

Keeping Students Engaged: A Prerequisite for Learning

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Abstract

It is argued that students, similar to other humans, have their own problems, and that they are also impacted by their families' problems. In line with this contention, it is absurd to expect all of them to be motivated and engaged in the classroom. Despite this difficulty, it is necessary to keep students involved to help them with learning. The discussion demonstrates the necessity of keeping students engaged because this engagement is a prerequisite for learning. To achieve this objective, this study suggests using a few strategies that have been used for so many years, and that are at the center of the attention of educators and teachers alike. Experience-based, these strategies represent my methodology, and they are as follows: careful planning, creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment, evading prejudice, calling students by their names, varying instructional strategies, minimizing criticism and praising students, relating the lesson to students' experiences and future careers. These strategies have been responsible for not only keeping students involved but also changing them into lifelong learners. It is the teacher's job to keep students involved in the discussion and eliminate dead time. If this involvement is lacking, there won't be any learning.

Keywords: students' engagement ; learning ; voice opinion ; motivate ;educational process; capture ; engaging; involvement.

1. Introduction

This study emphasizes the necessity of keeping students engaged. This engagement that precedes learning depends completely on the method of instruction. In a sense, engagement hinges on the instructor. If the instructor chooses, for instance, to employ rote learning as a method of instruction, it is taken for granted that any talk about engagement will be a waste of time. The reason underlying this contention is that rote learning itself is a waste not only of time but also of money and energy. This method makes classes boring, and certainly keeps learners disengaged. Similarly, if the instructor employs the learner-centered approach as a method of instruction, it does make sense to talk about engagement and maintaining it in this case because this approach makes classes interesting, creates an enjoyable learning environment, empowers learners, helps them acquire the necessary skills, and enables them to learn on their own after graduation. Hence, it is the duty of instructors to understand their students and their problems to be able to choose the strategies that help them with learning and becoming better.

2. The Significance of this Study

This study focuses on engagement as it paves the way for learning and increases achievement. Its significance lies in its being based on a number of strategies that I have been using in my classes for a variety of reasons. Firstly, these strategies enhance students' abilities to learn. Secondly, they empower learners as they are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and make comments on the topic discussed. Thirdly, they help students regain their self-confidence.

Fourthly, they stop students from drifting off. Fifthly, they make classes interesting, and worth-while. Sixthly, they help me with classroom management. For these reasons taken together, I am keen on implementing these strategies that I strongly recommend in view of their impact upon learners.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this study is represented by the strategies that I have been anxious to implement due to their worthwhileness. These strategies involve evading prejudice, minimizing criticism and praising students, varying instructional strategies, calling students by their names, relating the lesson to students' experiences and future careers, etc. While this study emphasizes this number of strategies, other studies are not as comprehensive as this one, and mostly underline one strategy, such as relevance to future careers.

4. Literature Review

A number of studies have been done about student engagement as well as its importance. One of these studies is Windham's (2005) which recommends new educational curriculum and activities, such as interaction, exploration, relevancy, multimedia, and instruction to engage learners in learning. Another study is titled *Improving Student Engagement*. In this study, the authors claim that student engagement "has primarily and historically focused upon increasing achievement, positive behaviors, and a sense of belonging in students so that they might remain in school" (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). A third study titled *Measuring Learner Engagement in Computer-Equipped Classrooms* focuses on measuring learners' engagement (Bulger, 2008). This argument shows the correlation between engagement and academic achievement. A fourth study titled *Motivation to Learn* emphasizes motivation that is generally linked to engagement, and has been defined as a state that activates behavior and gives it direction (Huitt, 2001). In contrast with these studies, this study suggests that engagement crown great efforts made by the instructor who is ready, caring, and willing to pass his knowledge on to his students. In other words, engagement occurs if the instructor cares. To cut a long story short, the instructor is the one responsible for making the classroom hell-like or inviting. Instructors who care devise ways which keep students engaged; others that don't never plan to give an engaging class. This means that engagement is a choice that the instructor may or may not make.

5. Defining Engagement

Engagement, the key word in this article, has been defined differently by scholars.

The research about engagement that has been so far done by Finn & Rock (1997) as well as Brewster & Fager (2000) emphasizes the psychological and behavioral characteristics of learners. From a psychological perspective, engaged learners are motivated by curiosity, interest, and enjoyment. On the behavioral level, engaged learners demonstrate enthusiasm and concentration. Unlike Finn & Rock, Brewster & Fager, Chapman (2003) defines engagement as students' willingness to participate in academic activities, application of successful cognitive strategies, and persistence through difficult tasks (13). Echoing Chapman, Chen, Gonyea and Kuh (2008) maintain that engagement is the degree to which learners are engaged with their educational activities, and that engagement is positively linked to a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and perseverance. Following Chapman and Chen et al. steps, Stovall (2003) suggests that engagement is defined by a combination of students' time on task and their willingness to participate in activities. Emphasizing academic activities, Coates (2007) holds that engagement is seen to comprise active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported. Most studies reveal that engagement lies in students' willingness to participate in the learning process. In other words, engagement is something that comes from within. It isn't imposed from without. In addition to willingness, engagement is also the fruit of not only the desire harbored by the learner himself but also the enjoyment experienced.

