Teaching Engaged Students



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This post is eighth of a series based on excepts from my book on *Student-Engaged Assessment: Strategies to Empower All Learners* by Laura Greenstein and Mary Ann Burke (2020). You can purchase the book from Roman and Littlefield for charts, examples, and worksheets on how to engage students to become owners of their learning successes.

Teacher Examples of Engaging Students in a Classroom

Mr. Kee likes to introduce a new lesson with a story that cultivates interest and attention, raises curiosity, or presents a mystery about the topic. Sometimes, as he uses an image or object to introduce a new concept, he also models a think aloud. One time, he showed a picture of an ending or outcome of an occurrence for students to ask questions about what it is and how it came to be. Another time he asked his middle schoolers about the Little Red Hen’s process of decision making.

Engaging Students with Learning Outcomes

He then introduces the big picture standard and describes three to four measurable learning outcomes for the lesson. Learning begins with an individual reflection or analysis of the topic. Students then work in small groups to gather additional information that may be needed to move forward with their learning, problem-solving, or investigation. As they track their progress, they continually self-assess learning in relation to the learning intentions. They also take brief practice/formative assessments during learning.

Modifying Learning Goals for Individualized Student Needs

Mr. Kee notes that some of the students clearly understand the process and outcomes, others need additional review, and several need focused tutoring. Before the grade level common assessment, he groups students into those that would benefit from enrichment, those that need further review and reinforcement, and a choice of tutorials for other students. In doing so, he notices that his students are more engaged and show reduced stress responses.

On the one-hand, rote learning takes the joy out of learning and can make learning tedious. On the other hand, electronic devices and games in the classroom can distract learners or simply be gamified rote learning. Maintaining a focus on learning outcomes, purposes, and

processes can be challenging when the distractions are so attractive.

Sometimes diversions do work out for the best. Think about the unintended development of sticky notes by Spencer Silver as he was trying to invent a super-strong adhesive. Microwave ovens were invented when Percy Spencer, a radar scientist, noticed that the candy bars in his jacket pocket had melted. In the classroom, sometimes a distraction can benefit learning. And thinking about one problem can lead to solutions of others.

Stretching Learning to Higher Levels

Stefan planned to learn more about radiation emanating from hand-held electronic devices and to make recommendations for reducing exposure to it. Pretty soon, his teacher discovered that Stefan was designing an electromotive force (EMF) shielding device for his head. Stefan explained that he lived near overhead high voltage power lines and wanted to protect his family. It was a dilemma for Ms. Wren to decide whether to let him continue on this alternative path. After their discussion, they agreed that Stefan could explain what he learned about EMFs and show how his device might prevent potential brain damage whatever their source. He agreed that recording his steps and sequences in a graphic organizer would confirm that he developed an understanding of the basic concepts of radiation. They also decided that he would include a fact sheet comparing the fact and fiction of EMFs.

Stretching thinking to higher levels is not only for older students. Prompts and activities can be thoughtfully placed within most learning. Ask students to predict what a character will do next and brainstorm alternative decisions. Ask students to generate questions about a picture of early settlers or the Mars landing.

Ensuring Regular Student Check-ins

For many students, routine check-ins and intentional refocusing can make a big difference. It's a good idea to periodically check on the destination and even take a brief layover to reaffirm or revise goals and outcomes. In a student-engaged classroom, flexibility is essential. Take the time to refocus and realign learning by relying on reflective prompts such as "Am I still working towards my goal? or "How can I get back on the path? and "What if I found something else that interests me more?"

Check in on student understanding by asking them to "right the wrong" or incorrect answers to a math problem, capitalizing letters, verbs verses adjectives, labeling organs in the body, or following steps in a recipe or experiment. Examples include:

> At the start of the lab, the first thing Rosie did was *turn on the burner*. _____
> Which of these is not in the right place in the picture: the *heart, lungs, liver, stomach, or intestines?*_____
> _____

Jetta wanted to smell the peach so she used her *nose.*_____

The first prime number is *3.*_____

World War II ended in *1943.*_____

Another strategy is to give students cards for something that happens in a sequence such as getting ready to go to school or photosynthesis. This can be done with a partner, or in groups. The following are examples of how assessment can become more engaging and meaningful:

- Make real world connections like what would happen if we had the Black Plague today?
- Incorporate fun and humor in learning: Have students make up riddles such as “Why shouldn’t you tell secrets in the vegetable garden?” with an answer of “because of the beanstalk.”
- Review with student generated responses to “Two Truths and a Lie” game.
- Ask a whole class to “spot the fake” headline and then ask students to write real and fake headlines to summarize their learning and for classmates to sort.
- Play student designed games, such as Jeopardy or Trivia.
- Make it fun: shape playdough, play charades, write a song, create “Wanted” posters, or make a map.

Our January 11th post will explain how students assess their learning outcomes. For more charts, examples, and worksheets on how to engage students to own their learning, you can purchase *Student-Engaged Assessment:*

Strategies to Empower All Learners by Laura Greenstein and Mary Ann Burke (2020) from Roman and Littlefield.