

Running Head: ENGAGED CLASSROOM

The Engaged Classroom: A Review and Critique

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## The Engaged Classroom: A Review and Critique

### Introduction: Educations as Entertainment?

Should teachers engage in entertainment and sensationalism and even exaggeration and inaccuracy to gain the attention of students? Does a teacher create an engaged classroom by focusing on provocative and controversial big ideas and enduring understanding goals, or through a typical “coverage” approach?

In the “The Engaged Classroom”, Sam M. Intrator examined and discussed what happened in the hearts and heads of students as they experienced school (Intrator, 2004). What characterizes a classroom where students are completely engaged and energized and find genuine meaning? The author spent 130 days shadowing students in a California high school to find out how students think and feel about their classes, and to try to characterize what happens in a classroom which can allow them to be energized and engaged.

Intrator found that apathy and boredom in the classroom were the major obstacles to learning. How do you create interest in what you are teaching? How do you create an energized learning environment? Are classrooms “dream factories” or deserts? Intrator examined the potential of classrooms to be places where students can be encouraged to use their imaginations and to explore differing and divergent viewpoints and perspectives. But he also discussed how classrooms can be perceived by students as places of sterility and conformity

where students are daily indoctrinated and regimented to accept the societal norms.

A classroom can be a dynamic place where dreams are launched and minds challenged and delighted. A classroom can, on the other hand, be an arid and sterile place where hope is diminished or extinguished and energy is depleted.

Intrador made classroom observations and found that many typical classrooms are tedious and listless.

### Research Findings

Intrador focused on key research findings on student apathy and boredom in the school classroom. In John Goodland's study of secondary schools from 1984, he found that the typical classrooms are places with a "flat neutral emotional ambiance [where]...boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions" (Goodland, 1984).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson in their 1984 study found: "... [T]ime in class is associated with lower-than-average states on nearly every self-report dimension. Most notably, students report feeling sad, irritable, and bored; concentration is difficult; they feel self-conscious and strongly wish they were doing something else" (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

What is "boredom"? Boredom is "weariness brought on by tedious iteration or dullness." The author found classrooms are not only boring, but that there are different states of disengagement and apathy that students shift into.

### Different States of Disengagement

There are different states of disengagement or apathy and student disinterest. During “Slow Time”, class time is monotonous and classroom activities are predictable, mechanically routine, and dull. Students listen to CD players with headphones, read magazines, play cards, play games, daydream, talk, and goof off.

“Lost Time” is a more intense form of disengagement. Students cannot describe or articulate any form of experience. They merely wait for class to end.

During “Fake Time”, students position themselves to appear attentive. Students engage in “doing school” (Pope, 2001). Students engage in the charade of paying attention but instead pass notes, do homework, study for quizzes, and create to-do lists.

During “Worry Time”, students spend their class time worrying and fretting and strategizing about nonacademic, personal issues. These distractions drain their energy to connect emotionally and intellectually to the classroom.

Finally, during “Play Time”, students are generally attentive but are passive. They appear to be engaged in collaborative work but are actually engaged in off-subject conversations.

### Engaged Time

Engaged time is “the grail of teaching”. What is it? It is time when students are deeply immersed in learning. Students become roused to life and animated with feelings and ideas. They show intense concentration in moments that are

provocative, memorable, enchanting, and enjoyable. Students feel involved in what is going on (Intrator, 2004).

The teacher in an engaged classroom made pedagogical decisions in the short term and cultivated a powerful ethos in the long-term. These teachers in the engaged classroom fought fiercely to hold the attention of students. These teachers applied an anti-boredom pedagogy that focused on the attention span of their students. Students are knowledgeable consumers who are savvy shoppers. They are part of a generation that is over-stimulated and that has short attention spans. The engaged teacher applies various strategies and techniques to keep students engaged.

#### Teaching Strategies to Ensure Engagement:

What teaching strategies can a teacher use to ensure or to promote engagement? First, the teacher can manipulate the classroom pace. The teacher can change the pace of the classroom from a fast or frenetic pace with questioning and discussions to a slower pace with quiet journaling. One teacher modeled her approach on MTV's pace using an MTV disc jockey as a model. There are a lot of transitions that jar students into paying attention. Take students outside of class, have guest speakers, show a video, to change the pace.

Second, the teacher can "feed the need to create". Students were most attentive when they are creating or thinking about something new. Have students express their originality. Students showed interest and enthusiasm when they felt they had ownership over ideas expressed. They felt they were safe in class to share their

own ideas. They wanted their ideas to be respected.

