



Youth Engagement

Effective Classroom Practice

By Louise Knowles
Youth Launch

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Many educators would agree that one of the fundamental goals of education is to assist our young people in the attainment and development of skills in order to become self-sufficient individuals, ready to take their place in an ever-changing society. Educators, as a group, are extremely dedicated to researching and developing curricula and methods to meet the dynamic and diverse needs of their students and enhance the learning process. For the average teacher, the task of keeping abreast with constantly changing instructional strategies is a daunting one, to say the least. In my thirty years as a teacher in Saskatoon, I have witnessed and jumped aboard my share of “bandwagons”. (This term is understood by most educators as the latest and greatest trend in educational strategy, sure to be the answer to all of our educational woes.) With zealous optimism, I attempted them with my students, hoping that they would indeed turn on the switch, and be just the thing for those students who struggled in class, or whose needs simply were not being addressed by current curricula or instructional methods. I must say, that some were probably very successful, and did indeed enhance student achievement, but others were not as effective. These were either abandoned, or were quickly replaced by the next “bandwagon”. I soon learned that as a teacher, I must not rely solely on the curricula or a particular learning strategy to reach my students. There had to be more to the educational process than that. But, what was it?

We all know that there have always been effective teachers in our schools. They are the ones who share a common denominator, a quality, a characteristic, a skill, which sets them above the rest. They are the teachers who are most easily identified by their students as being their “favourite” teacher, or the teacher who taught them the most, or the teacher who changed their lives in a most positive way. What “bandwagon” did they ride? How were they able to reach their students and have such a terrific impact on their learning and ultimately, on their lives? The answer, I propose, is actually quite simple: these teachers are able to engage their students in the learning process. Therefore, the common denominator is **engagement**. For some teachers, this is an intuitive art, and engaging students in learning is second nature to them. For others, becoming a teacher who understands this relationship is possible, but requires trying and learning some different (not new) approaches. The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of youth engagement in the classroom and in

the school, and suggest what teachers can do to make their students feel more connected, and therefore, be more successful learners. Please do not confuse this with another “bandwagon”. There is nothing really new here, except perhaps a shift in perspective. Effective teachers have always employed the strategies I will outline. This may be a different way of approaching students for some teachers, but certainly, not for all. In these pages I hope to present some basic understandings of engagement, and why it is such an important piece of the educational process puzzle. Without engagement, all the “bandwagons” in the field of education can not possibly be effective.

Why Power in the Classroom Needs to be Shared with the Students

A theory exists that many teachers run their classrooms following an authoritarian model of teacher centered learning in order to achieve maximum student compliance. At least, that’s the theory. These teachers set the rules, the consequences, the rewards and the punishments. They decide what the students will learn, the pace of the class, the assignments, and the evaluations. They determine the classroom climate, communication procedures, and in fact, make all of the most important decisions about learning. This model appears to work, at least on the surface, for the teacher who is then able to instruct large numbers of students with minimum resistance.

But, what are the students really learning? They are learning, according to a recent study (Maryellen Weimer Learner-Centered Teaching, 2002) that they “will not speak in class unless called upon...want and need teachers who tell them exactly what to do... (and that) education is “done to them” (and) it usually involves discomfort.” (Weimer)

“The research of those who look at Feminist theories of development and the development of Self-Regulated Learners suggest:

- Motivation, Confidence and Enthusiasm are adversely affected when teachers control the process through and by which students learn.
- Control is so much a part of us as teachers we don’t see the level of control we have taken.” (Doyle)

This writer goes on to suggest that teachers often take control because of the strongly held belief that they can’t trust students to “make decisions about learning”. “They lack the intelligence... (and) do not care about learning....we seek control because teaching makes us vulnerable-we know students can choose to ignore our authority.” (Doyle)

From this authoritarian, top-down model of teachers, many students are learning to be passive, spoon-fed learners, to just do the minimum required, to not ask questions, to “jump the hoops”, and then to retain the knowledge just long enough to regurgitate it all on the test. The good news is that today this is not seen as effective practice.

Principle #9 in Best Practices: Powerful Tools for Learning by Gini Shimabukuro, Ed.D.

(<http://www.peterli.com/archive/tct/701.shtm>) states “Classrooms can become more effective when procedures are DEMOCRATIC.” The classroom should be seen as a community of learners. Students need to be shown how to exercise choice in decision-making, they need to be asked their opinions on things that affect them, they need to feel that their voice matters, they need to feel like they belong and that they are safe and valued.

The Teacher-Student Relationship

The relationship between the teacher and the student has a critical impact on student learning. Teachers who operate as allies to their students and respect them, more easily connect and bond with them thus encouraging a sense of belonging and a spirit of co-operation. Teachers would do well to adopt an attitude of a partner in the classroom learning community, with their students, and share power with them. This can be done in ways that maintain classroom order, but also provide the students with a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning.