6. How I Keep My Students Engaged

As regards keeping students engaged, the focus of this paper, it is a real challenge to get students listening to a teacher focused and motivated all the time. The reason underlying this contention is that some students are bound to drift off at some point. Once these students do so, they stop learning, which is a serious problem as they may lure others who are listening into drifting off. It is the teacher's job in this case to create an arsenal of strategies that eliminate dead time and help him/her with getting students back on track to resume learning. In my capacity as a teacher, I arrange for keeping students involved by following a number of strategies that I have been practicing and which do not give them any chance for drifting off. One of these strategies is that I prepare my classes well and urge students to keep lending me their ears to understand all that is said. Arguing in support of this strategy, Moalosi (2012) claims that a "teacher who comes to the classroom and prepares lessons with intention is much more likely to positively impact student engagement and learning than one who sees his or her position as simply a job to be endured" (208). While holding their attention, I also tell them that they should raise their hands whenever they find it difficult to follow, that they should listen carefully to see how words are pronounced, and that they should pay attention to the structures of my sentences, and put them down in their copybooks as they constitute a model they badly need to learn this foreign language that they have been trying to learn for over a decade. To help them with learning, I try speaking slowly and clearly, which enables them to process my comments and write down a few notes. I make it clear to them that they can ask me about any structure they haven't understood or about any sentence they've failed to hear or to write well.

Another strategy is that I facilitate learning and "create a safe and comfortable classroom environment where students listen, raise questions, and make comments" (Al-Shalabi, 2011). By giving them this opportunity to voice their opinions, "students relax and become as involved as I am in class discussion" (Al-Shalabi, 2011). In this non-threatening environment, students are urged to speak English and not to worry at all about mistakes. Although they demonstrate reluctance at the beginning, I don't lose hope and I keep asking them to overcome their fears. I tell them that they certainly learn more by doing than listening. Upon hearing that, they respond to me and express their minds. While doing so, I listen carefully to all that they say. To do them justice, I listen to all of them. By listening to them this way I tell them indirectly that I respect each student's point of view, that they are equal, that I am giving each one of them the time he/she needs, and that I am not prejudiced. In a sense, by listening to them I mean to let them know that I care for them and that I intend to help them. This behavior fosters their engagement and makes them display a passion for learning. Commenting on this argument, Jones (2008) maintains that "[s]tudents are more likely to make a personal commitment to engage in rigorous learning when they know teachers... care about how well they do" (6).

To further their engagement, I praise them and minimize criticism, which constitutes my third strategy. By minimizing criticism, I try helping them with regaining their self-confidence, and maintaining the necessary willingness and desire to participate in class. In this way, they go on with voicing their opinions and commenting on the topic discussed. I pick a mistake or two mistakes and correct them. When I have done that, I ask them to write both the mistakes and the corrections. Then I ask them to learn how the mistake has been corrected in order not to remake it. I point out that they'll be judged by how well they can speak and write English, and that speaking this language well necessitates that they lessen their mistakes to the minimum. Thus, they become more engaged and more curious than before to know about their mistakes.

A fourth strategy that works well is that I connect the material with the learners' prior experiences. The value of this connection is that it makes learning enjoyable, purposeful, and engaging. Today's learners living in this world marked by competition realize that rote learning has become something of the past, and that learning should be applicable to real-life scenarios. This view is supported by Claxton (2007), Dunleavy and Milton (2009), and Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009). It is also underlined by Jones (2008) who holds that "teachers can create a more engaging classroom situation by getting to know their students and using examples during instruction that relate to students' backgrounds, cultures, and prior experiences" (95). Similarly, Beyer (1991) contends that teachers who link classroom activities to prior knowledge build on their students' familiarity with a topic, and enable students to connect the curriculum content to their own experience and culture. Kujawa and Huske (1995), likewise, hold prior knowledge to be the proper entry point for instruction and a major factor in comprehension. This comprehension occurs on account of the engagement ensuing the connection made between the course content and the learners' experiences. This engagement certainly leads to learning. Jones (2008) holds that students learn better when the topic discussed is "connected to something that they already know" (5).

Just as linking the course material to the learners' experiences is motivating and captivating, so is the instructor's calling them by their names, which is the sixth strategy of keeping them engaged. Commenting on the impact of the teacher's knowing the students' names, Jones (2008) contends that "[s]tudents show increased effort in classroom activities when teachers take interest in students as individuals, get to know them by name ..." (2). The significance of the teacher's calling learners by their names is that it communicates respect, fosters a sense of community, makes them feel that they are recognized, helps to include shy students in the discussion, demonstrates clearly that they are identifiable, and tells them clearly that he/she cares about them as individuals. Speaking of the significance of names, Gil Blanchette (2002) claims that knowing students' names shows that "the teacher cares about them" (1). This knowledge of students' names keeps them engaged and makes them much more conscious of their behavior. In a sense, it impinges on how they behave in the classroom. It silences them and renders them disciplinary.

