

Defining, Detecting, and Promoting Student Engagement in College Learning Environments

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Abstract:

Although much scholarship has been produced on the importance of engagement in higher education, few works on the topic focus on defining engagement. This paper explores definitions gathered from faculty and students at two universities and also identifies and summarizes several extant definitions in the scholarly literature. Teachers are encouraged to consider their own definitions of and expectations for student engagement. Accurately detecting genuine engagement can be challenging. The author proposes six strategies for promoting engagement.

Key Words:

Active learning, college students, learning environments, participation, student engagement.

Introduction

After attending the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Institute held June 2005 in Chicago, I commenced work on a course portfolio for the Introduction to Literature class I taught at Texas A&M University. Bass (2005) describes the course portfolio as a reflective document that focuses on “articulating the intentions and experiences involved with teaching particular courses at a given time in a person’s career” (p. 91). In the process of producing that course portfolio, particularly after reviewing my course goals, I noticed that one of my primary objectives was to promote student engagement with literary texts. As I reflected on the term *engagement* I realized that even though I valued this word I did not fully understand what it meant to me. So I began a quest, seeking to define student engagement and how to discern the signs of engagement.

What I discovered is that numerous works of scholarship have been produced on the importance of engagement. However, of those works on the topic in higher education, there are relatively few that focus on defining engagement. Notwithstanding the popularity of the term, many of these works of scholarship do not provide a working definition of student engagement. Others have also noticed this. For example, S. Linkon asserts that “part of the challenge is simply defining engagement. Once we know what we mean, then we can ask how engagement relates to learning. When [she and her colleagues] went looking for articles, most of what [they] found seemed to take the idea of engagement for granted and simply equated it with student interest” (Personal Communication, March 23, 2006). Similarly, Farmer-Dougan and McKinney (2001) observe, “Student engagement is an often discussed but difficult to define variable related to student success. When asked, most, if not all, faculty and students agree that engagement is a highly desirable trait for collegiate academics.” When discussing the concept of student engagement with fellow teachers, I have noticed that we immediately want to jump ahead to our ideas and best practices on how we can promote engagement rather than first determining what it is that we want to encourage.

Is it possible to develop a succinct definition of student engagement? The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following in its definition: an agreement; a formal promise, contract, or pledge; to be appointed; an obligation; attachment; involvement, business requiring attention. The verb *engage* means: to expose to risk; to commit; to attract and hold fast; to occupy or employ; to fight or battle. Just about all of these terms may be employed in describing *student engagement*. We can play with the term further by using the metaphor of romance and engagement, comparing it with learning and engagement. However, it brings up some tricky questions, and the metaphor seems to disintegrate rather quickly because we don’t want students to fall in love with us. Instead, we want them to pledge their commitment to the subject matter and to learning. As teachers, what is the role of the teacher in that metaphor? Perhaps we are more like matchmakers—introducing, developing, and solidifying relationships between students and subjects.

In this paper we will explore and consider definitions of student engagement gathered from faculty and students at two universities. Our study will also examine several extant definitions in the scholarly literature. My purpose is to probe and pose questions, seeking paradoxically to both simplify and complicate our understanding of engagement. I will assert that teachers need to formulate their own working definition. This essay will conclude with several strategies I have utilized to encourage student engagement in the classroom.

Polling Students and Faculty

In my quest for an attractive and satisfying definition, I interviewed five colleagues, including those in a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) group I organized at Texas A&M University. I also queried my students regarding how they defined the term *engagement*. Here are a few of the responses I gathered, and we will begin by reviewing those made by my students who enrolled in my Literature, Religion, and Culture course during the summer of 2006 at Texas A&M University, comprised mostly of juniors and seniors. Written approval was granted by students and faculty to publish

their responses, and Texas A&M University's Office of Research Compliance reviewed this study and offered its approval.

According to Audra, engagement means "active involvement" and signs of engagement include "eye contact, listening, being alert, etc." Engagement "is extremely important in the learning process. If a student is engaged, she will learn much faster and much more in depth than if they were not engaged." Carly writes that engagement is about doing the assignments and showing "enthusiasm towards the subject matter in some way." Anthony defines engagement as "active participation." Angelique claims that it "is the process of actively devoting time and effort to a given subject or task." She believes that "signs of engagement vary depending on what your learning style is." In response to the question, "What is engagement?" Charles replies, "Engagement in the material...or their grade?" He notes that "someone who is engaged is going to challenge and be challenged by new ideas.... engagement is conflict." Lilly declares that engagement is "the passion that drives the learning process."