One way to begin is to create a classroom atmosphere that is warm, friendly, respectful and welcoming to each and every student. Find out who is in your classroom; get to know your students on an individual basis. At the beginning of the term, instead of giving the students a list of rules, create a list of guidelines with them, so they feel that they have ownership in setting the tone for the classroom. Facilitate a class discussion about your role as the teacher and their role as students with them. Use the “My job as your teacher is...” “Your job as the student is...” framework to create this list of responsibilities and expectations. This will help to set the tone for the classroom as one that is respectful of the students’ needs and one that helps to foster responsibility for each person’s behaviour. If and when problems arise, refer them to the guidelines that were established and agreed to by every member of the class.

Building a personal relationship or connection with each of your students is vital to them feeling engaged and that they belong. It is very important that you find out who is in your classroom, and you need to take the time to do this. It is also important that they learn who you are as a person, and not just as the

teacher. It is also important to let them know you have high expectations of them, are there to support them, to help them learn, develop their skills, become lifelong learners, and be effective citizens. Most of our students are interested in the same things. Have a dialogue with them to learn what their goals are as students. Most young people want to succeed just as much as we want them to.

An obstacle that seems to stand in the way of teachers taking the time to really get to know their students as individuals is the ever-demanding curriculum. One way of dealing with this is to have teachers sit down with the other teachers in their departments and decide what are the “big ideas” in the curriculum they must cover in a semester, as it is not realistically possible to teach all of it. This will free the teacher to focus more on student learning instead of rushing through material just to say that the entire course has been covered. We, as teachers, need to be reminded that we are teaching **students** and not courses.

Practical Ways to Engage Students

Assuming that as a teacher, you are interested in empowering your students and you also want to try to engage them more in their learning, what are some practical, yet engaging strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms? Here are a few suggestions:

- Facilitate regular classroom meetings during which, students can voice their opinions on issues that are concerning them. Use the Sharing or Talking Circle model.
- Arrange the desks or tables in a circle, to diffuse the power base from the front of the classroom.
- Organize learning activities outside of the classroom (field trips, clubs, extra-curricular activities, etc.) in order for you to have opportunities to see the students in a different setting. They will also get a chance to see their teacher in a different light. This might help to build on your relationships with your students and showcase both the students’ and teacher’s warmth, patience, humour, consistency and other personal qualities.
- Employ effective assessment for learning practices (as opposed to only assessment of learning practices) and provide lots of feedback to the students. Ask them to tell you how you are doing as their teacher.
- Make lessons interesting, fun, exciting. Mix it up! You may enjoy teaching more also!
- Avoid the “lecture” approach as much as possible. It often leads to passivity and boredom.
- Take the time to determine each student’s learning style and teach to this variety of styles.

- Offer students the opportunity to choose from lists of topics to research and end products to demonstrate their learning when doing assignments.
- Set due dates for assignments with the input of the students. Determine late penalties together.
- Greet your students when they arrive to your class and stay in your classroom during the class period.
- Take “creative” attendance. Instead of the usual “here” or “present” type of response, ask them to share the name of their favourite color, song, band, or movie.
- Try adding engaging elements to your lessons, such as games, guest speakers, jigsaws, films, cartoons, music, discussions, debates, web-based lessons, graphic organizers, etc. In fact, try anything that will allow the students to become active participants, rather than passive observers.
- Give very clear directions, short work periods, and lots of positive reinforcement.
- Before each lesson, put up the agenda for the class, so the students know what the class will entail.
- Teach students facilitation skills in order for them to have more fruitful small group discussions. This approach can also be used when students share their research findings with each other.
- Offer choice with regards to end products that fit with each student’s learning style.

Student Resistance to Engagement

All these ideas sound like they just might help to foster engagement in the classroom, but what happens if and when the students just will not buy into this approach? Often students will resist the shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered model for a variety of reasons. One is that they might find it easier to maintain the status quo and to just do what the teacher tells them to do. If they have seldom been given opportunities to be involved in classroom decision-making, they might not understand the way one approaches that process. With a student-centered approach comes much more student responsibility for their own learning and their own behaviour. Some students may not be ready to take on this ownership. In the article by Richard M. Felder, “Navigating the Bumpy Road to Student-Centered Instruction”, he states:

“The students, whose teachers have been telling them everything they needed to know from the first grade on, don't necessarily appreciate having this support suddenly withdrawn. Some students view the approach as a threat or as some kind of game, and a few may become sullen or hostile when they find they have no choice about playing.” (<http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Papers/Resest.html>)

Upon meeting this type of student resistance the teacher would do well to persevere and eventually the students will live up to the expectation that they need to become more active participants in the learning community. The teacher-centered approach is not seen as “best practice”. The democratic classroom is. Once students understand that some of the power previously held by the teacher is now being shared with them, they will begin to take more ownership for their learning. To express this in a cliché, the teacher can move from a “sage on the stage” to a “guide on the side.” The students will gain a sense of empowerment and begin to feel more involved in the learning process.

