



The ABC's of Classroom Engagement

By Louise Knowles and the staff of Youth Launch

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The demands and expectations put on classroom teachers today are enormous. There is pressure from many sectors of society and it seems as though teachers are continually being called upon to do more. Perhaps one solution is to approach the teacher-learner relationship in a different way.

As a classroom teacher, how do you create a classroom environment in which your students grow and thrive with the freedom to be themselves and take responsibility to be equal partners in their learning community? This guide offers some practical suggestions for teachers who are interested in adopting this shift from a more “traditional” teaching style (the way we’ve always done it with the power entirely held by the teacher), to one that is more collaborative, and shares power with their students. Having a room full of students who are keenly excited about learning is the ultimate goal of every teacher. But how does this happen? We all know that the learning process is extremely complex and there really is no “one size fits all” approach. However, these suggestions are based on the work of **The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE)**, whose mandate is to research youth engagement and its effects on young people and the adults who work with them. I present them to you as ideas that have worked for me, and for many other teachers who have tried to get their students interested and “engaged” in their learning.

A is for adult ally.

Being an adult ally to young people involves a combination of attitude, skill and awareness to help in the promotion of youth empowerment and engagement. Being an effective adult ally challenges the classroom teacher to step out of the “traditional” role and into an “adult as partner” role to create a more engaging classroom atmosphere and learning community. “Partnerships in which young people and adults share learning and leadership allow them to become co-creators of community.” (*Des Marais et al, 2000*). This approach involves a major paradigm shift as “the more traditional power relationship between educators and students shifts to one of more mutual respect and trust.” (*Saskatchewan Learning, 2004*). Qualities of the ally include: showing genuine care and concern for young people; being flexible and willing to listen and adapt; being supportive, ready to listen and offer suggestions, reassurance, resources, and time; working with youth, rather than doing things for or to youth.

B is for belonging.

This may sound rather simple, but each and every young person in the classroom needs to feel that he or she belongs, is valued and that if they are not there, they will be missed. Adolescence is a time when many question their self-worth and need much reassurance and support from adults who have established with them a caring and supportive relationship. The classroom teacher needs to ensure that each of their students feels welcome, safe and connected to their learning community. With belonging comes responsibility, and in an engaging classroom, there would be many opportunities provided to ensure that each young person contributes their skills, abilities and knowledge to the rest of the learners.

C is for communicating and community.

C is also for circle. One way to encourage young people to become engaged in their classroom or learning community, is to hold regular classroom meetings. Make sure to arrange the desks in a circle whenever possible because as we sit in a circle, we are all equal. There should be no preaching or judging because everyone's voices and opinions are respected in the circle. The circle model also encourages respect for diversity as each member of the learning community can sit and discuss topics that affect them. This fosters understanding and provides an opportunity for the young people to provide input on issues in the classroom that affect them. This will also help to build trust and create a caring environment that is necessary for engagement to occur.

D is for democratic classroom.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recommends that the principles of participation and best interest be followed when educating young people. "Democratic teaching styles are consistent with these principles. A major part of democratic teaching is that it allows children to participate in classroom decision-making." (*Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child, 2002*). Children and youth need to:

"participate in making decisions about the type of tasks to be done, individual or group learning, class rules, seating arrangements, homework assignments and

use of free time. For example, children might choose whether a project is to be completed individually or with a group, how the project will be presented, or the topic of the project... democratic teaching consistently has been shown to be in the best interests of children. It is related to positive self-perception, a sense of personal efficacy, social responsibility, self-esteem and good decision-making skills.” (*Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child, 2002*)

E is for engagement and empowerment.

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines engagement as occurring when a young person is given the opportunity to:

“meaningfully participate in an activity that has a focus outside of him or herself. This person grows in behavioural, affective and cognitive ways through meaningful interaction with others towards a common goal. This leads to empowerment.”

Authentic engagement is not tokenism or manipulation of youth by adults with their agendas, but does involve youth initiated and shared decision-making with adults.

Empowerment occurs when traditionally held adult power is shared with the students; the teacher and the students work collaboratively in authentic partnerships. The students gain decision-making power but also assume responsibility for both positive and negative consequences. This teaches them to take more ownership and responsibility for their own learning and behaviour. For example, if the students are involved in setting up their own classroom guidelines, they have ownership for them and are more apt to follow them.

F is for facilitation, focus and fun.

The classroom teacher’s role has always been one of imparting knowledge and to be faithful to the curriculum. The role of the student is to learn. In order for students to feel like they are active participants in their learning, the teacher’s role needs to include the role of learning facilitator, group guide or enabler. This would be to assume the role of the “guide on the side” instead of the traditional “sage on the stage”. The focus needs to be on including student-centred learning approaches (e.g. co-operative learning) instead of just teacher-centred ones (e.g. lecture style). Students who are having fun while learning are also more likely to feel engaged. The challenge for teachers is to try to facilitate learning

opportunities for their students that are both student-centred and fun. A sense of humor cannot be underestimated, and in fact is an essential quality for a teacher to possess when working with young people.

G is for guidelines, and goals.

