



“Engaged to the Teacher”

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ABSTRACT

A high school teacher surveys her students about what engages them in the classroom. She discovers that her students are authorities on engagement and that her ideas about how to engage students do, for the most part, correspond with theirs. It seems that the relationship between teacher and student is at the heart of student engagement.

The problem with teachers is that they think they know everything. At least, they think they know everything about their subject and about their students. When I first considered the subject of student engagement for this article I sat down and began with a list of all the things I thought contributed to it. The list was long—it covered two sheets of legal-sized paper—and it was not until I had finished it that I had a moment of hesitation. As I reviewed my list, I realized that I had just broken my first rule as a teacher: start by asking my students what they know about a topic. I developed this rule early on in my teaching career when I figured out that the teacher, as an expert, is a rather daunting figure.

It is very empowering for students, as they embark on the study of a new text or topic, to discover that they already know something about it. Students need to feel that they are not “empty vessels,” but rather, expandable ones that hold both considerable and valuable knowledge. It is not only possible, but also desirable, to make the themes of a piece of literature or the socio-cultural contexts of a work meaningful and interesting by beginning with a brainstorming session. Simply asking students, “What do you know about...?” can elicit a wealth of information. Of course,

some of the information will be inaccurate, maybe even false, and there will invariably be misconceptions, biases and even prejudices expressed during this initial discussion. There is no need to address or correct these at this stage. Students will eventually adjust their ideas as their knowledge develops. Often students will correct each other and offer different ideas. What is important here is that the information, including the misinformation, be generated by students. It is discouraging for students to always be confronted with what they do not know. The world of adult knowledge must often seem like a very exclusive club to which they will never gain membership.

As I gazed at my list of what I thought I knew about student engagement, I wondered why I had not simply asked my students what engages them. They endure five 65-minute periods a day, five days a week. I teach a maximum of three 65-minute periods a day and so they presumably have more expertise on student engagement than I do. I set aside my list. I filed it away and took a new approach. I recollected a class on qualitative research methods that I had taken many years ago. Being an over-extended teacher, I did not revisit my textbooks and class notes, or investigate the literature on the teacher student relationship, as perhaps I should have.

Context

I have taught at a small private girls' school in downtown Montreal for the last 14 years. I have had the privilege of working with small classes of motivated, self-disciplined students. Although it is an independent school, it has a very diverse population and this is one of its strengths. Our students come from a wide range of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Since my school offers more bursaries per capita than other independent schools, we are able to maintain a very heterogeneous population, thereby avoiding the elitism often associated with private schools.

I teach grade 10 and 11 English Language Arts and also two separate North American Literature classes, an option at the senior level. I came to teaching indirectly and almost accidentally. After graduating with a B.A. in English from Trinity College, the University of Toronto, I signed up for two years with Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO). I taught from 1980–1982 in a remote secondary school in northern Nigeria—a posting with no electricity and no running water. Upon returning to Canada, I attended McGill and gained a Diploma in Education. From 1984–1986, I taught grades 5 and 6 in Salluit—the northernmost Inuit community in Quebec.

After a seven-year “sabbatical,” during which time I raised two children, I returned to teaching in 1993 at the school where I am currently the Head of the English Department. I have completed all the courses for a Masters in Education, but the final step, a special activity/thesis, is proving to be elusive. My goal for some time has been to take a year off and complete my graduate degree. I hate unfinished business. I love being a student, but I must love being a teacher more because each year I return to my job rather than to my studies.

Approach

I began my thinking about this topic by reviewing the process I had employed for a research paper on teachers’ attitudes towards professional development. I decided to survey my students and use their ideas on student engagement as a basis for my article. I did not create a questionnaire because I wanted to see how students would respond, in their own words, to the topic. I considered the definition of engagement employed by Vibert and Shields (2003) in their article, “Approaches to student engagement: Does ideology matter?”. According to this article student engagement is ...

a continuum, ranging from relatively rational and technical approaches to those that are more constructivist, to those reflecting a critical democratic worldview. We would suggest that not only is this a descriptive continuum, but that a move from the rational, through the interpretivist, to a more critical understanding, also approaches a more socially grounded construction of engagement (p. 237)

I read it over many times and decided that I could not offer this definition to my students. It only served to remind me of the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practices. If I did not find the definition helpful, then how less helpful would it be to my students? I came up with my own simplified definition and used it on a survey sheet. At the top of the page was the heading Student Engagement followed by a single paragraph:

When a student is engaged he or she is interested and involved in what is happening in the classroom. Whatever the task is, whether reading, writing, listening, discussing or watching, the student’s attention is focused and he or she is willing to participate.