These responses are augmented by those I received from colleagues in my SoTL writing group. Similar to several students, Dr. John Park (Agricultural Economics), opts to focus on the necessity for engagement, identifying it as a "vital dimension" in the learning process, and describes it metaphorically as "the fuel that keeps it going." In contrast, Dr. Virginia Fajt (Pharmacology) questions just how vital engagement is to the learning process. She reports that some students are not engaged but are able to pass the tests, show proficiency, and sometimes even get an excellent grade without being engaged. However, Dr. Fajt perceives engagement as a distinguishing factor that separates deep learning and surface learning.

Some of these responses led me to wonder if it is possible that engagement is just a different way of labeling participation. Perhaps engagement is synonymous with active learning. My colleagues suggested that activity in class is just one level of engagement, but that there is engagement that may take active learning to another level. Dr. Prudence Merton, while serving as program coordinator at Texas A&M's Center for Teaching Excellence, suggested that engagement implies there is something more, that it means going beyond what can be seen in the classroom. As shall be shown in several examples reported in student narratives later in this essay, this "going beyond" may include when students proactively seek to engage other students outside the classroom in discussions and debates. It is this "going beyond" that may signal a student's significant engagement with ideas—an engagement that could transcend a semester experience in a course, transforming a student who begins to develop both interests and habits of mind that could last a lifetime.

In my current work as Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Oklahoma City University, I have noticed that when we offer a faculty workshop that has "engagement" in the title there is tremendous interest and attendance. At one of these workshops, I polled 30 faculty attendees regarding their definitions of engagement. The responses were submitted anonymously. Although there were some similarities, each statement represented an individual, personalized interpretation of engagement. Eleven of the responses collected are listed below:

"Actively participating in their learning."

“The ability to get students to know about the topics you are exploring.”

“Being in the moment—paying attention.”

“Fully immersed in the topic and in shared learning.”

“Alive eyes. Alert Brains. Asking questions.”

“Thinking critically and creatively and sharing ideas.”

“Wanting to know.”

“Exploring, making connections, going deeper.”

“Co-discovery.”

“Taking the time and effort to understand students and help them.”

“Aware, interested, active in the content in the classroom.”

These responses emphasize a variety of ideas—from student activity and interest to the teacher’s ability and commitment to guide and motivate students.

Searching the Literature for Definitions of Engagement

As evident from studying the responses above, engagement can be defined in diverse ways. Likewise, those who have performed extensive research on student engagement offer multiple interpretations. Pace (1984) links engagement with “quality of effort.” Pace points out that it is the things students do on their own initiative that will make their college experience most valuable:

students don’t have to browse in the library stacks, or make outlines from their class notes, or work on a committee, or have serious discussions with students whose religious beliefs are very different from their own. But these activities...can and do contribute to learning and development. They are activities that professors, counselors, and other educators regard as desirable; but they are not required activities (pp. 96-97).

Astin (1985) opts to describe engagement as “student involvement.” Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) favor Astin’s definition in their research, which concludes that “the greater the student’s involvement or engagement in academic work or in the academic experience of college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive development” (p. 616). Other studies have described engagement in terms of interactions between a student with faculty and other students (Light, 1992; Astin, 1993).

Warren (1997) equates engagement with active learning and emphasizes that it “requires student preparation before class, not just before exams” (p. 17). Kuh (2003) proposes that student engagement is “the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom” (p. 25). Shulman (2002) suggests, “Learning begins with student engagement, which in turn leads to knowledge and understanding” (p. 38).

Because of its multidimensional characteristics, taxonomies of engagement have been suggested. According to Handelsman et al. (2005), there are “factors” that can be

identified as skills engagement, emotional engagement, participation/involvement engagement, and performance engagement. Scholarship on student learning in elementary and secondary education has distinguished between behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and motivational engagement (Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, few works of scholarship have provided focused attention on defining the term. Several noteworthy exceptions include Barnett and Coate, Coates, and Barkley. Barnett (2003) offers an essay that explores various ways of understanding engagement, wherein he muses:

Engagement is a coming together, a merging, a fusing. Engagement points to mutual listening, to reciprocity, and dialogue but conducted in a willingness to change. It is the antithesis of separateness, of distance, of incomprehension. Engagement implies not just a coming together but an interaction (p. 23).

In his book, Coates (2006) asserts, “Student engagement is concerned with the point of intersection between individuals and things that are critical for their learning.” He also adds that engagement is “the involvement of individuals with phenomena that are relevant to and instrumental for their learning” (p. 17). Likewise, Barnett and Coate (2005) suggest that engagement “indicates an identity, to a significant degree, between the student and the act of learning” (p. 128). Barkley (2010), proposes, “Student engagement is a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning” (p. 8).

