

Increasing Student Engagement

I also remember that, as I grew older, the more I was talked at. When did we somehow decide that as children grow up, they should be less involved in their own learning? Let's be clear on some foundational points.

- 1 Although students can be engaged in reading, reading the text-book (or the worksheet) and answering questions is not necessarily engaging.
- 2 Although students can be engaged in listening, most of what happens during a lecture isn't engagement.
- 3 Although students working together in small groups can be engaging, simply placing them in groups to read silently and answer a question isn't. When one or two students in a group do all the work, that isn't engagement. Small groups don't guarantee engagement—just like large groups don't automatically mean disengagement.

What does it mean to be engaged in learning? In brief, it boils down to what degree students are involved in and participating in the learning process. If I'm actively listening to a discussion, possibly writing down things to help me remember key points, I'm engaged. But if I'm really thinking about the latest video game while nodding so you think I'm paying attention, then I'm not. It really is that simple. Of course, the complexity is dealing with it.

Think for a moment about a slinky. For a slinky to work, you have to use two hands to make it go back and forth. If you hold it in one hand, it just sits there, doing nothing. It doesn't move correctly without both ends working. Similarly, if the teacher is the only one involved in the lesson, then it isn't as effective. The foundation of instructional engagement is involvement by both the teacher and the student.

Rigor Does Not Stand Alone

In order to effectively increase the rigor in your classroom, it is essential to incorporate elements of student motivation and engagement. There is a clear link between motivation and engagement, and when you increase expectations without considering those two factors your students are more likely to fail. If we want to help all our students succeed at high levels, we must tap into their intrinsic motivation by helping them see value in our lessons, provide support for them to be successful, and structure our lessons to ensure high levels of engagement. By doing so, students will respond more positively to the increased expectations. Then their learning will increase.

Demonstrating Learning at High Levels

Characteristics of Demonstrating Learning at High Levels

Finally, in a rigorous classroom, *each student demonstrates learning at high levels*. You might think, "If I provide more challenging lessons that include extra support, won't this last part just happen?" I wish teaching

were that easy. Nothing "just happens." If we want students to show us they understand what they learned at a high level, we also need to design assessments that provide them the opportunity to demonstrate they have truly mastered new content. Although we will more fully address assessment in Chapter 9, I'd like to provide a framework for assessing high levels of rigor here.

Many people use Bloom's Taxonomy as a measure of rigor, and that is a good starting point. But I find that we need to move beyond Bloom's because it is verb-dependent. There are limitations. For example, creating a model of an artificial arm to solve a problem is higher level than creating a get well card for a classmate. But they both involve creation.

Raising Level of Student Ownership

How does ownership increase rigor? By shifting responsibility for learning to students, students take control of their learning, thereby raising the level of content.

What is student ownership? Student ownership is strongly linked to student-centered instruction (SCI). Collins and O'Brien describe SCI:

Student-centered instruction [SCI] is an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. The SCI approach includes such techniques as substituting active learning experiences for lectures, assigning open-ended problems and problems requiring critical or creative thinking that cannot be solved by following text examples, involving students in simulations and role plays, and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. Properly implemented SCI can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught.

(Collins & O'Brien, 2003)

Notice the key facets of that definition.

Key Facets of SCI

- ◆ Students influence instruction
- ◆ Students at center of learning
- ◆ Students learn independently and with others
- ◆ Active learning
- ◆ Increased motivation and understanding

Strategies for Increasing Ownership

There are a variety of ways you can shift ownership of learning to students. First, you will need to shift your role from director of learning to a facilitator. You've likely heard the phrase "Shift from sage on the stage to guide on the side." That's what this entails. It's a change, and one that requires you to give up overall control of the learning. You will need to trust your students, and there are times that is difficult. You may think, "My students can't handle it," or "They will get out of control." First, you are still facilitating learning and are very involved in the learning process, just in a different way. Next, unless students are given opportunities to own their learning, they will never be successful in the process.

Finally, you can promote ownership of learning by asking students to help you design learning. An excellent tool for this is an adaptation of the Know-Want to Know-Learned (K-W-L) model, the K-W-H-L.

<i>K</i> <i>What Do</i> <i>I Know</i>	<i>W</i> <i>What Do</i> <i>I Want to</i> <i>Learn</i>	<i>H</i> <i>How Can We</i> <i>Learn It</i>	<i>L</i> <i>What Did</i> <i>I Learn</i>

Notice the opportunities for ownership. Noting what they want to learn helps, but more importantly, this graphic organizer allows students to identify ways the learning can occur. I observed one teacher who used the process as an introduction to a unit on the Holocaust. The students generated ideas such as bring in a Holocaust survivor to speak to us, see if we can find a World War II veteran to speak, and search the Internet to find blogs or journals about the Holocaust. Their ideas were creative and increased student ownership.