This is not just a one-way street. The teacher who adopts the role of “adult ally” may also experience a sense of satisfaction knowing that the students have become his/her partners in the classroom learning community. Behavioural issues that were a direct result of a power struggle between the teacher and the students suddenly disappear, as the teacher is no longer wielding his/her power in a top-down manner. There is, instead, a relationship built between the teacher and each student, and there is a sense of community, and that everyone is in this together; all are learning together.

Teacher Behaviour and Student Engagement

What are some behaviours exhibited by effective teachers? If one thinks back to one's school experiences, it is relatively easy to suggest a few. Effective teachers are enthusiastic, welcoming, warm, friendly and positive. They are creative, they know the names of their students and they offer frequent specific praise to them to let them know that their efforts are noticed and appreciated. They respect their students. They don't yell, and they don't use threats on misbehaving students, or those not done their work. However, they still ensure that the students are responsible for their actions. Effective teachers also relate the classroom learning to real life, and they set high standards for their students. They also listen to their students, encourage them to be independent and model a genuine passion for learning. They love what they do and their students know it.

In *The First Days of School in the Classrooms of Two More Effective and Four Less Effective Primary-Grades Teachers*, an article written by Catherine M.

Bohn, Alysia D. Roehrig and Michael Presley, published in the Elementary School Journal in March of 2004, the writers found that:

“Consistent with previous studies, the 2 more effective teachers did more to establish routines and procedures at the beginning of the year. In addition, compared to the less effective teachers offered more engaging activities, more enthusiastically introduced reading and writing, indicated higher expectations, praised specific accomplishments of students, pointed out when specific students were behaving in a praise-worthy fashion, and encouraged student self-regulation. In short, the first days of school were very different in the classes taught by the more effective teachers from those taught by the less effective teachers.”)

The writers go on to state that being an effective teacher is more about developing students who are able to regulate their own behaviours, rather than being a classroom manager.

([http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/academics/center/Teaching and Learning Tips/Learner-Centered%20Teaching/BalancePower.htm](http://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/academics/center/Teaching_and_Learning_Tips/Learner-Centered%20Teaching/BalancePower.htm))

The message delivered by the effective teachers to their students was the importance placed on the classroom as a community and that they needed to be “good community members”. Even though this study was done in primary classrooms, I believe that the findings are applicable to students of all ages. Our learning is enhanced when we are praised for our efforts, feel connected to one another, that we belong, and have value. Effective teachers have learned how to turn their classrooms into actual learning communities.

Engaging and empowering students is definitely a challenge. The traditional training of teachers, not to mention the powerful “apprenticeship of observation” they would have experienced when they were students, has probably not prepared them to share power with their students. In fact, the concept of “Youth Engagement” was probably not even raised or discussed. These days, more and more demands are placed on teachers; as the cliché goes, their plates are full. Adopting this paradigm shift in the role of the teacher, however, is really not adding anything to the “plate”. In fact, this way of perceiving the teacher’s role is very liberating. As more power is shared with the students and they assume more responsibility for the learning process, the teacher has fewer behavioural or discipline type problems to deal with. The students are no longer passive receptors of information, and education is no longer something that is being done to them. They have become partners in their learning community, becoming an integral part in the decision-making and taking more ownership for all that happens in the classroom. By their participation, they become empowered and engaged in their education and so does the teacher.

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Questions for Reflection

1. Reflect on the types of students who are in your classrooms. Can you describe their current attitudes towards their education? (Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to pose this question to your students to get an accurate picture of how they see themselves as learners.)
2. If your students are not necessarily keen learners, why might that be? What has happened to make them that way? If they are excited about coming to class everyday, why is that the case?
3. Reflect on the level of participation the students are typically at in your classroom. The Shier Model, identifies 5 levels:
 1. Children are listened to.
 2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
 3. Children's views are taken into account.
 4. Children are involved in the decision-making process.
(Please note: This is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.)
 5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.
4. What decisions concerning your students, that you make by yourself now as the teacher, would you feel comfortable sharing with them? (Classroom climate? Classroom guidelines? Lesson content? Pace of lessons? Assignment choices? Due dates? Evaluation techniques?)
5. How will you know that your students are engaged in their learning? What indicators will you use?