Although he does not attempt to provide a definition of the term, Shulman (2002) argues “that engagement is not solely a proxy; it can also be an end in itself” (p. 40), and he includes engagement and motivation as the first step in his Table of Learning. In explaining his proposed taxonomy, Shulman declares:

Learning begins with student engagement, which in turn leads to knowledge and understanding. Once someone understands, he or she becomes capable of performance or action. Critical reflection on one’s practice and understanding leads to higher-order thinking in the form of a capacity to exercise judgment in the face of uncertainty and to create designs in the presence of constraints and unpredictability. Ultimately, the exercise of judgment makes possible the development of commitment. In commitment, we become capable of professing our understandings and our values, our faith and our love, our skepticism and our doubts, internalizing those attributes and making them integral to our identities. These commitments, in turn, make new engagements possible—and even necessary (p. 38).

Not only is engagement nobly embedded in Shulman’s taxonomy of learning but it is also, he asserts, “a fundamental purpose of education” (p. 40).

Detecting Signs of Student Engagement

From this study, we can see the complexity and the challenge of defining engagement. Perhaps it is easier to establish what engagement is *not*. Based on their experience examining how students in a general education literature course respond to

literary texts, Diamond, Linkon, and Stephan (2003) conclude that “engagement is diverse, which makes it difficult to define, but it’s clear that engagement is not simply a matter of liking a text or feeling a personal connection with it.”

As teachers we may wish to consider signs of disengagement, behaviors in the college classroom that demonstrate that a student is not interested, involved, or committed to/in the process of learning. A few of these might include: frequent absences from class sessions, sleeping in class, undisciplined chatting, reading materials not relevant to the course (e.g., newspapers, magazines, textbooks for other classes), chronic tardiness, not submitting assignments, being habitually silent during class discussions.

In contrast, what are some signs of engagement? Students are engaged when they show one or more of the following behaviors or actions: involvement in class discussions, participating in learning activities, asking questions, responding to other comments, marking in their texts, debating, bringing questions and problems to class that were discovered by reading out-of-class, writing response papers, emailing or posting discussion thread questions and comments to the instructor or others, blogging, re/researching independently, making connections with other texts and writers, and probing deeply into a text or a research problem. These are a few possible signs of engagement, and some of them include those activities that the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) questionnaires ask for students to self-report at the end of their freshman and senior years of college. The modes of engagement that NSSE investigates can be summarized as preparing, questioning, presenting, revising, collaborating, solving, communicating, and discussing.

In addition to the NSSE surveys, other questionnaires have been devised in efforts to assess or detect student engagement. Several examples include the Approaches to Studying Questionnaire (Entwistle, 1981), College Student Engagement Questionnaire (Handelsman et al., 2005), Revised Student Engagement Index (Langley, 2006), Webster’s tool of engagement (Webster & Hayes, 1997), and the Engaged Learning Index (Shreiner & Louis, 2011).

What is the value of detecting signs of disengagement and engagement? Do we alter our classroom strategies in order to more effectively engage our students? If “engagement” is virtually synonymous with active learning, or if engagement can simply resemble activity, are these signs of activity only to make us, as teachers, feel good and provide us with a sense of satisfaction that our students are working and that perhaps our efforts are paying off? The signs may indicate that our students are having a good time, enjoying the activities that show their involvement, but these activities do not necessarily mean that learning is occurring.

Is it possible that you have had a student feign engagement? Based on my personal experiences, as both student and teacher, there are challenges in detecting signs of *genuine* engagement. In a classroom that is operating as student-centered, particularly a discussion-oriented class, one sign of engagement, as noted earlier, may include active participation in the discussions. Unfortunately, this sign of engagement can be feigned. While in graduate school I recall how a fellow student candidly admitted to her peers outside of class that she had read only about 10% of the assigned readings for a

graduate seminar. Yet I observed in that course how this student enacted a sign of engagement by actively and confidently talking in every class session, joining the discussions on books that she had not studied. She learned how to first listen to the comments and summaries of others and then speak in such a way that it appeared that she knew and had studied the story, its context, its characters, and the issues detailed in the book.

As teachers we wish to visualize engagement. We want to see it so we can believe that what we are doing is valuable. When lecturing, instructors may expect to see students feverishly taking notes or may value eye contact from their listeners. When moderating discussions, teachers want to see students participating in the conversations about the assigned topic. These visual signs may give us a sense of personal satisfaction and sense of worth in our profession of teaching.

In addition, we look forward to reading positive evaluations from our students, thanking us for our work and for motivating them to learn about a subject that they never liked before. But sometimes I wonder if my students are just telling me what I want to hear. I wonder if in attempting to detect engagement instructors cannot rely on or trust merely the words or actions of students because engagement is deeply personal and often invisible to the teacher.

