Student Engagement or Simply Participation: How Does a Beginning Teacher Know?

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Abstract

Student engagement that yields positive learning outcomes may be tricky to measure. While teachers might consider behaviors such as hand raising as evidence of engagement, observation alone fails to capture motivational factors behind true engagement. To measure engagement, the authors developed an informal tool that allows teachers at all levels to assess their effectiveness in delivering engaging instruction across varying classroom activities and topics.

Keywords: assessment, engagement

For learners of all ages, levels of engagement have been proven to correlate positively with student educational outcomes. Some of the positive outcomes correlated with high levels of engagement include increases in retaining students’ interest in school (Yair, 2000), higher levels of academic achievement (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Joselowsky, 2007), increases in retention rates (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011), and lower dropout rates (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009).

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Wasserstein (1995) stated that engagement is not just students keeping busy, but rather when they are being self-motivated. Self-motivation comes from a desire to understand something interesting or to learn in order to achieve personal goals. Teachers can increase their effectiveness by developing the ability to discern the difference between a student who is truly engaged in learning and a student who is simply participating and behaving. The discernment of this distinction suggests a more complete definition of engagement.

Engagement has been defined as the involvement, interest, and connectedness learners have with their courses, one another, and their institution of instruction (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Adding to this definition, Newman (1992) noted that engaged students make a psychological investment in learning, as evidenced by their taking pride in understanding the material and incorporating it into their lives. Schlechty (2011) further explained that students who are highly engaged are focused and invested in what they are doing; their learning is accomplished with the idea that the topic has perceived purpose and value.
These definitions suggest that engagement extends beyond participation and includes students’ interests and motivations. Even when students are participating and behaving, a teacher cannot assume motivation behind that participation. Better understanding the construct of engagement is an important step toward creating a valid measure of student engagement.

Why Assess Engagement?
The measurement of engagement is primarily important because teachers may use the information aggregated from engagement assessment to make data-driven decisions that serve to propel instruction toward more engaging classroom delivery formats and environments. What better way to know how to teach than finding out what methods are most engaging to students? Teachers easily can calculate percentages of students at each engagement level and compare percentages among lesson types and content areas. For example, does a higher percentage of students indicate “true” engagement during collaborative plans or during Socratic discourse? How do percentages of engagement rates vary among math classes? How do levels of engagement differ among low- and high-achieving students? If classroom data suggest that students in a seventh-grade science class are more engaged during interactive lecture than during group work, then a teacher can provide more interactive lecture deliveries and thereby improve the level of student engagement in the learning environment. The notion of teachers attending to true engagement is in accord with the Common Core State Standards that emphasize instructing students in meaningful ways.

Teachers are under tremendous pressure to raise the levels of student performance by informally and formatively assessing academic progress. The checklist presented here extends the academic assessments to capture underlying motives for learning and provide a more comprehensive understanding of class dynamics that could positively impact academic progress.

Engagement Measurement Procedure
The research suggesting easy and effective methods for teachers to measure engagement is limited (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005). Handelsman et al. (2005) created a measurement of engagement tool, including more than 20 factors of engagement, which was intended specifically for college use. The tool presented here, which was developed by the authors of this article as part of a grant, is intended as a simpler, yet valid, informal assessment for use by teachers at all age levels. This five-item, theoretically based checklist easily allows students to describe their engagement level.

Theoretical Base of Engagement
The checklist gets its theoretical base from the work of Schlechty (2011), a nationally recognized engagement specialist who runs a center that promotes student engagement for classroom educators. He has operationalized the construct of engagement by delineating five levels of student engagement, summarized here:

1. True Engagement. The student sees the activity as personally meaningful and worthy of trying to “get it right.”

2. Strategic Compliance. The reasons for doing the work are not related to the true nature of the task itself; rather, the student is concerned about grades, rank, acceptance, and approval.

3. Ritual Compliance. The student seeks to avoid confrontation or disapproval and is focused on minimum requirements.

4. Retreatism. The student is disengaged from current goals and is thinking about other things.

5. Rebellion. The student is completely disengaged and acting out.

Validity of the Checklist
The five checklist items that measure student engagement are based on Schlechty’s (2011) levels. The theoretical base of the checklist helps ensure that teachers are actually assessing engagement and not another factor such as participation or behavior.

The checklist serves as a formative, informal assessment and is not subject to the same requirements of evidence of validity and estimations of reliability as high-stakes tests. However, the grant team wanted to make certain that the checklist statements were assessing the construct of engagement and that each checklist item was representative of each level of engagement.

Select the statement that best describes your engagement. Choose only one.

- I saw this assignment as meaningful and believe something of worth may be accomplished by doing this task. (True Engagement)
- I saw this assignment as something I did because it was expected of me to complete. (Strategic Compliance)
- I saw this assignment as having little to no meaning to me and completed it to avoid getting in trouble. (Ritual Compliance)
- I saw this assignment as having no meaning to me and was thinking about other things while completing it. (Retreatism)
- I saw this assignment as having no relevance and I misbehaved while completing it. (Rebellion)

(Based on Schlechty’s 2011 theory of engagement)

Additionally, the experiences of each judge must be described. Five content experts were asked independently to rate the alignment of each checklist item with the level of engagement it was intended to represent. Three of the experts were tenured education professors representing each level of K–adult learning, including elementary, secondary, and adult education. The other two experts were psychology professors; one was an expert in measurement, and the other a specialist in educational psychology.

Each expert was given a Likert scale with ratings from 1 to 5 and asked to rate and comment on the degree to which they thought each item represented the associated engagement level. All checklist items were rated on average between 4.56 and 5.0, indicating a strong degree of alignment between items and levels. Following the expert review, small revisions in wording were made to the checklist. Table 1 displays the checklist responses (or engagement statements) that represent each engagement level for middle and secondary students. These statements may be reworded so that they are age appropriate, making the checklist useful for assessing engagement at all K–adult levels.

**Using the Engagement Checklist**

Any teacher or inservice instructor can use this informal assessment checklist in a variety of ways that make it fun for students. The goal is to have the students indicate their level of engagement following an assignment, without penalty, by selecting the statement on the checklist that best describes their engagement. After students have indicated their level of engagement, the teacher can tally the percentages of students at each level. To enhance usability, some ways to get students to indicate their engagement are suggested.

One method is to have students indicate their engagement level on a magnetic, dry-erase board using a variety of magnets. A laminated card for each engagement category may be taped across the top of the board and vertical lines drawn between the cards to create columns for each statement where students can place the magnets. Alternatively, each student could get a card with the engagement statements listed and a circle to the left of each statement for selection. Students could mark their engagement level and drop the cards in a basket as they exit the room.

**Implications of Assessing Engagement**

Teachers may discover additional ways to present the engagement statements and for students to indicate their level of engagement. The important thing for new teachers to understand is the need to measure engagement in a research-based way and to understand that this assessment can be easily done. The data from informal assessment of a teachers’ ability to deliver engaging instruction also allows new teachers the opportunity to provide their evaluators information about their teaching that sets them apart.

**References**


Wasserstein, P. (1995). What middle schoolers say about other things while completing it. (Retreatism)