Beneath this paragraph was written:

I feel engaged in the classroom when...

At the beginning of class I explained that I was writing an article and would appreciate my students' help. I gave out the sheet, read the definition of student engagement out loud, and allowed 10 minutes for students to write whatever they wanted. Students were instructed not to put their names on the sheets. Interestingly, my students were very engaged in this exercise. There was no talking, unusual in an all-girl's class, and everyone was "on task." Much to my surprise, students were writing at length, filling not only one side of the sheet, but also, the reverse side. No one seemed stuck for ideas and, surprisingly, there were few questions. The questions asked were straightforward: "Can we write in point form?"; "Are we talking about English class only or any subject?"; and, "Can we give examples?" At the end of 10 minutes, I collected the survey sheets. Some students were not finished and asked if they could give in their papers later on in the day. All of the students who kept their sheets did, in fact, hand them in later, sometimes days later. I did this activity in my four separate classes.

Altogether there were 47 respondents, not a large sample, but, approximately, one quarter of the population in my small school. As senior high school students, these girls have considerable classroom experience and presumably have insight into what engages them. Collectively, they had spent at least 470 academic years in the classroom. If I allow for a minimum of 5 hours a day, 5 days a week for 9 months of the year, that figure represents 900 classroom hours per student each year. Therefore, my sample of students had 423,000 hours of classroom experience. If I compared their classroom experience to my own, it became obvious that they had an advantage. I estimated that over the course of 18 years I had taught an average of 15 periods a week for 36 weeks of the year. My classroom experience only totalled 9,720 hours.

Discussion

Having collected my survey sheets, I set about collating the information. I identified 59 separate items and wrote each item on an index card and then placed similar or identical references under the headings. Then I began to categorize these references according to key words. Throughout the process, my goal was to keep

things simple. My key words were: Who, What, When, Where and How. My findings were what emerged from a simple, local “experiment” that I found to be both interesting and informative.

Under the “Who Engages” category, I placed all references to the teacher and to the student. What surprised and pleased me was the fact that an equal number of items addressed the teacher and the student as factors in student engagement in the classroom. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the items discussed the role of the teacher and exactly the same percentage discussed the role of the student. The balance in references to both the teacher and the student seemed almost too good to be true. I reviewed the surveys again highlighting the word “teacher” with one colour and the word “student” with another. Out of 59 items “teacher” and “student” each occurred 16 times. Clearly teaching is a partnership between the teacher and the student.

On the subject of the teacher, I found that my students had plenty to say. In fact, I took the title of my article from one student’s comments. She wrote:

First of all, teachers have to be charismatic [underlining not added]. It is fundamental, I think, that the person from whom I am supposed to learn something is someone with whom I can feel connected. I think feeling engaged in a classroom has something to do with feeling engaged to the teacher [underlining added].

This sentence stood out for me and I was immediately struck by the misuse of the preposition “to”. The preposition “with” would be more appropriate here and yet the student’s use of “to” was not simply a grammatical error. This student’s survey was filled with thoughtful and well-written prose. As I read her statement over and over I realized that, whether consciously or subconsciously, she had identified a key element in student engagement, what I call the teaching relationship. Being engaged “to” someone, rather than engaged “with” someone, has a very different connotation. I hope I will not be misunderstood when I suggest that a partnership between the teacher and each student definitely exists. Many respondents spoke of the importance of the relationship between student and teacher. Seventeen percent (17%) of the students mentioned the necessity of liking and/or respecting the teacher as a prerequisite to being engaged. Ten percent (10%) of the students stated that the teacher needs to be “charismatic” in order for them to be engaged in the classroom. The need for the teacher to “show leadership,” “to be confident,” and “not be afraid of her students,” was mentioned by 12% of the respondents. Similarly, 12% of the students surveyed felt it was important that the teacher be “animated.” Eight percent

(8%) of the students expressed the belief that teachers need to “talk to the students” rather than just talk. Six percent (6%) of the students felt that it was essential that teachers “treat students as equals; and not to be “biased” or prejudiced” towards either the material or the students. Another 6%, felt that teachers needed to “share their own opinions and views” and “be honest” with their students. Four percent (4%) felt that the teacher best engaged them if he or she was “relaxed,” “not too strict” and was “fun”. By far the most significant item was the idea that a teacher needed to be “enthusiastic,” “passionate,” and “dynamic”—23% of respondents felt that these characteristics played a role in their level of engagement in class.