Engaging in the learning process is risky business for student and teacher—both must be willing to be vulnerable, take chances, expose themselves to what they know and don't know, what they can and cannot do. The process of engagement demands work from student and teacher. Both parties are expected to put in the effort, trusting that the investment will yield the intended outcome (i.e., significant, deep learning).

Engagement and the Role of the Teacher

One of the more creative attempts made in suggesting a definition is a formula devised by Marcum (2000):

$$E = L (I + Cp + Ch) \times Inv (A + Co + Cm) \rightarrow IK/Ef \rightarrow E.$$

In interpreting his formula, Marcum explains that “Engagement = Learning (Interest + Competence + Challenge) x Involvement (Activity + Communication + Commitment) producing Increased Knowledge and Effectiveness which results, typically, in increased Engagement.”

I propose that engagement is the interactive space, or lack of space, between student and the subject, and we, as teachers, hope that, as an outcome, deep learning arises or is produced from that interaction. But where are we, as teachers, to be found in this activity (or in Marcum's formula)? What is the role of the teacher in engagement?

There are some who argue that teachers have little influence on student engagement. For example, Harvey (1999) espouses his practice of “Learning to Not*Teach.” In explaining his philosophy, Harvey states:

Given my firm belief that you can't teach individuals to make decisions and take actions that are central to their lives and the lives of others, one of the most important skills that I have learned as a university professor is how to not*teach.

In fact, I gave up trying to teach long ago. Fortunately, I have never given up trying to learn (p. 73).

Embedded in his argument for “not*teaching” is the placement of accountability. Harvey is concerned about teachers who “worry about how to motivate students in the classroom” and those who “believe they are responsible for what their students learn—or fail to learn,” claiming “any time a teacher accepts responsibility for students’ learning, the teacher denies the students’ humanity” (p. 76).

In opposition to Harvey’s position, Smith et al. (2005) argue that “engaging students in learning is principally the responsibility of the teacher.” As teachers, the part we play in student engagement is significant. As Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet (1991) declare: “To teach is to engage students in learning.” This sums up the importance that many of us see as our primary task as teachers. This influential role has been confirmed in research studies. For example, after analyzing data collected from their research, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) conclude that “faculty behaviors and attitudes affect students profoundly” and that “faculty members may play the single-most important role in student-learning” (p. 21).

Promoting Student Engagement

One important role of teaching includes doing all we can to promote student engagement. Such engagement empowers students, provides them with choices, and encourages students to be pro-active on their own initiative (Warren, 1997). Although teachers should promote learning activities and encourage effort from their students, we need to be careful not to stifle creative energies, not to snuff out those burning fires of enthusiasm, not to turn off their interest in the subject. We need to be careful not to inhibit or get in the way of the engagement of our students. Based on my own experiences as a teacher and as one who observes and coaches other instructors, I propose six strategies for promoting student engagement in college learning environments:

(1) Show your engagement. We can do this in many ways, but we need to allow our enthusiasm and love for learning to be visibly evident to our students. Share with students your passion for learning and for your discipline.

(2) Class discussion on engagement. At the beginning of a course, ask students about their definitions of student engagement and how it relates to learning. Emphasize to them that you value their engagement, that it is important to you and then show them by valuing their activity during the course. You may discover, as I did, that such a discussion may yield an increase in engaged behaviors. One week after our class discussion on engagement, one student, as she was studying *Paradise Lost* for class, decided to make of list of the challenging words and define each of them. She came to class with copies of her glossary and distributed them to her classmates. Another student remembered a song in Latin that he had learned and sung in high school, a song which he thought was relevant to our class discussions on literature and religion; so he brought copies of the lyrics (translated into English) to share with us. What made these activities so satisfying is that they were not a result of any assignment that I had designed nor were there any extra credit points offered to entice them.

(3) Give students a variety of options to show their engagement. These may include class discussions, quizzes, in-class writing, exams, response papers, essays, etc. The important thing for us to realize is that some types of activities may be uncomfortable for some students to engage in. For example, quiet students often appreciate opportunities to register their insights via online discussion boards or in small (rather than large) group discussions. Furthermore, utilizing an assortment of active learning strategies throughout the course of a semester may engage more students. Several pedagogies of engagement include cooperative learning, problem-based learning, service learning, peer teaching, undergraduate research, self-assessment, reflective and experiential learning (Edgerton, 2001; Smith et al., 2005; Silberman, 1996; Moon, 2004; Barnett & Coate, 2005).

