

Engaging Students in Learning

Charlotte Danielson – Framework for Teaching

Student engagement in learning is the centerpiece of the Framework for Teaching; all other components contribute to it. When students are engaged in learning, they are not merely “busy,” nor are they only “on task.” Rather, they are intellectually active in learning important and challenging content. The critical distinction between a classroom in which students are compliant and busy, and one in which they are engaged, is that in the latter students are developing their understanding through what they do. That is, they are engaged in discussion, debate, answering “what if?” questions, discovering patterns, and the like. They may be selecting their work from a range of (teacher-arranged) choices, and making important contributions to the intellectual life of the class. Such activities don’t typically consume an entire lesson, but they are essential components of engagement.

A lesson in which students are engaged usually has a discernible structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end, with scaffolding provided by the teacher or by the activities themselves. Student tasks are organized to provide cognitive challenge, and then students are encouraged to reflect on what they have done and what they have learned. That is, the lesson has closure, in which teachers encourage students to derive the important learning from the learning tasks, from the discussion, or from what they have read. Critical questions for an observer in determining the degree of student engagement are “What are the students being asked to do? Does the learning task involve thinking? Are students challenged to discern patterns or make predictions?” If the answer to these questions is that students are, for example, filling in blanks on a worksheet or performing a rote procedure, they are unlikely to be cognitively engaged.

In observing a lesson, it is essential not only to watch the teacher but also to pay close attention to the students and what they are doing. The best evidence for student engagement is what students are saying and doing as a consequence of what the teacher does, or has done, or has planned. And while students may be physically active (e.g., using manipulative materials in mathematics or making a map in social studies), it is not essential that they be involved in a hands-on manner; it is, however, essential that they be challenged to be “minds-on.”

The elements of engaging students in learning are:

Activities and assignments

The activities and assignments are the centerpiece of student engagement, since they determine what it is that students are asked to do. Activities and assignments that promote learning require student thinking that emphasizes depth over breadth and encourage students to explain their thinking.

Grouping of students

How students are grouped for instruction (whole class, small groups, pairs, individuals) is one of the many decisions teachers make every day. There are many options; students of similar background and skill may be clustered together, or the more-advanced students may be spread around into the different groups. Alternatively, a teacher might permit students to select their own groups, or they could be formed randomly.

Instructional materials and resources

The instructional materials a teacher selects to use in the classroom can have an enormous impact on students' experience. Though some teachers are obliged to use a school's or district's officially sanctioned materials, many teachers use these selectively or supplement them with others of their choosing that are better suited to engaging students in deep learning—for example, the use of primary source materials in social studies.

Structure and pacing

No one, whether an adult or a student, likes to be either bored or rushed in completing a task. Keeping things moving, within a well-defined structure, is one of the marks of an experienced teacher. And since much of student learning results from their reflection on what they have done, a well-designed lesson includes time for reflection and closure.

Indicators include:

- Student enthusiasm, interest, thinking, problem-solving, etc.
- Learning tasks that require high-level student thinking and invite students to explain their thinking
- Students actively “working,” rather than watching while their teacher “works.”
- Suitable pacing of the lesson; neither dragged out nor rushed, with time for closure and student reflection

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