meaning making). Through experience of this cycle, students develop a sense of self-efficacy depending upon their degree of success and the factors to which they attribute that success. As much as teachers may provide interesting and potentially meaningful learning experiences for them, the personal decision to engage will also be influenced by students’ internal assessment of the likelihood of success, and this is partly based on their sense of self-efficacy. They decide, generally sub-consciously, about whether to engage with an activity based on a sort of cost-benefit analysis and one of the “costs” to be considered is the likelihood of failure. If a students do not feel that they have a reasonable likelihood of success then they will generally find reasons and ways not to engage, even if the task itself is attractive.

The following recommendations for building confidence in students are based on self-efficacy theory, which holds that the underlying motivators of human action are perceptions of personal control and competence.¹³

- Help students develop their self-perceptions of competence within a content domain. Provide assistance in areas of difficulty, but focus on constructive, encouraging and specific feedback about what students *can* do rather than what they *cannot* do.
- Help students to maintain relatively accurate but high expectations and self-efficacy beliefs, and to avoid the impression of incompetence. Towards this end, use formative assessment frequently to provide descriptive feedback and supportive suggestions, and make much more limited use of summative evaluation and critique.
- Minimize the amount of relative achievement information that is publicly available to students. Do not use comparative evaluation.
- Because students' perceptions of competence develop not just from accurate feedback, but also through actual success on challenging academic tasks, assignments should be relatively challenging but reasonable in terms of the students’ developmental capacity.

¹³ Pintrich, P. & Schunk, D. (1996). *Motivation in education: theory, research and applications*, Chapter 3. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Foster the belief that competence or ability is a changeable, controllable aspect of development rather than a question of innate talent or intelligence. Focus on encouragement rather than praise and stress the merits of effort and persistence.

Well-structured assessment that provides informative feedback and helps students to develop an understanding of, and confidence in, their learning style and abilities is a rising tide that will lift all boats, but it is important to remember that student readiness and aptitude will vary widely. Thus, it is also important to use a Universal Design for Learning¹⁴ and to be sensitive to students' zone of proximal development¹⁵ as each will require forms and degrees of feedback, encouragement and support that are to some extent unique. In order to “enable all learners,”¹⁶ teachers must be aware of and respond to those differences.

Implications for Practice

Learning to recognize and influence levels of engagement involves all aspects of a teacher's work—developing productive classroom relationships, teaching intellectual tools and learning strategies, creating and tailoring rich learning activities that are accessible and suitably challenging for all students, helping students to understand the significance of what they are learning and providing frequent feedback and encouragement that guides and supports that learning.

There is a lot of educational literature, and an even more substantial body of professional practice and wisdom, that can be helpful. Unfortunately, failure to distinguish between the various levels and intensities of engagement has muddied the discussion about what is desired and how it can be achieved. By employing nuanced language such as that introduced in this article, educators can be more focused and productive in sharing their professional practice, questions and insights. If such dialogue is embedded in practice, and ideally in collaborative inquiry about practice, educators will be most likely to experience their own deep learning about student engagement and how to improve it. And, of course, if students themselves can be brought into the inquiry there will be further mutual and reinforcing benefits.

No final or universally applicable prescriptions should be expected to arise since the unique characteristics and needs of individual learners, and groups of learners, will always require the artful use of effective practice in creative ways dictated by the content and context of the learning. Learning to deepen student engagement, like other aspects of a teacher's professionalism, is a career-long process of continuous professional improvement through inquiry, theorizing and praxis.

¹⁴ See <http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html>.

¹⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zone_of_proximal_development for an explanation of this concept. An example is that the CEA's WDYDIST study found that students who lack confidence in their ability to succeed in their studies exhibit dramatically lower levels of engagement in them and somewhat lower levels of engagement in other school activities. Students who are confident in their skills but do not feel challenged are also more likely to experience lower levels engagement in learning and participation in other aspects of school life. (p. 29)

¹⁶ The School Act in British Columbia states that, “the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners,” which is an inclusive intention presumably shared by others.

In addition to critiquing the construct that has been presented and the implications that arise from it, the reader is invited to consider additional questions related to student engagement that this discussion may evoke. For example:

- To what extent must teachers be personally passionate about learning in order to be able to engage students in learning? Does the “synchronicity” of human emotions that Goleman reports have a consequence in the classroom?
- How can both learning activities and resulting understandings be co-constructed with students in order to enable them as lifelong learners and to avoid them becoming passive objects of our attempts to engage them?
- Since it is students’ perceptions and responses that determine the degree of interest and meaning involved in their learning, how can teachers establish a reliable means of hearing the student voice on these matters?
- What might explain the decrease in intellectual engagement after Grade 7 that is reported in CEA’s *What Did You Do In School Today* research? Is this an inevitable characteristic of adolescence or a consequence of the organization and operation of secondary schools?

End