(4) Have students periodically reflect and report on their engagement. Since some signs of engagement cannot be detected such as those activities that occur outside of the classroom, I propose that we occasionally ask students to report such efforts. While I am not sure how valuable it is for us as teachers, I think it may be important for reminding students that you value their efforts to engage in the learning process and such introspection helps them remember their accountability for their own learning.

(5) Create memorable moments. Design creative class activities that promote engagement or future engagement. Some of these creative activities become memorable moments for both my students and I. Some of these include: a tour of our university's special collections library; turning our classroom into a dance hall, resembling a scene from a novel we were studying; a mid-term cinnamon roll party; skits performed by students; and migrating outside to do a creative writing exercise.

Sometimes engagement can be facilitated by changing venues for class meetings. One of my students, Calli, vividly remembers the day our class ventured outdoors:

It was during the time that we were reading the novel *My Antonia*. For the assignment we were concentrating on a specific passage in the novel. The assignment was to look at the nature that surrounded us and try to write our own paragraph in the manner we thought Willa Cather, the author, might have written it. It was the best assignment I have had at Texas A&M.... If the assignment had been given inside a stuffy classroom, the results would have been more than dull (Personal Communication, April 2006).

(6) Solicit feedback from students to identify significant activities that were engaging. One semester, while teaching Introduction to Literature, I asked students at midterm to evaluate the course and to share what class activities were most helpful and also the least useful. Many of my students reported how onerous they felt the response papers were that I had assigned. I was asking them to do too much writing, they declared. So I cut back on the frequency of writing assignments. At the end of the semester, I asked students to identify class activities that most effectively engaged them in learning. Below are some of their anonymous comments:

Student 1: "Small group discussions and response papers were very helpful in adding to our understanding of the course. It allowed us more freedom in getting our ideas across, instead of having ideas virtually fed to us during a lecture. Keep

the response papers and even quizzes once in a while. They keep us on our toes.”

Student 2: “Most helpful was voicing our own opinion through response papers then discussing them in class. It was helpful to take notes and to hear other people’s thoughts. Mr. Garrett provided additional insights that aided in [our] understanding. I loved this course. Thanks for always being enthusiastic and for keeping it interesting! Grade policies were more than fair, and everyone agrees the class totally rocked. It was a lot of work/writing but it was well worth it. I got out of the class what I put into it.”

As a teacher, I do all I can to promote engagement, striving to design learning activities and provide opportunities that motivate and entice my students to study and develop critical thinking skills. It is also important to ask them for their feedback on those activities. If we don’t ask our students, we may never learn what sort of engagement they have experienced in our courses.

Such was the case for me until I received several letters from two students (Anne and Calli) who wrote in support of my nomination for a university-wide teaching award. What I found interesting and immensely valuable about these letters is that both of these students were reflecting on their experiences in my class one year later. What would they remember about our class sessions? In addition to identifying class discussions that were open-ended and the mid-term class breakfast event, Anne reported that

after class, students would gather outside the building to further analyze what had been taught. ... Study groups were held at Sweet Eugene’s [an eclectic coffee shop in College Station, Texas] that lasted through the early hours of the morning as we delved deeper into the reading material. [She was able to] develop a deep connection with [her] fellow peers. Mr. Garrett taught us to have a sense of respect for all opinions, and he challenged our own (Personal Communication, April 2006).

In her reflective letter, Calli recalled opportunities to

write response papers on the pieces of literature we were assigned to read that night. The best part about them was that they were our opinions. There was no right or wrong. We were allowed to express what we thought about the story, what we disliked, how it made us feel, and the message we thought it was trying to portray. This concept no longer frightened me because I was not worried about the grade I was going to get or being told I was wrong, I was actually enjoying analyzing the pieces I read. The following class we would have class discussions about what we read. I was no longer afraid to open up and give my opinion in class. Even if I was a little off base, Mr. Garrett would guide me and help me get on the right track without saying outright that I was wrong. He would help the students find the beauty in literature, but find it for ourselves, not because it was what he saw or what was supposed to be seen (Personal Communication, April 2006).

Conclusions

Based on my research of the literature, polls and interviews conducted among students and teachers, and classroom experience as a teacher and as a teaching consultant, I am convinced that our efforts to engage students are worth the investment of time and energy. Student engagement can lead to and enhance deep learning. As shown above, engagement may be defined in a variety of ways, so it is essential for teachers and students to discuss its meaning. Instructors should be flexible and offer students multiple options for engaging in learning. A teacher should develop her own definition of engagement, critique and examine it to discover what leads to what she sees as engagement, what hinders him/her from implementing strategies, and what the connections are in his/her classroom between engagement and learning.

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