

# *Engaging Students for Success*

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## **A. Teaching Context**

In my classroom of twenty-five 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, there are nine boys and fifteen girls. I was fortunate enough to be placed in a classroom full of eager learners, each bringing unique strengths to the classroom.

My classroom has a variety of different academic levels; there are seven students who are involved in learning enrichment activities, as well as five who receive Title One support for reading. This wide range of abilities results in some students completing lessons early on a consistent basis, while others take longer and need constant teacher support.

My classroom also has some cultural diversity. The majority of the students are Caucasian, while four students belong to minority races (African-American, Puerto Rican, or Asian).

Socially, the students in my classroom, for the most part, get along very well and are all good friends. Out of the twenty-five students, I would categorize four as having social issues. There are two students who are shy, yet are still included by their classmates. Two other students have a hard time getting along with their peers, and are not liked by many. The rest of the students all have good friends and are very friendly to one another.

The major behavioral problem in this classroom is the students talking when the teacher is. The classroom is full of good friends who like to socialize. When it comes to work ethic, there is some variety amongst the students. For example, I would classify eight of the students as always being on task when doing work. They are also attentive

during instruction. Then, twelve students are often/sometimes on task, and four are seldom on task. The students who are seldom on task have trouble getting individual work completed, and have great difficulty paying attention during group activities.

The diversity regarding student ability to complete work, and student ability to be attentive is something that I have interest in. I contend that both of these result in students becoming unengaged during a lesson and as a result, are not challenged to their full potential. Therefore, this issue is what I chose to inquire about.

## **B. Rationale**

As stated above, there is some diversity amongst my students. Two of these diverse factors led me to inquire about engagement during lessons.

The first factor is the variety of academic levels. The students in my class who are more gifted understand concepts a lot more quickly. They also work very fast. From the beginning of the year, I observed these students finishing their assignments early and becoming unengaged because they had nothing productive to do. They were often bored with the follow-up busy work. I did not feel it was fair for those students to only be challenged for half a lesson because they worked at a faster pace.

Then, there is the difference between the students in their work ethic. My class does like to talk and would rather talk to their friends than listen to me. However, attentiveness during instruction is very important in order to learn the concept, as well as not distract their fellow classmates. Furthermore, I have some students who also have trouble getting individual work done. I don't know if they become disinterested or confused, but I have to constantly monitor their work in order to have completed assignments, and redirect them to stay on task during lessons.

Engagement is at the heart of all successful instruction. If the students are not paying attention then how are they able to learn anything new? The previous examples of student disengagement are hurtful to the students because they are missing out on learning. Therefore, as a teacher, I know that in order to be successful myself I need to know how to have a classroom full of eager students engaged in what they are doing for the entire lesson.

### **C. Literature Review**

Through using ERIC to find journal articles, as well as researching textbooks, I was able to find an abundance of information. There has been much research on the subject, as well as many conclusions and strategies found to enhance engagement during lessons.

To begin, Levin and Nolan, Principles of Classroom Management, state frankly and simply why student engagement is so important in a classroom. They say, “the more time spent on learning (time-on-task, or engaged time), the more learning that will take place (p.30).” This is an easy concept to grasp. Engaged learning means that the students are actively participating in the lesson and that they are learning. The more engagement in a classroom, the more time the students are participating in the lesson, and the more chances they have to learn.

In a typical classroom, a highly engaged learner is *deeply* engaged in learning and not just going through the motions. An engaged learner is “intellectually involved with curriculum topics (Black, 58)”, and is mentally involved with the lesson. An engaged learner is not slouched, toned out, snoozing, or talking with friends.

Susan Black in “Engaging the Disengaged” describes research that shows that disengagement, for some students, has outside influences. These influences, such as unsupportive families and bad neighborhoods, can affect student engagement in the classroom. Luckily, however, studies shows that younger students mostly still have their confidence and have not yet been brought down by these negative outside influences.

Unfortunately, it is still a possibility in these younger grades, though, and very evident in the higher grades (p. 59.)

Although these influences do exist, engagement is mostly the result of dynamic teachers who use effective instruction, behavior management, and efficient planning to create a positive environment in their classroom. All of my research shows that only the best, most distinguished teachers can keep their students highly engaged and that it is something that all teachers should strive for. As stated before, engagement is accomplished through instruction, behavior management, and planning.

