Enhancing Student Engagement: Exploring the Participating, Investing, and Driving Pathways of a Continuum Framework

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Enhancing Student Engagement: Exploring the Participating, Investing, and Driving Pathways of a Continuum Framework

How do teachers know if their students are truly engaged in a learning activity? What does student engagement sound like and look like inside a learning space? How is student engagement described to someone that is not familiar with student learning? Each academic year in K-12 schools, the term student engagement is widely used to describe student actions and behaviors. The meaning of student engagement has substantially changed over time. For example, Kuh (2008) describes student engagement as, “the extent to which [students] take part in educationally effective practices.” Eccles (2016) postures, “[T]he popularity and seeming familiarity of engagement as a “concept” brings with it the danger that, although we believe we are communicating well, we are actually talking about different things.” Accordingly, in recent history, teachers were seeking overt [observable] behaviors in their students as a measure to prove they were engaged in the learning. From writing on a mini whiteboard to participating in a discussion prompt with a shoulder partner; a student’s level of engagement was determined by the demonstrated behaviors the teacher could see happening in the learning space. Today, teachers are focusing on student ownership in the classroom as an outcome to learner engagement surpassing the days of mere overt (observable) behaviors.

This broad spectrum of differing student engagement perspectives has caused unclear expectations for students within U.S. classrooms. In fact, these definitions reveal a unified need for clarity on what it means for students to be truly engaged in today’s public education classroom. As we become clearer with, or accustomed to, the look and feel of being engaged in a learning task, we must land on a solid and representative understanding of what student engagement is and the power it holds for students achieving learning outcomes. Thus, an examination of a simplified, yet effective, continuum of student engagement with undercurrent strategies is needed to bring clarity around a sustainable practice and conceptual understanding.

Before detailing this continuum for student engagement, a visual is offered to first better understand the interconnectedness between three critical components that represent overlapping consistency for students engaging in learning. When all three pieces work in an intersecting synchronization, the result is genuine engagement.

Figure 1: A Model of Engagement by Design

![Figure 1: A Model of Engagement by Design](chart1)

As Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia (2018) first explained in the graphic represented in Figure 1, this convergent circular model represents three distinct components (Teacher, Student, and Content). As we combine any two of the three components, a potential outcome is achieved.

1. Teacher and Student develops a relationship between the two parties,
2. Teacher and Content develops a teacher clarity around the lesson delivery and communication,
3. Student and Content develops a challenging learning opportunity for students participating in the lesson design and delivery.

In fact, engagement in the lesson increases when students have teachers that are present, understand the content, and can deliver it in ways that are clear, creative, and challenging. In fact, Hattie (2022) explains, “Across the grades, when instruction was challenging, relevant, and academically demanding, then all students had higher engagement and teachers talked less…” This level of cognitive “with-it-ness” demonstrated by the teacher forges a strong and sustainable relationship with students because these students know they can rely on the teacher for leadership and guidance when needed the most. As well, teacher clarity in the moment is critical for deeper learning. Clarity from the teacher can ignite a level of risk taking in learners resulting in creativity, true progress, and ownership in their own learning.

Hattie (2009) asserts,

Teacher clarity has an effect size of 0.75 as this is equivalent to nearly two years’ worth of growth for a year in school. And that makes sense, doesn’t it? When teacher and student are in agreement about what is to be learned and how both of them will know when intended learning has occurred, we save a whole lot of time that would have otherwise been spent floundering around looking for purpose.

As aligned, when students dive deeper into the content and make connections to the world around them, relevancy and challenge quickly surfaces as two very important ingredients to student learning and overall engagement.

Better Relationships Lead to Better Student Engagement

Before students feel a sense of security in the classroom where they can think and learn more deeply, a true and trusting relationship must be developed between student and teacher. Students perform better academically when they are more emotionally engaged in the learning process. And they’re more emotionally engaged when a classroom climate is characterized by warm, respectful, and emotionally supportive relationships.” In essence, when the teacher develops a relationship with students that is dependable, student engagement is impacted in a way that helps students become more aware of their own learning. Adding in clear instruction that connects to previous learning, provides a sense of purpose to students involved in the lesson. Reeves (2021) describes,

It begins with connections and that means do I trust my teacher and does my teacher trust me to actually engage in a real dialogue, which means I might make mistakes, I might have problems, I might give the wrong answer. But that’s a sort of connection that really shows high levels of trust in which students can be there. I always ask people who are instructional coaches or administrators who come in and observe classrooms, what do you expect to see? If all you expect to see is perfection, that’s not engagement. You’re just seeing the illusion of engagement. What you want to be looking for, for example, “are teachers who use equity sticks who are willing to call on people randomly, they might have the wrong answer. That’s where the learning happens.
Learning doesn’t happen when you only call on people with their hands in the air. Learning happens when you call on people who don’t know the right answer.

