

# Nurturing Engaged and Empowered Learners

*By Greg Duncan*

The 5<sup>th</sup> grade French students are all circled up, and the teacher has just finished telling them about her first visit to Versailles. The students heard about this incredible palace, about famous people who have lived there—and even lost their heads—and what the palace and grounds are like today. The teacher now wants to give the students the opportunity to show off what they understand. So she poses a series of questions to which she is met with lots of raised hands. A thrilling response for any teacher! She calls on as many students as possible in the short time that remains for the lesson and leaves the experience feeling

quite good about how well the students listened and showed their understanding.

It would be easy to see why a teacher would feel satisfied with the scenario above. Students sat quietly, they listened to the teacher, they enthusiastically wanted to respond to the teacher's questions, and those who were called upon correctly answered the questions. So what on earth could possibly be amiss in that scenario?

There are two fundamental questions that could be posed about the Versailles lesson: (1) How does the teacher *know* that the students were paying attention as she talked about her trip to the palace, and (2) how many people showed their understanding of

what they heard? Answers to these questions become critically important if we are to ensure that learning has happened, instead of assuming that it has.

The teacher might say that she knows that her students were paying attention because they were quiet, they weren't distracted, they watched her and they even provided facial evidence of following along. But is it safe to assume that these displays are evidence of paying attention? Sam Intrator (2004) writes about how students have learned to "do school" by producing all the outward signs of engagement while retreating behind a façade to attend to "things" deemed more interesting to them.

A supposed listener may nod and make eye contact but may be thinking about something totally unrelated to what is being said. It happens all the time. We are all guilty of it.

But what about all those raised hands? Didn't they indicate students had listened and were eager to answer? Not necessarily. Some students raise their hands to give the appearance of being prepared to answer because they know that they will not likely get called upon so they live much of their time beneath the radar. And what happens to the students who were willing and wanted to answer the questions but didn't get called upon? In the particular situation described above, the teacher was only calling on one student at a time.

Current thinking within education circles suggests that if students are not engaged they might not be learning. And if they are not learning, all of us—students and teachers—are wasting our time. The Teacher Effectiveness in Language Learning (TELL) Project spells out within its planning domain that teachers should plan lessons “that contain learning experiences designed to keep all learners engaged all the time.” Himmele and Himmele (2011) tell us that “unless you intentionally plan for and require students to demonstrate active participation and cognitive engagement . . . you have no way of knowing what students are learning until it's often too late to repair misunderstanding” (p.4). So, the very clear message seems to be that if the teacher cannot see that students are engaged, learning is questionable. And, as TELL reminds us, it's not one or two learners engaged but ALL learners and ALL the time.

Let's go back to the scenario about Versailles. The teacher has told a story that she feels students will likely be interested in. And she thinks the students understood it and were engaged because of their attentiveness. How can the teacher validate her hunches in a way that has all of her students engaged all of the time? In their well-known book, *Total Participation Techniques*, Himmele and Himmele suggest many ways that teachers can check for understanding and have all students engaged in the learning process. Here are a few of the strategies they discuss that could be used by our teacher during and following the account of her visit to Versailles.

**Turn and Talk** (during the story or as follow-up)

Before the teacher poses a question, she

announces that when she asks the question, she wants everyone to say nothing but to think about his or her response [this avoids the blurting out of the answer which can cut off thinking and provides everyone with the opportunity to think about their answer before being asked to give it]. Then, after ten seconds or so, the teacher directs students to turn to their elbow partner and share their thoughts.

**Whiteboards** (during the story or as follow-up)

Using individual whiteboards, students write their responses to questions posed by the teacher. When the teacher gives the signal, all students hold up their whiteboards (responses), which serves as an immediate check for understanding.

**Quick Draw** (during the story or as follow-up)

Students draw images of things they heard in the story. No words are necessary—students are just capturing what they heard. Then, as students share, the images spark the words they will use to describe what they heard.

**Quick Write** (follow-up)

Similar to Quick Draw, students write down everything they can remember from the teacher's story. These thoughts can be single words or phrases and don't have to be complete sentences. This strategy is about getting on paper all that you can remember.

Once time is called (no more than two minutes), the teacher can ask students to share their recollections with their elbow partner.

**Chalkboard Splash** (follow-up)

Using available board space and supplemental flip chart sheets taped to the wall, students are asked to choose a section of writing surface and to write down—using words or phrases—as much as they can remember about the story the teacher told. Once time is called, the teacher provides students with a handout that contains three columns labeled “Similarities,” “Differences,” and “Surprises,” and students are given five minutes to do a gallery walk during which they will make notes on their handout. Once completed, the teacher can instruct the students to pair or get into groups of three to share their observations.

In each of the strategies suggested above, every student is involved and that involvement is visible to the teacher. Students are not able to hide or be shielded by more eager students or, in the case of some, to be eclipsed by more aggressive students who do

not give the opportunity for quieter students to respond. Involved students are engaged students, and engaged students are learners. Harry and Rosemary Wong, in their book *The First Days of School*, which has emboldened many a beginning teacher, tell us “the person who is doing the work is the ONLY one who learns,” (p.204). Teachers must do the deep planning that is required to ensure that, during the learning experience, it is indeed the student who is working and who is learning. Engaged learners are also empowered learners. They have discovered the feeling of accomplishment that accompany learning, and they have gained valuable, life-long insights into its power and benefits.

Teachers see the future everyday in their classrooms. It is represented in the face of each student they encounter. Building a strong future means developing human beings who believe that learning is valuable and inherently interesting. For that to occur, students must experience learning that involves them, is worthy of their time, and captures their commitment, energy and enthusiasm. And that takes teachers who intentionally and skillfully plan to make such learning happen.

#### SOURCES CITED

Himmele, Pe, and William Himmele. *Total Participation Techniques Making Every Student an Active Learner*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2011. Print.  
Intrator, Sam. “The Engaged Classroom.” *Educational Leadership* 62.1 (2004): 20-25. Print.  
Teacher Effectiveness for Language Learning Project (n.d.). *Teacher Effectiveness for Language Learning Framework*. Retrieved March 27, 2015 from <http://www.tellproject.org>  
Wong, Harry K., and Rosemary T. Wong. *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*. Second ed. Mountain View: Harry K. Wong Publications, 1998. Print.

**Greg Duncan**, president of InterPrep, Inc. and a foreign language educator for more than thirty-five years, is an independent consultant who serves K-12 schools, teacher preparation institutions, and other education organizations educationally focused entities throughout the United States and abroad. His work with schools includes professional development of teachers, curriculum and assessment design, and program evaluation, and he serves the professional organization community as an invited speaker at state, regional, national, and international language conferences.