Students’ comments were quite eloquent. For example, one student wrote, “I feel engaged in the classroom when the teacher is passionate when she/he teaches. This encourages me to like what they teach me. It inspires me.” Another student wrote, “I feel engaged in the classroom when the teacher is genuinely interested and excited about the subject. Their enthusiasm is often transmitted to the students. I feel that that makes the biggest difference in the way I feel about a class.” Another student referred specifically to one teacher saying, “Ms --- gets so into it, and she teaches history like some sort of fantastic story. I am invested in the story and am utterly captivated.”

Students’ comments about the teacher were very detailed and filled with words like: “charismatic,” “dynamic,” “entertaining,” “involved,” “confident,” “honest,” “open,” “humorous,” “enthusiastic,” “passionate,” “animated,” “energetic,” and “interesting.” The students’ sentiments can best be summarized by the following statement: “It’s not the subject that engages me. I could be sitting in the most boring class (subject) in the world but be totally into it because the teacher makes it worthwhile.”

Students proved to be equally insightful about their own role in classroom learning. I identified all “I” statements as being a reflection upon the student and distinct from all statements beginning with the words “the teacher”. Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents mentioned “being sleep-deprived,” “being tired,” and “not having enough sleep” as impacting negatively on their engagement in class. One student’s comment sums up what was a refrain running through the survey responses, “When I am tired I find it VERY hard to stay engaged” [capital letters not added]. Another factor affecting engagement negatively was being hungry. Nine percent (9%) of the respondents commented on how hunger distracted them in class and that the 3rd period, the one before lunch, was identified as being a problematic one for many students. On a positive note, the same percentage of the students, 9%, reported being more engaged when their own experience was called upon and

when they were “having a good time” in class. Six percent (6%) of the students felt more engaged if they felt they could “be open with a teacher” or “give an opinion freely”. Four percent (4%) felt engaged if they were “creating something” and also when they “understood the material”. Other issues mentioned by 2% of the students were: being required to analyze, having a role to play, being able to problem-solve “without the teacher”, and being given a choice about activities. Two percent (2%) of the respondents also mentioned that they were more engaged when, “not preoccupied with problems,” “when comfortable with my peers,” and also, “when my peers are engaged too.” What struck me about the students’ comments about themselves was how well attuned they are to their own needs. Sadly, many of the factors affecting student engagement are not within their control.

In the category I labelled “What Engages Students” there were significantly higher percentages. Thirty percent (30%) of the students said that they were engaged when “I can relate personally to what is being taught”. One student wrote, “When I can relate personally to the topic being learned it gives me more of a connection and makes me more motivated to work.” Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the respondents felt that they were more fully engaged when the material was “interesting”, “relevant”, “captivating”, “controversial” or “intriguing.” Eleven percent (11%) of the students noted increased engagement if the material being taught was related/connected to current events or to contemporary culture. One student wrote, “I feel engaged in the classroom when the information we are learning is connected to real life and we get to make the connections.” Another student appreciated her teacher, “relating the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to today’s hip-hop culture.” Nine percent (9%) of the respondents felt more engaged when the material being taught was new and not a review of previously taught subject matter. Two percent (2%) of students felt their engagement increased when they perceived the material to be “essential to my future.” One student wrote, “I feel engaged in the classroom when I feel that I am learning something that is useful in life.”

When learning occurs also proved important since 19% of the students commented on the time of the day. Classes at the beginning of the day were problematic for the majority of students. They expressed a preference for classes later in the day when they felt more engaged because of feeling, “fully awake,” “more alert,” and “not so tired”. Two percent (2%) of the students felt that their engagement in a specific class depended on what class came either before or after that class. Two percent (2%) noted that if there was a test later on that day they would not be engaged in the classes that preceded it.

Where learning takes place also affects student engagement. Thirteen per cent (13%) of the students surveyed were influenced, either positively or negatively, by the atmosphere in the classroom. If the classroom was “bright”, “not too busy”, and “relaxed in atmosphere”, they felt better able to engage. Class size also mattered and 2% of the students felt more engaged in smaller classes. As one student wrote, “A smaller class means students are closer and the atmosphere is welcoming; students are more likely to not feel as nervous about participating in class.”

