

Setting the Stage for **Student Engagement**

by Jan Richards

In the much-loved movie *Stand and Deliver*, Jaime Escalante sports a chef's hat and chops apples into fractional parts while peppering his high school math students with questions. He probes. He explains. He demonstrates. The classroom is alive with enthusiasm and learning. We catch a glimpse of a gifted teacher's talent for generating an atmosphere of connectedness and focus—powerful qualities that bring out the best in students.

Most of us have experienced such moments of "student engagement" when every learner seems utterly focused on the task, and time seems to stand still. They are what teachers live for. You wish you could capture the exhilaration of these moments to sustain yourself through those exhausting, miserable days when everything seems to go wrong. State standards emphasize the importance of student engagement as do countless articles and research studies (Wentzel 1997; Goodenow 1993; Teven and McCroskey 1997). But such an admonition is worth little unless it can be translated into your day-to-day life in the classroom.

So the big question is: *What can I do to prolong these exhilarating*

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moments and increase the chances that my students will be fully engaged during a lesson?

Outstanding teachers reflect on this question often. They consider whether a particular lesson was developmentally appropriate, and they rethink their choice of a teaching model. They fine-tune their knowledge and skills to increase the likelihood of student engagement. Like the successful director of an upcoming play, they consider myriad contextual factors to be important as well: issues of *time, space, materials, and relationships*.

Issues of Time

- Ask yourself whether the length of time for this lesson is appropriate to your students' age and developmental level. Are you talking too long, not noticing that eyes are wandering and students are shifting restlessly? Too much information given in one block of time can be as futile as attempting to pour a quart of sand into a one-cup container. Students need time to absorb material. Research has shown that information given in smaller chunks of time can result in a more positive outcome. Often a short break or change of location will keep the momentum going.
- Do you strive for a balance among cognitive, social, and kinesthetic experiences? One teacher in my master's level class offered this suggestion: "The way I keep students engaged is to do a *Pair-Share 10 and 2*. After I talk for 10 minutes, I let the kids

discuss what I just said with a buddy for two minutes."

- Have you anticipated the time involved for each part of the lesson? For example, was the time moving to learning centers or cleanup figured in? Transitions from one activity to the next can prompt a loss of focus. These times of transition are like walking through a minefield full of distractions. Be aware of potential triggers and plan accordingly.
- Are you planning to give this lesson at an appropriate time of the day, week, or year? A great first lesson on fractions given just before lunch on the day of a field trip or on a holiday—like Halloween or Valentine's Day—likely will be counterproductive. Match your lesson requiring high concentration with a time of the day or month most conducive to mental clarity, and the quality of student engagement will be strengthened.

Issues of Space

- Does your arrangement of desks encourage on-subject conversation? Can students move easily from facing you for instruction to a group formation? Wasted time spent moving chairs or desks, as well as inadequate space, can break the flow of engagement. Are there sufficient walkways between desks and groups? Feeling crowded or having one's back to the teacher can be another invitation to distraction.
- In your arrangement of desks or

tables, be aware of the “action zone”—those students located in the center front of the room who participate most. Groups that fall outside this zone often will be less engaged. This problem is solved by moving around to talk from various spots in the room during the lesson. When all children experience close proximity, they are more inclined to stay engaged.

Issues of Materials

- Are all needed materials ready and available when the lesson begins? Having to stop and look for papers, a sample project, or marking pens tends to break the smooth flow you are after. Time invested in planning well, doing a trial run on that experiment, or making sure you have enough glue and scissors for a project (or red construction paper *before* February 14) will keep your positive momentum going.
- Use hands-on materials and manipulatives when possible and appropriate. One of my student teachers was presenting a lesson to first graders. Her lesson planning on adjectives was flawless; but when she began to pass around *one* stuffed animal for each child to describe with an adjective, the result was predictable. By the third little anxious pair of hands, 17 others were beginning to show impatience or boredom. The moral is that the more students are involved *firsthand*, the higher the student engagement. If each student had been given a small object to hold, the focus on adjectives might have been better maintained.

- Having a smooth procedure for passing out materials and collecting them also can enhance student engagement. Another student teacher went to great lengths explaining the principles of landscape drawing to third graders. He covered simple concepts of creating perspective using line and intensity of color. They got it! They were ready to create! The drawing paper, however, was in the cupboard. When this teacher asked the group captains to get paper for their tables, the chaos began. *Which* cupboard? *What kind* of white paper? This potentially rich experience was weakened because a predictable and practiced procedure for distributing paper was missing.

Issues of Relationship

The most powerful influence you can have on your students is realized through your personality: your smile, your humor, your praise and caring.

Part of this “connecting” with students is through your words. Think about the quality of your voice. When Hollywood wants to portray a disliked or ineffective teacher, the vocal timbre is predictable: monotone and expressionless, high-pitched and shrill, or the shouting, intimidating tirade of a drill sergeant. These are caricatures, of course, but the negative image is a reminder of the importance of voice quality. Listen to yourself on a tape sometime. Is your voice quality pleasant? Do you use inflection and modulation effectively? Remember: your students listen to teachers talk up to six hours a day! Try to be conscious of conversing in a lower register, which is more pleasant to the ears of your listeners. Voice quality can improve with practice.

When students believe that their teacher enjoys teaching and genuinely likes them, they are more willing to put effort into their own learning. According to research, students have reported that feeling liked by the teacher is more important to them than is a teacher who is knowledgeable about the subject. According to Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996, 255), “Teachers who care about their students are remembered, effect change, stimulate growth, and are more likely to be successful at teaching their students.” The great learning theorist Lev Vygotsky (as quoted in Wong and Wong 2001) would agree: “The relationship between children and their teachers is not incidental, but rather is the central component of their learning. Human development occurs within the context of real relationships. We learn from whom we love.”

Many of our students have obstacles to overcome: economic disadvantages, racial discrimination, or academic weakness. Your attitude of enthusiasm, acceptance, and encouragement can go a long way toward keeping them engaged in their pursuit of lifelong learning. It is not just what you *do* but who you *are* in the classroom that encourages engagement and provides so many children with hope for a bright future. 🟩

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