



Student Engagement Handout

Prepared by Kathy Klein for Week of Teaching Session – November 6, 2019

Reflections: Does Learning Require Students to be Engaged?

We all appreciate that teaching students in higher education is complex and some faculty report it is becoming more difficult and challenging. Now consider what is like to be a student in our classroom. What can we learn from the student behaviors we observe? What does it mean when students are spending our entire class on a cell phone or engaged in other tasks? Students will be engaged in something during our course time. We are effective teachers when we engage students in learning. If a student is engaged in texting on a cell phone, is it fully the student's problem or might I be missing opportunities as the faculty teaching the course to keep my students engaged?

We're all learners and everyone benefits from being fully engaged in the learning process. Think about sitting as a participant through an all-day conference or workshop, would you honestly say you focus and absorb all the information presented in that format? Are you pulling out a phone or tablet to check your email? Why are you not fully engaged in the topic being presented? For those of us of a certain generation, our school experience largely involved sitting in our desk, listening to the teacher, taking notes, studying and trying to get good grades. We claim we learned, but what did we retain? How did we retain what we truly learned?

Have you had an opportunity to experience a conference, workshop or course based on active learning with lots of opportunities for movement, activities, discussion, solving problems, questioning and information processing? Research indicates increased effectiveness and retention of learning with this kind of active teaching approach. Students benefit from talking and engaging with one another, with course content, and with the faculty. Students need time to process a response after a question is asked, they benefit from explaining information, sharing thoughts and providing opinions. Students learn more when they discuss concepts with each other and will remember more of what they learn. This is an important feature of the adult learner. Learning is most effective when the "student" is engaged. Is my class promoting student engagement through active learning strategies or is my teaching a little more "traditional"?

Five Levels of Student Engagement

Educational research is clear in demonstrating that the more time students spend engaged with learning during instruction, the more they learn and retain. What levels of student engagement are observed in our classrooms? How is this impacted by the course design we've selected and implemented as faculty? Schlechty (2002) defines five levels of student engagement. Think about students in your class. What levels are observed?

1. **Authentic Engagement**—students are immersed in work/activities with personal meaning and value (discussing a topic of personal interest)

2. **Ritual Compliance**—the work/activity has little or no immediate meaning to students, but students are engaged because of extrinsic outcomes of value (earning high grades)
3. **Passive Compliance**—students view work/activity as having little or no meaning, but participate/expend effort to avoid negative consequences (failing the course)
4. **Retreatism**—students are disengaged from work/activity (observed texting on phone) and make no attempt to comply with work/activity, but are not disruptive to others. Learning is unlikely to occur.
5. **Rebellion**—students refuse to do the assigned task, act disruptive, and attempt to substitute alternative activities creating some-major disruption (viewing social media sites that distract students within viewing distance). Learning does not occur.

Three Categories of Classroom Engagement

When considering the 5 levels of student engagement, we note that the level may vary from student to student and over time. We may want to consider the classroom category for our course. Schlechty (2002) outlined three categories useful for measuring the level of engagement based on the entire classroom.

1. **The Engaged Classroom:** We will note that all/most students are authentically engaged at least most/some of the time. We rarely observe passive compliance and retreatism. We would not have rebellion.
2. **The Compliant Classroom:** The compliant classroom is a reflection of “traditional” education and is noted to be orderly with the appearance that most students are working. Despite appearance we can’t infer that learning is occurring as retreatism is common in the compliant classroom.
3. **The Off-Task Classroom:** Retreatism and rebellion are observed in the off-task classroom. Students typically fend for themselves with some degree of engagement and passive compliance. Faculty may need to address rebelling students which reduces time available for other students.

Ways to Increase Student Engagement

There are many ways to increase student engagement in traditional classrooms as well as hybrid and online courses. Activities we choose and select will depend on a variety of factors. We appreciate that when our students are engaged, authentic learning takes place and students learn more efficiently and retain more learning.

The [Center for Learning Design](#) is happy to discuss ideas for your classroom. You are invited to explore available website resources including a listing of available [professional development activities](#).

Reference: Schlechty, P.C. (2002) *Working on the work: An action plan for teachers, principals, and superintendents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Education Series.