Moreover, when trust is established and sustained with relevant and purposeful learning opportunities, students are willing to participate in questioning and conversations with the teachers and/or peers. In fact, students are open and attracted to challenging learning experiences where they participate in, invest in, and drive their learning. Engaged students often ask themselves if the offered task is connected to connected applications in the outside world. If so, engagement spikes considerably. As Kohn (2022) asserts, “...A real-world project, such as taking soil samples to determine which neighborhoods are the most polluted (and why), is likely to be experienced as much more meaningful than memorizing a list of chemicals to score well on a quiz.” As a framework that provides an advantage toward connecting higher levels of engagement with real-world projects (and student ownership); a clear student engagement continuum is delivered by Honorary Fellow of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Amy Berry.

**A Focus on Active Engagement**

Berry (2022) developed this continuum that encompasses six forms of student engagement. This continuum as seen in Figure 2, is divided into two halves. The left half of the graphic continuum focuses on three levels of disengagement, (withdrawing, avoiding, and disrupting). The right half of the continuum explains three levels of student engagement, (participating, investing, and driving). Each of these three phases are considered more active than the previous with driving defined as the most active form of student engagement and participating as the most passive. For purposes of this essay, a clear examination on this particular (right) half of the continuum will be of focus, accompanied by a description for each form of engagement.

The following descriptors provide the reader with key ingredients or markers that make up each of the three phases of passive to active student engagement. It’s important to note that as student(s) progress from the participating level to more active levels (investing and driving), they should do so in sequential order as they become more active in the student engagement continuum.

**Participating** - This level of engagement is frequently identified as students following directions from the teacher and complying with those directions related to student tasks or activities. A student can also be observed at the phase of engagement; listening to the instructions given, following specifically the directions or expectations provided, and participating in the related activity (collaborative or independent). Most students in the participation phase will not balk at the request to participate in the learning and will even take part in small collaborative groups, but only if the teacher initiates this direction to the student.

**Investing** - Students generally are actively engaged in this level of the engagement continuum and are genuinely interested in the learning. Behaviors that confirm this phase involve questioning peers and/or the teacher, sharing with peers the connections made while learning in a small or whole class group, and contributing possible ideas or solutions within a collaborative setting. Evidence of having fun and enjoying the process of learning something is frequently represented within this phase. Students can also easily be identified as investing in the learning by being curious to learn more or go deeper with their own learning because they genuinely are interested in the topic being learned and want to increase their knowledge in the area being explored.

**Driving** - The most active, committed form of engagement surfaces when students own their own learning by developing personal learning goals, self-reflecting, self-assessing and looking to others for
input on how they can continually improve. This approach to learning allows students to think deeper and reach further toward achieving connections or an outcome they are satisfied with. Students at this level of engagement have built their self-efficacy as a student, are focused on improvement planning, and taking action to implement the plan. They are goal oriented and utilize the feedback from peers or others to improve their work and understanding of the learning task or activity.

As a student transitions from one phase of the student engagement continuum to the next; (participating to investing and investing to driving) his or her ownership in learning and partnership with others’ transitions, as well. Berry defines a partnership as, “A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.” (p.23). Learning partnerships begin with sound relationships; and within the driving phase, a reliance on one another to share in the responsibility of upholding a set of values, outcomes, or processes, must be clearly evident and frequent. If this deep and driven learning is to happen, teachers and students alike must be open to sharing their processes for understanding, contributing their ideas, and regularly evaluating their own work and behaviors (in partnership with other students and adults). This is the core of the driving phase of student engagement; a leadership and onus for one’s own learning and the process for achieving learning goals (with assistance from student and teacher teammates).