Third, the teacher must share their personal presence. A teacher must always strive to be energized and expressive. A teacher should not sit and present monotonous lectures. The teacher has to be passionate and authentic, should tell personal stories, and express emotion and vulnerability. Students want teachers who are real. Teachers have to show a sense of wonder and a passion for what they are teaching.

Fourth, teachers must come to “know students as people.” Students want to be respected as human beings who have interests, fears, quirks, and their own experiences. Teachers must use personal knowledge about students to build bridges to content. Teachers must keep students connected by creating extra-curricular activities and contacts.

Fifth, teachers must be able to connect content to “teen questionings”. Engaged teachers helped students tackle the big ideas of: who they are, where they are going, what talents they have, and what they need to know about their future study. Questions that focused attention were connected to psychosocial dilemmas that all students were facing. Students were taught paradox by engaging in polls to gauge student opinions that allowed them to understand their own generation. One strategy that was used was to construct an “experience wheel” that compared Huckleberry Finn’s experiences with those of the student.

### Winning the Hearts and Minds of Students

How can teachers gain the positive attention of students? We can win the

hearts and minds of students by engaging them in what we teach. In this way, they will find genuine meaning and value in the classroom. The teacher has to gain the attention of the students to achieve a virtuous purpose. That virtuous purpose is to allow the student to find value and meaning in what is being taught by winning the “hearts and minds” of the students.

#### Critique of Content and Perspective of Author

The author uses military and political terms and slogans such as “debrief” and “winning the hearts and minds” from the Vietnam War (Intrator, 2004). The concept of winning the hearts and minds in order to persuade goes back several millennia. John Adams first used it in American history during the American Revolutionary War to describe how the war was won in the hearts and minds of the American people before it was won on the battlefield. President Lyndon Johnson used the term of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War. A U.S. military operation was even created that was geared to “winning the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. The operation sought to build roads, schools, and other infrastructure in South Vietnam. It was, however, primarily a propaganda construct or public relations exercise associated with the “pacification” program. It was an abysmal failure and became associated with military brainwashing and government propaganda. This term has a political and military connotation in American history. Intrator sought to co-opt it for curriculum design. Intrator sought to change the negative and pejorative meaning of this term. Was he successful?

Is this approach valid? Can you take a failed military operation from the Vietnam War that consisted primarily of propaganda and public relations (PR) and apply it to designing curriculum? It is a persuasion technique that relies on deception and self-delusion to achieve its results.

Intrator argued that teachers should apply the techniques and methods of television and capitalist marketing. This means that he is co-opting these non-educational media and applying them to the classroom. Is he making education into a form of entertainment and sensationalism? Do marketing and business strategies belong in the classroom?

Intrator's view is that all of these approaches should be tried to gain the attention of the students. But does Intrator address the underlying cause or reason for student apathy, especially in the instruction of history? What are the underlying causes for student apathy and disinterest in history classes?

### Improving Interest in History

The way history was taught in U.S. schools needed to be improved because of low and failing scores on national tests (Yarema, 2002). Different reasons for this low achievement in history were posited. Differing solutions were proposed. New approaches were proposed that would increase content literacy and interest in history. History instruction cannot be restricted to the traditional textbook-lecture approach, but must include the literature-based approach, more analysis, greater debate and higher order thinking, more in-depth discussion, and an incorporation

of other media such as movies, fiction and literature, biography, and a greater emphasis on primary sources.

The way to improve literacy and interest in history is to implement new proposals. The solution is not found in increasing history instruction quantitatively, but in qualitatively making history more meaningful, real, and vital to students. This can be done by using many different approaches: Integrating literature, fiction, cinema, biography, and primary sources in history instruction will improve interest and literacy. A high level interpretive and critical thinking approach will result.

The author argued that different teaching approaches could improve literacy and interest in history (Yarema, 2002). But a major reason why history is boring, empty, and shallow in the U.S. is because it is government-controlled and government-sanctioned and mandated by the federal, state, and local governments and corporate interests and powerful lobby and interested groups. The author conceded that U.S. publishers of history books were under pressure from “powerful groups” to slant and spin history a certain way. The author also conceded that college professors, “the academic community”, were also responsible for falsifying history and making it boring and self-serving. The academic community was usually more interested in higher salaries than in presenting history in a challenging and unbiased manner. Ultimately, the author did not address the issue of how much influence the U.S. government has in the manufacture and propagation of this “boring” history. What is the role of the

government? The author hints at it but does not address this issue. History books are poorly written, boring, and present biased views because powerful corporate and lobby groups and the U.S. government want it that way (Yarema, 2002). Moreover, the standardization of curricula in U.S. schools has resulted in lower success rates and has made teachers powerless (Sizer, 1984).

