

September 2016



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NEWSLETTER FOR LEWIS & CLARK LAW SCHOOL ADJUNCTS

In this Newsletter:

This issue of the adjunct newsletter offers two articles on increasing student engagement in the classroom. We hope they might provide helpful suggestions as you move into the start of the term.

- *What Does Student Engagement Look Like?*
- *Six Things Faculty Can Do To Promote Student Engagement*

WHAT DOES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Engagement. . .it's another one of those words that's regularly bandied about in higher education. We talk about it like we know what it means and we do, sort of. It's just that when a word or idea is so widely used, thinking about it often stops and that's what I think has happened with engagement.

We know that engagement is an essential part of learning. For years, folks have correctly pointed out that the term "active learning" is redundant. When learning's the game, you've got to be on the field, actively engaged. No sitting on the sidelines. We aren't like plants, if you can stand another metaphor. We don't get much by osmosis, but must instead rely on effortful acquisition for the knowledge and skills we need.

We aspire to get our students engaged because most of them don't come to us that way. Our first (and often default) strategy is participation. We believe if we can just get students talking in class, they'll be engaged. It's that part of our thinking that merits a revisit. In the April issue of [*The Teaching Professor*](#) newsletter, I highlighted research that explores the participation-engagement relationship. It's a complicated, two-study design with most of its eight hypotheses and three research questions confirming this conclusion: "oral participation is not a good indicator of engagement." (Frymier and Houser, p. 99)

The findings do not indicate that participation is a bad thing or that it can't engage students, just that it didn't do so very convincingly for this cross-disciplinary cohort of more than 600. What

the research team found did indicate engagement was something they call “nonverbal attentiveness.” It’s associated with behaviors like frequent eye contact, upright posture, seat location (closer to the front than the back), note taking, and positive facial expressions. In other words, silent students can be engaged and perhaps even more so than some who participate.

We tend to think that either students are engaged or they aren’t. In fact, engagement varies in intensity and duration. It “can be short term and situation specific or long term and stable.” (Fredricks, et. al., p. 61) It can be measured at different levels as well. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) gauges it at an institutional level—the extent to which a large cohort of students is engaged in the experiences that constitute post-secondary education at their institution. Other measures can be used to assess the involvement of an individual student in a course, a program, or at the institution.

In reading more about engagement, I’ve discovered that it’s a multidimensional construct—the academic way of saying it’s composed of parts. Most of the research has focused on three aspects: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement.

- **Behaviorally engaged** students do what students are supposed to do in class. They adhere to the rules and norms, and they display behaviors associated with persistence, concentration, and attention. They may ask questions and contribute during discussions.
- **Emotional engagement** reveals students’ attitudes toward learning. Those attitudes can range from simply liking what they’re doing to deeply valuing the knowledge and skills they are acquiring.
- **Cognitive engagement** involves effort and strategy use. It’s wanting to understand something and being willing to go beyond what’s required in order to accomplish learning goals. Those who are cognitively engaged use strategies associated with deep learning.

Although these parts of engagement can be defined separately, they don’t function that way. They are “dynamically interrelated within the individual.” (Fredricks, et. al., p. 61) Think a fusion of forces directing the student’s learning processes. What’s not yet been sorted out are the relationships between these parts of engagement; how exactly it is they work together. Furthermore, engagement interacts with related aspects of learning, such as motivation and self-efficacy, and those connections are also not well understood.

However, the general consensus is that engagement is “malleable.” It responds to external forces, such as the classroom climate in a course, and that leads us to the question of greatest interest to teachers. What teacher actions or interventions promote more and deeper student engagement?

We’ll work on that question in the next [article], but we’ll do so with a new perspective of what student engagement really means. It’s not all that cut and dried, not the automatic outcome of student interaction, and not an aspect of learning that works in isolation.

References: Frymier, A. B., and Houser, M. L. (2016). The role of oral participation in student engagement. *Communication Education*, 65 (1), 83-104.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., and Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74 (1), 59-109.

This article originally appeared in the June 22, 2016 issue of Faculty Focus. © Magna Publications. Reprinted with permission.

SIX THINGS FACULTY CAN DO TO PROMOTE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

[The previous article] encouraged us to reconsider what student engagement means and entails. Today I'd like to explore just some of the things teachers can do to better promote it. I'm offering six ideas here and encourage you to add to the list.

Redefine participation. Let it include more than verbal comments. Invite students to contribute electronically—with an email or post on the course website—with a question they didn't ask in class, a comment they didn't get to make, or a thought that came to them after class. Remind students that listening is also part of participation! Model and promote good listening skills. "Did you hear what Fredric just said? That's an explanation that belongs in your notes." Let the definition of participation honor silence—and give students the time needed to think about a question and assemble an answer. Maybe it's time to stop grading participation and let students speak because they have something to say.

Cultivate a teacher presence that invites engagement. It starts with being present. This means not just being there physically but also being mentally attentive to what's happening every day and in every interaction. An engaging teaching presence is communicated by nonverbal behaviors that convey confidence, comfort, anticipation, and great expectations. The classroom space, whether it's physical or virtual, is one you share with fellow learners. Move about in it. See who's in class. Smile, extend a greeting, or comment on the weather or a current event. There are lots of different ways you can show that you are present. Your actions will promote student engagement so long as they're genuine and authentic and so long as you are engaged—with the content, with the students, and with the learning.

Devote time to talk about learning—what it entails and why it's important. This is not the same tired old lecture about how this is such a hard course and a certain percentage of students won't make it through. Yes, there's tough content to master, but with effort it can be conquered. It's about your own ongoing love affair with learning. Most students haven't yet fallen in love with learning. They think they like easy learning, memorizing bits of information they can then forget, or getting by doing the bare minimum. Let yours be the class that introduces students to learning that captivates their attention, arouses their curiosity, stretches their minds, and makes them feel accomplished.

Give students a stake in the process. Teachers make all the decisions about learning for students. They decide what students will learn, how they will learn (taking tests, writing papers, etc.), the pace at which they will learn, and the conditions under which they will learn. Teachers

then decide whether students have learned it. Students can be given some control without abrogating responsibilities associated with the teacher. Let students start making small decisions about learning—what topics they want discussed in the exam review session, whether quizzes will count 10% or 20% of their grade, whether the teacher calls on them or they volunteer, whether their final project is a paper or a presentation—and watch what happens to their engagement.

Design authentic assignments and learning experiences. Doing the work of the discipline is more likely to engage students than hearing how the discipline does its work. Try presenting students with a hypothesis and asking them to predict the results or introducing them to the concept of literary criticism and having them critique a reading. Will they do the work of the discipline well? Probably not. They're novices working with difficult content in front of an expert. But making mistakes is how we learn. Furthermore, doing the work of the discipline feels like work that matters—and that motivates engagement.

Use cumulative quizzes, finals, and exams. If you're interested in long-term retention of course content and if you want students to transfer and/or apply knowledge, then their exposure to the material needs to be ongoing. Every time they retrieve what they've learned, that material becomes easier to remember. Students would rather have unit exams. Three weeks of content is easier to manage than six weeks of content. Teachers can help students prepare for cumulative exams by creating activities that require regular reviews of course material, such as challenging them to find something in their notes or opening class with a short review session—not on the content covered in yesterday's class but instead on the content covered last week or the week before. Scheduling regular quizzes can also provide low-stakes opportunities for learning and support the intensive study students will require before a high-stakes exam.

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