Guidelines for the classroom need to be set up on the first day so that the students are encouraged to take ownership for their behaviour. If the teacher facilitates a discussion and elicits the guidelines from the students, rather than imposing a list of predetermined teacher rules, the students will be more apt to follow them. Teachers need to set high standards for their students. The students need to be encouraged to set their own goals for the course. Saskatchewan Learning suggests that teachers try to “plan course content with students and support self-directed learning.” This is another way to engage the students in a learning process that is meaningful and challenging. One young person has described it, “nothing about us, without us.”

H is for health.

One of our most important goals of education must be to promote healthy individuals. Engagement and health are directly linked; one supports the other. The healthy outcomes of engagement, according to the CEYE include:

- Decreased alcohol use
- Decreased marijuana and hard drug use
- Lower rates of school failure and drop-out
- Lower rates of sexual activity and pregnancy in girls
- Lower rates of anti-social and criminal behaviours
- Lower rates of depression

I is for independence.

One of our goals as educators is to help young people reach a level of independence and to assist them to become lifelong learners. By increasing the voice and roles of young people they take on more and more responsibility for

their own learning. “Traditional” teacher-centred methods create a reliance on the teacher as the purveyor of information and the font of all knowledge, but students need to be given more opportunities to be directly involved in determining what they learn, to an extent, and how they will learn it. They need to be presented with choices that will also foster engagement and independence.

J is for justice.

By engaging our students, we are also empowering them. Empowerment brings about fairness and justice. According to the CEYE, empowerment means:

“creating opportunities for boys and girls to become advocates of their own lives. Traditional educational settings use a top-down approach to education which is fundamentally disempowering for most learners. Altering the dynamics from a fear-based authoritarian type of pedagogy... to a critical and liberatory pedagogy goes a long way toward creating an empowering and respectful learning environment.” (CEYE)

K is for knowledge.

In a classroom where students are authentically engaged, the quest for knowledge is rampant, with the teacher and the students working in partnership and sharing in the learning process. The students are not viewed as empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge that has been completely predetermined by the teacher, but instead as young people with many skills, interests, abilities and experiences that they are willing to share when they feel safe, respected and valued. To an extent, the teacher and the students co-create the content of the course and self-directed learning would be encouraged and supported. The teacher takes on a new role as a learning facilitator, responding to the needs, interests and abilities of the students. The students would be encouraged to set high standards and take more responsibility for their own pursuit of knowledge.

L is for leadership and listening.

In engaging classrooms students are provided many opportunities to take responsibility for their own projects. The teacher guides each student in developing his or her own leadership abilities. The students are actively involved

in creative problem solving, critical and creative thinking as well as planning and organizing the end products of their learning. The students are taught how to listen and how to express their thoughts. A trusting and safe classroom atmosphere is provided in which they are given ample opportunities to practice their communication skills.

M is for meaningful involvement.

In order for a person to become engaged, he or she must be given the opportunity to participate in a meaningful activity focused outside the self. Through this meaningful interaction with others towards a common goal, the person experiences behavioural, cognitive and affective growth. This leads to empowerment (CEYE). Students must be able to see that what they are learning has real application and meaning in the real world.

N is for needs.

Each student in the classroom enters it with his or her own unique needs. Some have more than others, but it is very important for the teacher to ascertain what they are, in order to maximize the student's capacity for learning. Generally speaking,

“Youth become engaged when they feel safe, respected, valued, appreciated and comfortable. They also need to have fun and feel that they are participating in an honest process. If the program is meaningful, useful, important, and relevant, youth will be interested, active, inspired and want to be there.” (CEYE)

O is for opportunity.

Young people need adults who recognize and provide opportunities to work in partnership with them. “O” is also for outcomes. The CEYE has suggested that the outcomes of engagement:

“may be layered since engagement could lead to personal benefits, as well as improved social relationships, and even improvements in the systems (schools, organizations, communities, towns, provinces, countries) in which we live and work.”

So the connection between engagement and positive outcomes may be different for each person, type of activity and type of outcome.

P is for power, partnerships and “participation with passion.”

“Participation with passion” is the definition of engagement coined by Stoney McCart, the Director of the CEYE. When engagement occurs, it often happens as a result of adults and youth working in partnerships towards a common goal, sharing in the decision-making, and in the responsibility for the process and the outcome of the project. The power once traditionally held solely by the adult in charge, is now being shared with the young person(s) in an authentic way. Sharing power may be difficult for some teachers as traditionally the teacher holds all of the power in the classroom. This implies that education is something done “to students.” New thinking in education shows that the democratic classroom is the model for effective practice, as the students are partners in the learning process and they have input in decision-making, thus taking more responsibility and ownership for their own learning. As a teacher who has adapted her teaching style to one that is less “top-down”, and is more collaborative with my students, I find much less student apathy, very few problems with students ever being “off task” and rarely any “behavioural problems.”

Q is for questions.

There are a few basic questions that an adult who wants to begin to work as an ally to young people may ask. They are:

- In what ways do I engage young people?
- In what ways do I share decision-making with them?
- How “youth friendly” am I?
- How willing am I to step out of my comfort zone as a “teacher” and work with young people as a “partner”?
- How closely do I identify with the title of the Frank Sinatra hit, “*I Did it My Way*”?