Discipline can be also furthered by the instructor whose eyes can set the tone of a class. Eye contact in class is significant in many ways. Firstly, it gives students the impression that nothing escapes the teacher's attention. Secondly, it keeps learners engaged. Thirdly, it makes the students looked at feel that they are at the center of the teacher's attention. When the teacher's eyes sweep around from one student to another, one section to another, forward and backward, and one side to another, learners realize that the teacher is in control of the whole room. The teacher's "look" has a disciplinary function. It disciplines students as it ranges in its meanings from "keep quiet please" "through I can't stand what you are doing" to "don't mess with me". Reflecting on the importance of eyes, Robert Ledbury, Ian White, and Steve Darn maintain that the eyes are "a powerful tool for both the teacher and the learner, yet much time is spent with eyes firmly fixed on the book, the board, the floor, the window, or roaming randomly around the teaching and learning environment" (1).

This environment should be comfortable and stimulating to encourage students to think unhurriedly about their

responses. The seventh strategy I practice to keep learners engaged is "[to leave] the seat I sit on, [to walk] the aisles, [to take] a quick look at the books and notebooks placed on the desks before them, and [advise] them against busying themselves with anything else other than the material at hand" (63). While sitting this way, I transform them from passive observers to active learners by giving them a question based on understanding and calling for formulating an opinion and justifying it. I may, for instance, ask them about the relevance of certain happenings or arguments to today's world or what they think of a certain character or idea. To take an example, I may say: Does the woman in the story or tragedy fit into today's world? How? Explain! Another question is: What do you think of the man or the woman in the novel? Do you hold him/her to be wise or foolish? Give reasons for your answer! These types of questions keep them actively involved in learning. I may ask them to work in pairs or groups and come out with a reasonable answer or solution of a certain problem. While working together, they learn from each other.

Learning also occurs when instructional strategies are varied. This is the eighth strategy I advise my colleagues to practice. Arguing in support of this view, Jones (2008) claims that "varying instructional strategies adds interest and increases engagement" (5). I think that Jones is talking sense because varying strategies stops students from feeling bored, and helps them with understanding and learning the course content. I myself have been practicing this strategy for so many years, and it has been working well. The reason underlying this practice is that it stops students from feeling bored, and facilitates both understanding and learning. As a facilitator, I use various ways to achieve the learning objectives. For instance, I use power point, the white board, textbooks, handouts, films, and role playing to empower my students and facilitate learning. As long as I follow the learner-centered approach that emphasizes the learners' needs, I stress discussions and do all that I can to transform students from, Aldrich(2009) argues, "just passive receivers of knowledge" (57) to learners who are able, Al-Shalabi(2011) maintains, "not only to learn, but also to fit into today's world of technological innovations where the "tabula rasa" are no longer needed" (62). To help them with learning I train them on how to compare and contrast characters and objects, classify information, and do summaries, which are jobs that call for analyzing the content. I may also ask them questions about relevance, evaluation, arguing for or against a certain view, justification, etc. Questions such as these are helpful, keep them engaged, develop their critical thinking skills which are necessary for achieving success, and make class lively and entertaining .

Class becomes equally entertaining when the content is connected with students' future careers. This is the ninth strategy that I have been practicing in my classes. By virtue of this connection made students become interested in the occurring discussion. I point out that the knowledge and skills acquired from class will help them after graduation. The moment they understand about that they become more attracted to the discussion and the few may start raising questions. Students' behaving this way exemplifies Bransford, Brown, and Cocking's (1999) contention that "learners of all ages" become "more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning" (49). Students' realizing that the knowledge gained does them good and makes them better qualified to do their jobs drives them to be engaged as engaged students experience, Astin (1993) claims, "increases in personal competence, verbal and quantitative skills, and cognitive complexity, that are all factors which greatly aid in success in one's occupational, personal, and social life". It is clear that Astin makes the connection between students' engagement and job-related skills that are in great demand in today's world dominated by competition. These skills themselves qualify students after graduation to compete with others and achieve great success. Unfortunately, without these skills, there is no room for either competition or success. Following Astin's steps, Avalos (1996) maintains that student engagement is linked to post-occupational status and income. Like Avalos, Gurin (2002) and Kuh et al. (1991) both hold that students who engage in good educational practices are more successful in their occupations, well- prepared for their occupation, and marked by higher level of community involvement (330-366).

I have demonstrated that student engagement can be enhanced by implementing a number of strategies, namely good lesson planning, calling students by their names, evading prejudice, minimizing criticism, creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment, relating the discussion to students' prior experiences and future careers, varying instructional strategies, and the teacher's leaving the seat he sits on, walking the aisles, and taking a look at the books placed before them to make sure that they are following.

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