Effective instruction that leads to a high level of engagement in your classroom consists of the following. To begin, effective instruction must consist of a lot of positive motivation. This motivation should be given using a variety of different methods, such as praising good work and effort, encouraging perseverance, and using intrinsic motivation. The teacher must effectively communicate to the students his/her expectations as well as feedback on what has been done. The lessons taught should have tasks that are interesting, challenging, and multi-disciplinary. These lessons should pay attention to individual interests and be taught in an interactive way. For example, students should be given the chance to teach themselves and each other; the lessons should involve students' families and friends, as well as be connected to prior knowledge and real-life situations. Students should be given responsibilities, such as helping to set clear objectives for the lesson, which will help them to become "self-regulators" of their own education. Again, intrinsic motivation is key. Furthermore, the teacher should make it known that he/she has high expectations set for each individual student, and that they will be held accountable for their work done. Students should be assessed through observations,

interviews, projects, etc., and, again, be given positive and constructive feedback, hopefully on a one-on-one basis. It is important that the teacher does not just “teach” to the students, but explains and models the information, stimulating interest and curiosity on the subject. Through the lessons, the teacher should be a facilitator, guide, and learner all in one, modeling an enthusiasm of learning and reflective thinking. Finally, instruction should conclude with the students engaging in self-reflection.

Next, behavior management is important for two reasons: to create a positive environment and decrease distractions during lessons. To begin, disruptive, uncontrollable behavior in the classroom creates an environment that feels stressed and anguished. If the teacher does not control behavior in the classroom, feelings get hurt and the students (and even the teacher) get sad, angry, and embarrassed. This, then, leads to students not feeling comfortable in the classroom and unable to stay focused and become fully engaged in the lesson. That positive, happy environment is a key component of a highly engaged classroom. Furthermore, when student behavior is out of control, the behavior itself also distracts students from the lesson and disengages them. Unfortunately, these student outbursts, even though they want to be engaged, will distract many students. From the first day of school, it is imperative that the teacher sets a tone of the students being responsible for their own behavior and that disrespect will not be tolerated. Teachers should emphasize “respect for one another, for example that when people disagree, they should do so respectfully” (Bohn, 271.) The teacher, by setting a positive tone built on respect, will then have a classroom ready to be highly engaged

The last key component of an engaging lesson is appropriate planning and preparation. A distinguished teacher, Sarah Dolezal says, must teach “coherent, well-



planned, well-paced lessons” (p. 241.) This includes everything from gathering the appropriate materials ahead of time to researching the needed content knowledge so that you are mentally prepared. This even includes thinking ahead to what your objectives and directions are going to be. The planning aspect is very important to the engagement level of the students, because it enables the instruction aspect to run smoothly and affectively. There is no way a teacher could instruct an engaging lesson without going through a system of planning and prep-work to become prepared.

Through my research, I have found a lot of great information on how to engage students. Most importantly, though, I have learned the importance of engagement in a classroom, which then tells me I have picked the right inquiry project. Susan Black explains engagement as the “heart” of instruction. (p. 58.) In my eyes, that’s pretty important.

## **D. Wonderings**

My main wondering:

*What specific teaching strategies help to keep students engaged for an entire lesson?*

Sub-questions:

1. Why is student engagement important?
2. How do you know a student is engaged?
3. What activities lose a student's attention?
4. How do I keep higher-achieving students engaged and not bored?
5. How do I keep my students' interests for hour-long lessons?
6. What techniques can I use on the spot to engage students?

## **E. Inquiry Plan**

After researching literature on student engagement, I came up with the following plan on how to attack this inquiry. To begin, I started keeping a log on behavior I observed in the classroom during lessons. I made note of what I felt helped students to become engaged, as well as what resulted in disengagement. Then, I collected more data through student surveys and teacher surveys and interviews. Through this data, I was able to analyze all the information received to come up with some preliminary claims. However, these claims were only preliminary because I still wanted to test them out in my classroom. Therefore, I started a second phase of collecting data by testing the strategies learned in my classroom. To do this, I developed an “Engagement Log” as a way to analyze my own teaching experience. I created this log by making a check-list from all the conclusions I made from my first round of data collection. Then, after teaching lessons, I completed the check-list to analyze what worked well for me. Finally, after collecting enough data from this phase, I analyzed what worked in my own classroom in order to create my final claims on what helped students to stay engaged for an entire lesson.