How can new approaches to the teaching of history improve interest and literacy when the government and corporate interests do not want improvement? In other words, the new approaches that are proposed are superficial and cosmetic because the underlying problem remains: The U.S. society and the U.S. government do not want history told in an unbiased and critical way. That is the real issue. So long as it is unresolved, new approaches will only marginally improve literacy and interest. The symptoms are addressed, but the underlying causes remain unexamined and unresolved.

American students are “historically illiterate” according to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (Gorn, 2005). The findings of the U.S. History National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were that U.S. students lacked understanding of American and world history and that history is devalued in American education. There are three reasons for why there is a “crisis in learning” (Gorn, 2005). There is inadequate teacher preparation as most social studies teachers did not major or minor in history. Students need to develop research skills, analyze multiple perspectives, and use primary sources. The Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress have

made math, science, and reading priorities but have ignored history. The way to increase literacy is to revise the way history is taught by making it meaningful and engaging and by stressing the use of primary sources. History teachers have to be required to major in the subject area. More money is needed from the government and from private sources. To improve interest and literacy in history, new ways of teaching history are needed, history teachers need to possess a major or minor in history, and greater funding is needed.

Why is there historical illiteracy in the U.S.? The U.S. government and Congress do not regard history as important and thus do not fund programs in history (Gorn, 2005). This reflects the mandate of the American public. The American public regards history as junk. How do you change this opinion? The author offers no answer. Education reflects the goals and objectives of society. The American public has spoken: History is bunk. This is the real issue. The author sidesteps this issue.

How do you make Americans historically literate when they do not want to be so? Math, science, and reading are high priority subjects while history is not. How can this state of affairs be changed? The author offers no real answers. The author argues that history is important and valuable but does not show how this is so. The U.S. government and the majority of the American public disagree with the author.

Reflections on the Implications for Curriculum Development

The implication of the Intrator approach for curriculum development in the classroom is that teachers will be applying marketing and business strategies in curriculum design. Moreover, teachers will be using a persuasion paradigm that the U.S. government and the military typically use. Is this valid? Should education become entertainment? Should the teacher use entertainment, advertising, and even PR and propaganda techniques if they relieve boredom and apathy and generate interest?

The fundamental weakness with Intrator's approach is that it ignored the underlying root causes and reasons for student apathy and boredom, especially in history and social studies classes in general. His approach addressed only the symptoms and not the causes for apathy, boredom, and disinterest. U.S. policy at the federal, state, and local level of government was to devalue history and not to develop critical thinking skills and higher order thinking in history instruction. This was the core reason why history was boring and uninteresting and not intellectually stimulating and challenging. Intrator offered techniques that were effective superficially but which did not address the underlying causes. But so long as the techniques did not address or confront the core causes of apathy and boredom, the results cannot be completely effective and successful.

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Appendix

Powerpoint Presentation: The Engaged Classroom

# The Engaged Classroom

*by*

*Sam Intrator*

*Educational Leadership*

*(September, 2004)*

Article Review and Critique

by

Carl Savich & Glenda Bizzotto

November 21, 2005

# Focus Question #1

Why do you think students are often bored in school?



With the “MTV Generation”, is it the teacher’s job to “entertain” students to get them to pay attention?

# Defining the Problem



- ❖ Students describe their academic experience as listless and tedious.
- ❖ Much school time is wasted because students are not engaged.

# Csikszentmihalyi & Larson study (1984)

Teenagers carried  
electronic pagers  
(randomly  
activated) and self-  
report forms to  
monitor moods.

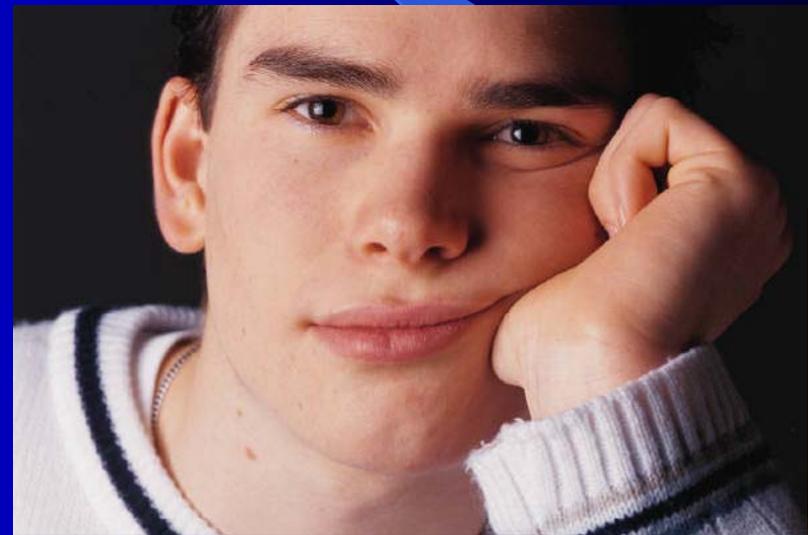


# Csikszentmihalyi & Larson study (1984)

- ❖ “Compared to other contexts in their lives, time in class is associated with lower-than-average states on nearly every self-report dimension.”
- ❖ “Students report feeling sad, irritable, and bored”
- ❖ “Concentration is difficult; they feel self-conscious and strongly wish they were doing something else.”