**Figure 2: Disrupting to Driving: A Continuum of Student Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISRUPTING</th>
<th>AVOIDING</th>
<th>WITHDRAWING</th>
<th>PARTICIPATING</th>
<th>INVESTING</th>
<th>DRIVING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting the learning environment</td>
<td>Looking for ways to avoid work</td>
<td>“Flying under the radar”</td>
<td>Doing the work</td>
<td>Asking questions about what we are learning</td>
<td>Setting goals for my learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to participate</td>
<td>Being off-task</td>
<td>Physically separating from others</td>
<td>Being on task</td>
<td>Valuing what we are learning</td>
<td>Seeking feedback to help me improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing with the teacher</td>
<td>Being unprepared</td>
<td>Paying attention</td>
<td>Responding to questions</td>
<td>Showing interest or curiosity in what we are learning</td>
<td>Seeking out challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looking for reasons to leave the room or move around the room</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Monitoring and evaluating my progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being distracted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Putting in low effort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging with peers</td>
<td>Arguing with peers</td>
<td>Off-task talking with others</td>
<td>Working with others when directed to do so</td>
<td>Sharing ideas and thinking with peers</td>
<td>Collaborating with others toward a shared goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to distract others</td>
<td>Playing around with others instead of working</td>
<td>Sitting with a group if directed but not interacting</td>
<td></td>
<td>Following shared interests</td>
<td>Challenging each other to drive improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Berry (2022)**

**Actionable Strategies**

So then, if we know that participating, investing, and driving help students to reach intended engagement outcomes, what can students and teachers do to bring these actions to fruition and position themselves for ongoing engagement at these higher levels?

First, a culture of engagement in the classroom where students own their learning experiences provides them with leadership in their own personal learning journey. When a learning environment embraces new perspectives and open sharing of viewpoints, students can develop active engagement behaviors followed by a new understanding and appreciation for engaging with their peers. A culture of learning embraces different answers, ideas, approaches, and ways of learning.
Second, students sometimes will remain at the participating pathway for some time before transitioning to the investing or driving pathway. Teachers and the students need to give themselves permission to remain in a particular phase before they are ready to move on to the next. With learning development and a bit of patience, students will not feel hurried to move on to the next phase until they are truly cognitively ready, but with a clear understanding of where they are going next.

Fisher & Frey (2004) describe an easy, yet effective strategy to gather information from students, by way of an exit slip or ticket. These tickets provide the learner with a short question or prompt that captures either (1) the learning that took place, (2) the process for learning, or (3) the quality of instruction delivered. This opportunity for student reflection informs the teacher of where the student is in the learning process and measures how effective the instruction was from the learner’s perspective. The information is vital to the teacher and student alike as it informs readiness for the next level of the continuum.

Third, as teachers, we must be intently focused on teaching students how to engage. Educators that give opportunities to students that include: (1) taking responsibility for their own learning, (2) seeking feedback of the teammates around them, and (3) asking questions of their group mates, will ultimately develop a student that is cognitively engaged in learning and will be able to use these tools beyond the walls of the classroom.

Last, once students have the skills to drive their own learning, students must be able to monitor their own engagement levels with consistency. As they self-monitor, they build on their self-efficacy for learning and develop a reflective process of self that will help them as they journey through the higher grades.

**Recognizing and Defining Student Engagement Through the Continuum**

At the beginning of this writing, the author asked thought questions about how teachers can better understand student engagement from their learners and what engagement looks like and sounds like in the classroom. An examination of basic definitions found several different iterations of student engagement. Accordingly, the author revealed an even greater need among K-12 educators relative to understanding student engagement. Berry’s work is clear and comprehensive about the levels of engaged learning; (participating, investing, and driving). Although it is difficult to narrow student engagement to one isolated definition, the author agrees, Berry’s work of identifying the clear and observable behaviors for each of the three levels of engagement examined within this writing, is an accurate depiction and a catalyst of what student engagement should look, sound, and feel like in today’s classrooms.

**Next Steps**

The next article by the author will be a sequel to this writing that provides a greater focus on the actionable strategies listed above, (an engaged culture for learning, self-monitoring student engagement to ready oneself for the next pathway, and teaching students how to sustain higher levels of engagement). A more in-depth exploration of the actions will provide the reader with a blueprint for implementing these strategies and an opportunity for students to master the process of highly sustained student engagement.
References