## **F. Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to find an answer to my inquiry, I knew I would have to collect a variety of different kinds of data. Furthermore, I decided to analyze my data as I proceeded in order to help me decide what to do next in the process.

To start, I began noting observations in a notebook. After a lesson, I simply took notes on the students' engagement level and why I thought they were engaged or not. From simply looking over these notes I could analyze a couple things. First, I realized that my students loved hands-on activities where they could manipulate materials and work in groups. I found that during this type of activity the students were most engaged. Two things I found that resulted in disengagement were finishing early with nothing else to do, and not providing the students with clear expectations. (See Appendix K.)

Secondly, I researched previous findings on student engagement (See section C. Literature Review.) This research provided me with some of the necessary parts of an engaging lesson. One of the components, which stood out to me, was that it must be interesting to the students. This led me to my next step. I realized that in order for me to teach to the students' interests, I needed to know what they were. Therefore, I gave my class a survey asking for their interests inside and outside the classroom. To analyze this survey, I went through all of the questions and made note of all of the answers using an extra survey and tally marks. (See Appendix L.) This gave me a good overview of some of the interests in our classroom. From this, I was able to see what lessons they have liked in the past, as well as activities that they like in general that I can use to guide my lesson-planning.

From this, I felt like I had a good start on how to keep my students interested, which usually leads to engagement. Yet I still had many other questions. For example, I wanted to know other things that a teacher can think about *before* a lesson to make it engaging, as well as what to do *during* a lesson if students become disengaged. Also, from observations I knew it was important to have some follow-up activities in case students finish, yet I wanted to learn about some different ways to do this. With those three questions in mind, I distributed a teacher survey. At the same time, I interviewed seven different teachers with these three questions, as well as a few more. This gave me the chance to have a conversation with these experienced teachers. In the end, I collected eight completed surveys from Park Forest teachers, seventeen completed surveys from teachers in my mom's elementary school in Rochester, NY, as well as answers from the seven interviews.

In order to analyze these, I used the same method of compiling all the answers on a blank sheet of questions. Because the interview and survey had three of the same questions I could compile those three questions together. These surveys and interviews resulted in an abundance of excellent information. (See Appendix M.) From these I was able to come up with three ideas of what I thought my claims might be. More specifically, I took all the information I had learned, so far, and copied the big ideas onto one sheet of paper. (See Appendix N.) From this paper, I was able to come up with three preliminary claims. However, I had only completed phase 1 of my data collection. There was still much to test before developing claims!

Around the same time, I also gave my students a second survey. This survey simply asked what they thought their engagement level was during a typical lesson. I did

this so that I would have something to compare to if I were to give the same survey at the end of my project. Furthermore, I attached an unrelated question to this survey for a different purpose. I asked the students to list any activities they would like to be able to do when finished with assignments early. Again, at this point I did know that having follow-up activities was an important part of keeping the students engaged. I still did not know how to go about it successfully and thought I would ask the students for their ideas. To analyze these surveys I used the same method as before. (See Appendix O.) I found out that the students felt they were actively participating, excited about what we were learning, knew what was going on often, and sometimes found themselves talking off-task. I got a lot of good ideas for follow-up activities as well.

After I had this information I was excited to then implement it in my classroom; this, then, started phase II of my data collection. I had collected a lot of great strategies from experts and experienced teachers, yet what would be successful in my classroom with me as a teacher? After all, this is an inquiry project that I am completing, so the strategies I find will have to work for me.

For Phase II, I created an engagement log that I used to critique my lessons. I used the preliminary claims I created from all the data collected in Phase I to determine what to put in this log. For example, I found that there are many necessary components of an engaging lesson such as a hook, set expectations, and variety. Therefore, in this log, one part is a checklist of different components for the purpose of noting whether or not I used them. Then, I finished each entry with conclusions on whether or not my lesson kept most of the class, or the entire class engaged. (See appendix R.) This log was a very important piece of data with a lot of good information.