Ultimately, the question of how students are taught proved to be the most compelling category as 29% of the 59 items addressed this issue. Once again students demonstrated considerable insight into the learning process. Well over half of the students surveyed, that is, 66%, reported being most engaged in classroom discussions or debates. One student said, “I feel engaged in the classroom when there is a class discussion I can understand and participate in. I would rather have an interesting class discussion than listen to a lecture or watch a movie.” Another student said, “I feel engaged in the classroom when we have class discussions that involve everyone interacting, where there is an exchange of ideas.” This same student recalled an activity called “Survivo” which we did as an introduction to *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954) in early September. She had a vivid recollection of animated small group and class discussions about priorities in the event of a plane crash during a class trip. One rather philosophical student said, “When we have class discussions it’s possible to hear your thoughts.” Second only to discussion, was a preference for some audio-visual component to the class. Thirty per cent (30%) of the respondents mentioned the desirability of images and/or sound accompanying a lesson. Movies were popular; however, photographs, video clips, posters and, even, overhead transparencies apparently contribute to student engagement. Humour rated very highly with students—17% identified it as something that really engaged them. Students also favoured working in teams or small groups—11% felt this engaged them more. What students called “Getting personal” was also favoured, 9% saying that they engaged more when either the teacher or their peers shared personal stories and anecdotes. Similarly, 9% of students were engaged when the teacher read aloud to them as opposed to only 6% being engaged when the class was involved in silent reading. Only 6% of respondents reported being engaged if a specific task, such as note taking or calculations, was assigned. Other factors students referred to under the heading of how they were taught included: the teacher demonstrating/modelling something; the teacher using /her voice effectively; being given clear explanations of difficult material; using contemporary examples; allowing a hands-on approach; letting students “teach the class”; and maintaining a lively pace. All of these dimensions enable students to engage more readily.

Having spent a great deal of time considering my students’ responses, I was rather reluctant to return to my own list of what engages students. What if I had gotten it all wrong? I was impressed with what all my students had to say—their observations seemed astute. I read over my list with a critical eye and concluded that, while I needed to revise it and add some things, I was, at least, on the right track. I offer my original, unrevised list simply to demonstrate that what teachers know intuitively about teaching often conforms to what students intuitively know about learning.

I engage students in the classroom by:

- having a relationship with them based on unconditional regard
- being passionate about my subject
- valuing their own knowledge and experiences
- connecting literature to real life
- using humour
- making literature relevant and showing how it teaches us about the human experience
- interpreting difficult texts and concepts and teaching students the vocabulary and skills they need
- reading aloud to students
- honouring their writing
- sharing my own writing with my students
- listening to their ideas
- reading the books they recommend to me
- suggesting books they should read
- using various media in the classroom
- introducing them to the author of a text as someone they might like to meet
- being sensitive to the mood in the class and being flexible
- letting people vent in class
- praising their engagement with a text or project
- allowing students choices

- having high expectations and assuming that students are smart enough to “get it” or “do it”
- being honest
- being human

Student engagement requires teacher engagement. If the student is engaged to the teacher it follows that the teacher is also engaged to the student. It's a relationship, and as such, deserves commitment and our best self.

Implications

At a pedagogical morning at the close of the school year, I gave an informal presentation of my “mini study” to my colleagues. They expressed surprise and pleasure at the discovery that the teacher student relationship is so pivotal. Many teachers said that this had always been their understanding, but that to verbalize it had seemed egotistical. My sense, from the feedback I received, was that my fellow teachers value their relationship with their students and get the most reward from this aspect of their profession. If teachers do not usually talk about student engagement in such personal terms, it is probably because they feel that those outside the classroom may not understand the connections that are made within the classroom. We are currently in the midst of implementing educational reform in Quebec. The Quebec Education Plan (2007) is an ambitious plan that “integrates all the subjects into a coherent whole focused on the major issues of contemporary life” (p. 5). Teachers are expected to “develop skills that will enable (students) to become educated and cultivated individuals, involved citizens and competent workers” (p. 4). The curriculum stresses competencies, but also a cultural approach which ensures that “all students have access to a broad culture and “a critical, ethical and aesthetic view of the world” (p.6). The word community is used repeatedly in the Quebec Education Plan (QEP) and schools “must act as agents of social cohesion by helping students learn how to live together and by fostering a feeling of belonging to a community” (p. 5). However, schools and classrooms represent communities and cultures within the greater community. I believe this greater community, the society in which schools exist, needs to engage in more learning about what actually happens in those places to which it sends its young people from Monday to Friday. There is surprisingly little curiosity about schools outside academia. Surely, “What did you do in school today?” should never be an idle question.

References

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Louise Jarrett has been working in education for 24 years. She began as a teacher in a remote posting in Nigeria and then “graduated” to an even more remote school in Arctic Quebec. After seven years at home raising children she applied to her first “regular” teaching job. She has been at Trafalgar School for Girls for the past 14 years, and finds it as challenging and rewarding as her first two teaching experiences in remote places.