# States of Disengagement

- ❖ Slow Time
- ❖ Lost Time
- ❖ Fake Time
- ❖ Worry Time
- ❖ Play Time



# Engaged Time

- ❖ Students become animated with feelings and ideas.
- ❖ Teachers fight fiercely to hold students' attention .
- ❖ Students deeply immersed in learning.
- ❖ When attention wanes, teacher intervenes.

# Teaching Strategies to Insure Engagement





# Manipulate Classroom Pace

- ❖ Alternate between fast or frenetic pace with questioning & discussions
- ❖ To Slower pace with quiet journaling.
- ❖ Take students outside of class, have guest speakers, show videos
- ❖ One teacher used the MTV disc jockey format as a model.

# Feed the Need to Create

- ❖ Give opportunities for students to express originality.
- ❖ Students must feel safe to express ideas.
- ❖ Teacher must show respect for all ideas.



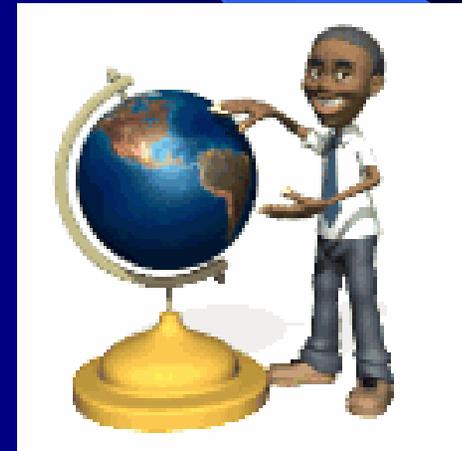
# Know Students as People

- ❖ Be accepting of students' interests, fears, quirks, and experiences.
- ❖ Use personal knowledge about students to build bridges to content.
- ❖ Create extra-curricular contacts and activities.



# Share your Personal Presence

- ❖ Strive to be energized and expressive.
- ❖ Tell personal stories, express emotion and vulnerability.
- ❖ Show a sense of wonder and passion for what you are teaching.





# Connect Content to Teen Questionings

Help students tackle big ideas of:

- ❖ who they are
- ❖ where they are going
- ❖ what talents they have
- ❖ what they need to know

## Focus Question #2

Should teachers engage in entertainment and sensationalism and even exaggeration and inaccuracy to gain the attention of students?



# Conclusion

- The primary weakness with Intrator's approach was that it did not address the underlying root causes and reasons for student apathy and boredom, especially in history and social studies classes in general.
- His approach examined only the symptoms and not the causes for apathy, boredom, and disinterest.
- U.S. policy at the federal, state, and local level of government:
  - 1) devalued history;
  - 2) discouraged the development of critical thinking skills and higher order thinking in history instruction.

This policy was the fundamental core reason why history was boring and uninteresting and not intellectually stimulating and challenging.

In *The Engaged Classroom*, Sam Intrator offered techniques that were effective on the surface but which failed to address the underlying causes for apathy and boredom.

So long as the techniques do not address the underlying core causes of apathy and boredom, the results cannot be completely effective and successful.

The Engaged Classroom  
by  
Sam M. Intrator

A Review and Critique

by

Carl Savich and Glenda Bizzotto

Oakland University

November 21, 2005

# What is engagement?

- 1. What happens in the hearts and heads of students as they experience school?
- 2. What characterizes a classroom where students are completely engaged and energized and find genuine meaning?

# Apathy and Boredom

- Apathy and boredom in the classroom are the major obstacles to learning
- How do you create interest in what you are teaching?
- How do create an energized learning environment?
- 
- Classroom Observations:  
Classrooms are tedious and listless.

# Dream Factories or Deserts?

- Is the Classroom a “Dream Factory” or a “Desert”?
- A classroom can be a dynamic place where dreams are launched and minds delighted.
- A classroom can be an arid and sterile place where hope is diminished or extinguished and energy is depleted.