When completed, I analyzed these entries by looking for patterns amongst the lessons. I looked at the lessons I concluded as successful in keeping the students engaged and counted how many of the “necessary components of a lesson” I had checked off. Then, I did the same for the unsuccessful lessons. Also, I analyzed the strategies used to get students back on topic by highlighting those I felt were most successful and looked for patterns amongst them. This log was very helpful in developing my three claims.

Lastly, to follow-up on whether the strategies I was now using in my classroom improved student engagement, I gave my students a third and final survey. Again, this one tested for their engagement level during a typical lesson, as well as asked them if they had any ideas on how to keep themselves more on task. (See Appendix P.) To analyze, I tallied all the answers on an extra survey. I found that there were a few improvements from the last survey given. The students answered that they talk less-frequently off-task, as well as are more often excited about what we’re learning. These are two great signs of engagement. Besides that, however, there were not any other significant changes. This shows that I still have some room for growth!

## **G. Claims**

**Claim 1. In order to keep students engaged, a lesson must have all of the necessary components of an engaging lesson.**

Through research I have determined sixteen components that are needed.

The lesson will:

1. be well-planned out;
2. have all materials prepared;
3. be interactive and hands-on;
4. appeal to students' interests;
5. include the use of visuals and manipulatives;
6. be challenging, but still allow students to succeed;
7. have objectives that are age appropriate;
8. include positive motivation;
9. have a hook to peak interest or to make it personal;
10. have the use of a variety of learning styles;
11. have a link to prior knowledge;
12. include enthusiastic teaching;
13. have clear expectations set;
14. include sharing or closure
14. allow for student reflection;
16. include a variety of assessments.

Each one of these components I have found to be a vital and essential part of a successful lesson. This is proven through both stages of my data analysis. To begin, through researching literature I was able to make a tentative list of these necessary components. Teaching to the students' interests and making lessons personal were found throughout the literature. In my notes, I had written down several others of these as well. For example, Beau Jones wrote that engaging "tasks are challenging, authentic, and



multidisciplinary” (p. 4.) This touches upon three other components that I have listed above.

The teacher surveys and interviews further proved this claim. From all of the excellent information they gave me I was able to compile the complete list above. I chose components that were suggested several times by teachers, not just once. That way, I definitely knew they were essential. (See Appendix N.)

Finally, I tested it out in my classroom in order to prove that these components were not just necessary for lessons in other classrooms, but also for mine. On a daily basis, I analyzed my lessons using the engagement log I had completed. In this log, I had all sixteen of the components I had compiled through phase 1 of my research. Boxes next to them were checked off if I successfully implemented that part. Immediately, when completing the log, I would discover components that I had missed and realized how including it would have made the students’ more engaged. Therefore, simply as I referred to my list and self-reflected on lessons, I already understood the importance of all of these components.

Furthermore, completing the formal analysis of this engagement log proves the claim even more. When analyzing, I looked at lessons that were successful with keeping students engaged versus those that were not so successful, as well as how many “necessary components” I failed to use in that lesson. If my claim is correct, the unsuccessful lessons should have more missing components, therefore concluding that the more components included in the lesson, the more engaging it will be.

Here is the data collected:

	Unsuccessful Lessons (rated as sometimes or rarely)	Successful Lessons (rated as always or often)
Number of missing components per lesson	9, 8, 7, 6, (4)	(7,) 4, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2, 2

Here, except for an outlier in each category shown in parenthesis, there is a significant difference between the successful and unsuccessful lessons. Furthermore, it does show successful lessons have less of these components missing, therefore proving my claim.

**Claim 2. If students are off-task, a teacher must use instructional techniques that do not embarrass the student, yet are effective to get their attention and draw them back in.**

Some of these I've discovered include:

1. Non-verbal commands

- Proximity control
- Touching his/her shoulder
- Eye contact

2. Giving one-on-one attention

- Speaking with the student
- Restating expectations
- Helping the student

3. Involving them in the lesson

- Using his/her name
- Asking for his/her help
- Asking the student a question that he/she will be able to answer

4. Redirect the entire class

- Rethink and shift the lesson
- Move onto the next part
- Give a break, time to move around

I have found that all of the strategies used must have two important factors in order to be successful. First, they must get the student's attention and draw them back in. Then, all strategies must not embarrass or anger the student.