R is for relationship and respect.

The bottom line in youth engagement is the connection made between the adult and the young person. If a healthy, supportive and respectful bond is formed between these two people, then authentic engagement is far more likely to occur, and there will be positive outcomes for both parties. “R” is also for role. The role of the adult ally requires the adult:

1. To care, to be available to the students and to show genuine concern for each of them.
2. To be flexible, willing to listen and adapt.
3. To offer support by listening and offering suggestions, reassurance, resources and time, working with the students and not doing things for or to them.
4. To be committed and value the rights of students to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives, and create opportunities for meaningful involvement.
5. To respect the students and demonstrate acceptance of the students’ contributions, values and opinions.
6. To facilitate opportunities for the students to contribute in meaningful ways to their classroom and school communities.

S is for safe, support, skills and success.

Students need to feel safe in their classrooms, and teachers need to ensure that the classroom is a positive, secure and welcoming environment. Teachers need to offer students support when they need it, but this does not mean that the standards are lowered. It may mean, however, that the program is adapted to provide that support. With regard to skills, students should be encouraged to develop skills necessary to support their participation. These will include the Common Essential Learnings with particular emphasis on communication skills, creative and critical thinking, as well as skills in co-operation. The true measure of success for the engaged learner must lie in the opportunities that the students have to take up the challenge to be active partners with the teacher in the learning process. Assessment for learning must take into account the learning processes and not just the product traditionally measured through testing.

“S” is also for sharing stories. In a classroom where students are authentically engaged, the students and the teacher are provided opportunities to share their stories with each other. This also leads to relationship building among all of the members of the classroom community.

T is for trust and tools.

The students in the classroom need to feel that they are connected to the teacher and that they matter. They need to be able to trust that the teacher is an ally and is there to support them. The students also need to be given the proper tools in order to become engaged. One such tool is facilitation training, which teaches young people how to engage other young people in meaningful dialogue with each other. This allows opportunity for authentic youth voice to occur, in a safe, respectful environment. With this tool, young people are able to raise awareness on any issues that affect them and be an impetus for them to promote positive social change.

For more information about Facilitation Training, or to download the *Peer Support Manual* visit www.tgmag.ca/centres/index_e.html and search the Resource section.

U is for understanding.

It is very important for the teacher who is trying to engage his/her students to be as understanding of them as is humanly possible. An activity one might go through to foster empathy for the students asks the teacher to think back in time to when he/she was 15.

“The empowerment of young people requires the active, supportive participation of adults. A good place to start is to consider and understand how we were treated when we were youth, and how this has contributed to the manner in which we now interact with young people.” (CEYE, 2004)

V is for voice and value.

In a democratic, student-centred classroom, the teacher asks the students to voice their opinions on many things, from the guidelines for classroom

behaviour, to what topics they choose to research, to due dates for assignments, just to name a few. The idea here is that students, who feel that they are respected and that their opinions are asked for, are valued and bear weight. They will more likely become engaged and be more responsible for their own learning process. They will take more ownership for what they learn and how they learn it, because they are partners with the teacher in the learning community.

W is for willing.

The teacher who takes up the challenge to teach in a collaborative partnership, sharing power with students in order to create an engaging classroom, must be willing to take some risks. The teacher who attempts some of the ideas in these pages might find the students to be resistant and uncooperative at first, because for the students, it may appear easier to play the role of a passive, receiver of knowledge in a traditional, top-down classroom setting. This often requires very little input from them. Engaged students need to invest more of themselves in the learning process rather than simply to retain the knowledge long enough to 'regurgitate' it all on the test.

X is for excitement.

Of course, excitement doesn't start with an x, but certainly one of the signs that the students in your classroom are authentically engaged is the air of excitement that you and your students will experience and expect as you continue to collaborate together. In a student-centred classroom, where everyone feels safe, respected and valued, where authentic youth voice is nurtured and everyone shares in the decisions that affect them, it would seem more possible for everyone to work towards achieving their learning goals.

Y is for youth-driven.

As educators we have been trained to lead, to teach, to be the font of all knowledge, but if we truly want to do a better job at engaging our students in our classrooms, then we must cast off the traditional "top-down" teacher role and try on the "coach" or "facilitator" role. This shift allows our students the opportunities

to develop important decision-making and problem solving skills, build meaningful relationships with peers and adults, as well as raise their self-esteem. When young people are engaged in an activity that they have planned and taken ownership for, the likelihood that they will learn from it and benefit from doing it will increase.

Z is for zealous.

Zeal is defined as “passionate ardor, intense interest, and eager striving” by Webster’s English Dictionary. As teachers wouldn’t we all love for our students to feel this way about learning? This is what youth engagement is all about; learning with passion, intensity and eagerness, to help students to reach their goals. As teachers we need to reflect on our practice of teaching from time to time, and examine why we do the things we do in the classroom with our students. Hopefully, for the sake of our young people, we will be able to shed some of the practices that do not support student engagement, and allow ourselves to take a few risks as we venture into this paradigm shift where the teacher and the learner work in an authentic partnership.

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