# Research Findings

- John Goodland (1984) study of secondary schools: Typical classrooms are places with a “flat neural emotional ambiance [where]...boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson study (1984) found: “...[T]ime in class is associated with lower-than-average states on nearly every self-report dimension. Most notably, students report feeling sad, irritable, and bored; concentration is difficult; they feel self-conscious and strongly wish they were doing something else.”

# What is “Boredom”?

Boredom is “weariness brought on by tedious iteration or dullness.”

The author found that classrooms are not only boring, but that there are different states or levels of boredom that students shift into.

# Different States of Disengagement

**Slow Time:** Class time is monotonous and classroom activities are predictable, mechanically routine, and dull. Students listen to CD players with headphones, read magazines, play cards, and daydream.

**Lost time:** A more intense form of disengagement. Students cannot describe or articulate any form of experience. They merely wait for class to end.

**Fake Time:** Students position themselves to appear attentive. Students engage in “doing school” (Pope, 2001). Students engage in the charade of paying attention but instead pass notes, do homework, study for quizzes, and create to-do lists.

**Worry Time:** Students spend their class time worrying and fretting and strategizing about nonacademic issues. These distractions drain their energy to connect emotionally and intellectually to the classroom.

**Play Time:** Students are generally attentive but are passive. They appear to be engaged in collaborative work but are actually engaged in off-subject conversations.

# Engaged Time

Engaged time is “the grail of teaching”. What is it? It is when students are deeply immersed in learning. Students become roused to life and animated with feelings and ideas. They show intense concentration in moments that are provocative, memorable, enchanting, and enjoyable. Students feel involved in what is going on.

The teacher in an engaged classroom made pedagogical decisions in the short term and cultivated a powerful ethos in the long-term. These teachers in the engaged classroom fought fiercely to hold the attention of students.

# Anti-boredom Pedagogy

- These teachers applied an anti-boredom pedagogy that focused on the attention span of their students. Students are knowledgeable consumers in a market capitalist economy who are savvy shoppers who make choices. They are part of a generation that is over-stimulated and that has short attention spans, the TV Generation. The engaged teacher applies various strategies and techniques to keep students engaged that rely on advertising and media techniques.

# Teaching Strategies to Ensure Engagement

## 1. Manipulate Classroom Pace:

Change the pace of the classroom from a fast or frenetic pace with questioning and discussions to a slower pace with quiet journaling. One teacher modeled her approach on MTV's pace. There are a lot of transitions that jar students into paying attention. Take students outside of class, have guest speakers, show a video, to change the pace.

## 2. Feed the Need to Create:

Students were most attentive when they are creating or thinking about something new. Have students express their originality. Students showed interest and enthusiasm when they felt they had ownership over ideas expressed. They felt they were safe in class to share their own ideas. They wanted their ideas to be respected.

# Teaching Strategies to Ensure Engagement

- 3. Share Your Personal Presence:
  - You should strive to be an energized, expressive teacher. You should not sit and present monotonous lectures. The teacher has to be passionate and authentic, should tell personal stories, and express emotion and vulnerability. Students want teachers who are real. Teachers have to show a sense of wonder and a passion for what they are teaching.
- 4. Know Students as People:
  - Students want to be respected as human beings who have interests, fears, quirks, and their own experiences. Use personal knowledge about students to build bridges to content. Keep students connected by creating extra-curricular activities and contacts.
- 5. Connect Content to Teen Questionings:
  - Engaged teachers helped students tackle the big ideas of who they are, where they are going, what talents they have, and what they need to know about their future study. Questions that focused attention were connected to psychosocial dilemmas that all students were facing. Students were taught paradox by engaging in polls to gauge student opinions that allowed them to understand their own generation. One strategy is to construct an “experience wheel” that compared Hucklenberry Finn’s experiences with those of the student.

# Winning the Hearts and Minds of Students

How do teachers gain the positive attention of students?

Teachers can win the hearts and minds of students by engaging them in what we teach.

In this way, students will find genuine meaning and value in the classroom.

The teacher has to gain the attention of the students to achieve a virtuous purpose. That virtuous purpose is to allow the student to find value and meaning in what is being taught.

# Criticisms of Approach

- The engagement techniques and strategies were shown by Sam M. Intrator to be effective in increasing the level of student engagement.
- The inherent weakness of this approach, however, is that it addresses only the superficial or surface symptoms of student apathy and boredom.
- The issue that needed to be addressed was governmental and societal policies in the U.S. that discourage critical thinking and higher order thinking when applied to history. History instruction has been devalued by American society and the U.S. government.
- Engagement techniques and strategies, to be entirely and fully successful and effective, must address the core causes for apathy and boredom