To begin, I have determined these specific strategies to effectively draw the students back in from asking for these types of strategies in my teacher survey and interview. These strategies I have concluded, again, were mentioned several times as successful in their classrooms. (See Appendix M.) Then, I tested them out in my classroom and kept record of them in my Engagement Log. All of these strategies I have found to work and are highlighted in green in my log. (See Appendix R.) Throughout this entire process I have also tried out many strategies that have not been found to work. These are also shown in the log under "Unsuccessful."

These strategies must not embarrass the students, as well, to be successful in a lesson. When a student gets embarrassed, I learned in an interview, you lose the student for the rest of the lesson. (See Appendix Q.) This student will only be concerned with the fact that he was scolded at or was caught not paying attention that he will continue to not pay attention to the lesson. Therefore, hopes of engagement are lost. In addition, other research further proves this point. Evident throughout my notes taken while researching are phrases such as "positive atmosphere," "praise students," and "stimulating confidence in students" (Brohn.) Reverting students' attention back to the lesson in an encouraging way is important in order to create this positive environment.

**Claim 3. Furthermore, an engaging lesson has pre-planned follow-up activities for students who finish early, that are challenging, interesting, and relate to the topic or subject of the lesson.**

From the first observations I collected for this project, I discovered that students who finish early become unengaged. Furthermore, they begin to talk with others who may not be done yet, getting them off-task as well. Also, just because these students are fast does not mean that they should only be challenged for half the lesson. Immediately, I realized how quickly these excelling students were becoming unengaged, as well as influencing others. Therefore, I discovered the importance of these follow-up activities.

Therefore, I included a question about successful follow-up activities in my teacher surveys and interviews. Again, I calculated all of my evidence and determined what they all had in common. During the interviews, I asked specifically what all these activities must include. Of course, I ended up with an abundance of excellent information and determined that follow-up activities should be pre-planned, as well as challenging, interesting, and related to the subject.

One teacher I interviewed spoke on the importance of having these activities pre-planned. “Over plan for everybody every single day,” he explained. He always has these activities set up ahead of time so they are available and easy to give out. Informing the students what to do when done, before they begin the lesson, as well as posting it on the board are two other advantages of planning them out. This will eliminate confusion later on and give the students less of a chance to get off-task. I heard this from several of the teachers.

I also learned from the teacher surveys and interviews the importance of making the activities challenging, interesting, and subject-related. My analysis of their answers shows many examples of successful follow-up activities that exhibit all three of these qualities. (See Appendix M.) During my second phase of data collection I experimented with some of these activities. Those I tried proved to be successful and kept those quick learners engaged.

Finally, a survey given to my students helped to prove this last claim as well. I asked them what they would like to do if they were to finish their work early. Going off of the research I have found earlier that activities must be interesting to keep students engaged, this proved to be a helpful survey. I learned what they find to be interesting as a follow-up activity and have used this information to use activities that are also challenging and subject related. (See Appendix O.) I have observed in my classroom that the students are engaged in these activities that they have suggested doing.

## **H. Conclusions**

My first experience with inquiry could not have been a better one. I picked a question that I was very interested in discovering more about, and learned so much more than I could have ever imagined. The best part is: everything I have learned will directly affect my teaching in a positive way. As stated before, “Engagement is the heart of instruction” (Black, 58.) More time on task correlates directly with the amount the student will learn and learning is what school is all about! Therefore, all of these strategies I have attained will help me to keep my students more engaged in the classroom, as well as learn more and become more successful.

Each of my claims is a strategy to carry out effective instruction of engaging lessons in my classroom. In order to teach these lessons, I will simply have to follow these three main strategies.

Along with that, I have found the importance of teacher reflection throughout this process, which I hope to continue with. My claims, I feel, are excellent strategies, yet are complex and have a lot of important components. Therefore, I found it very helpful to refer to my engagement log *before* teaching where all of these strategies were listed. Then, following up while the lesson was still fresh in my head helped me to realize what I could do differently next time to increase the engagement. Therefore, along with continuing to implement my three claims into my classroom, I will follow-up with reflecting how it went and what could be improved.

## **I. New Wonderings**

Although most of my questions were answered, they only lead to new wonderings that I hope to inquire about in the future.

1. How does the increase/decrease of community in a classroom effect engagement?
2. How does a student's personal and home life effect his/her engagement in the classroom?
3. How do you create intrinsic motivation affectively in a classroom?

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