

## **Why is Student Engagement Important?**

**By: Dawn Lane**

Before attempting to answer, allow me to introduce myself and establish my perspective on this vital question. My name is Dawn Lane and I am a SERT at Oak Ridges Public School in Richmond Hill. I work in a community that has a diverse student population, with some families that have plenty and others who have need. Our school council runs a snack program to ensure that every student has access to healthy food to fuel his or her growing body and brain.

Engagement requires the mind to be turned on.

Engagement is something that can be measured.

Our measure of student engagement is coloured by our background, our outlook and by our philosophies as educators.

Allow me to focus the lens of my role in the school community a little clearer: I am a SERT; I work with learners who have been identified as having special needs. In my philosophy of education all learners are unique learners. I am also a classroom teacher in that I have community class for students with a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum disorder. Typically my students have an Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis; sometimes this comes with ADHD as a co-morbidity. Often there are signs and symptoms of mental illness or emotional exhaustion in the families of my students. I have the pleasure of working with support staff and classroom teachers as a team. Teaming takes time and patience to master and I have not always been a good team leader.

Sometimes people engage in ways that are not welcome by the group and this can feel uncomfortable and be labelled as "acting out" or "storming". As many, if not most, teachers can attest, collaboration is not taught in teacher's college. When in doubt "shut your door and teach" is a saying I have overheard many times in my ten plus years in education. Research tells us that when even one person uses the norms of collaboration, everyone benefits.

Teaching and learning are reciprocal acts that can be viewed as a form of collaboration. Student engagement fuels teacher engagement and everyone benefits.

Engagement requires the mind to be turned on. If you watch the Discovery channel you may be able to visualize MRIs of the brain with various areas lit up with electrical activity. This is what I imagine when I think of engagement. I have learned from my students to think in pictures. Actually, I am told that more than 90% of all people have a visual imagination. I am not among this group and although I am a painter and an illustrator I do not truly think in pictures. To engage my students, I reach beyond my natural inclinations to engage their imaginations. To level the playing field for students who struggle with receptive language my team and I visually track, on the board, what is said in the classroom. Our classroom teachers write a significant amount of information on their boards every day, for example: today we will be learning, success criteria, page numbers, examples and factual notes... My team takes this one step further to document and hold still for students who have unique processing needs, social information that might otherwise be fleeting: find a partner, after lunch we will be going to an assembly, we will be working on this in class for a few weeks... Perhaps more importantly we capture visually classroom discussion in which students popcorn ideas or

deepen their understanding through discussion. Without this type of support my students would disengage and tune out; their brains would turn off.

Being a black and white thinker or a polarized thinker impacts engagement.

By being observant you can see a student's mind shut off.

By caring and reserving judgments you can look for ways to re-engage these learners. For me it starts with a question, or series of questions, it is a puzzle to solve, what is it about the format or the environment that is disengaging the student? Do they already know the information and have become uninspired or bored? Has the level of stimulation become too great, throwing their brains into overload? Do they have the background information to make sense of new learning?

If I am not careful I can easily become overloaded myself as I seek to engage all of the students in a class of 30 plus intermediate students, which reminds me to tell you that my students rarely have cognitive disabilities and are generally integrated into a mainstream classroom.

Last year I joined our school's Action Research team with colleagues from my school and across the board. The topic we investigated was engagement. We were specifically interested in social media. Could we use web 2.0 tools or social media, for example Twiducate, to increase student engagement? We were surprised by how quickly the students lost interest in this form of discourse when it was an option for reading responses.

What captured my interest was the inquiry process itself that guided our action research. It was my first formal introduction to inquiry-based teaching. I borrowed "Open to Question" by Walter L. Bateman from the Ontario College of Teachers library. Bateman gives a first hand account of inquiry-based teaching. The book is written largely in a narrative dialog with his nephew, a new teacher. The focus is on University level teaching. Examples are given in addition to theory. Reference is made to trusting student's big brains, to the resulting increase in critical thinking, to Piaget and Perry. In preparing students for an uncertain future Inquiry based methods teach how to think, not what to think. Reading this book lead to an "aha" moment in my teaching. I couldn't wait to see what would happen to student engagement if we started with an open-ended question and followed their interests.

I had already signed up a grade 7/8 homeroom for a partnership with Venture Café and Entrepreneur Adventure to expose students to financial literacy and real world business experience. My teacher partner and I posed an open-ended question- "If you could make a difference in the world, what would you do?"

Brains were a bit sluggish to turn on. So we showed a few short online videos from "Me to We" and Alexandra Cousteau's "Blue Legacy International" and then provided some talk time. Afterwards, students responded in short written responses that were sorted into big ideas and transferred to Survey Monkey. We booked the computer lab so that each student could log on anonymously to Survey Monkey to choose from the menu of options generated by their classmates. They were determined to help people, and most interested in cancer and children's issues such as bullying.

And then we took a break from school for March Break. How does timing impact engagement? Do we consider a range of processing time or "think time" when we differentiate?

On March 15<sup>th</sup> Japan was hit by a tsunami. We came back to school with a project goal, to help the people of Japan. Student dialog on Twiducate over the break demonstrated their engagement with our inquiry process. As teacher moderators, we were ready with our literacy connection, a read aloud, a picture book about Sadoko and the students determined to fold 1,000 paper cranes and raise \$1000. They wanted to find a school in Japan and give directly to students their own age.

A competition began to determine a name with suggested names posted on Twiducate. The votes came in and “A Dream Made of Paper” was chosen. The teachers provided an overview of various roles needed in a business, students picked their top two roles and the teacher created groups for: Research and development, editors, marketing, advertising, production and web master. The level of excitement in the room was infectious. Students began coming in early and tweeting at all hours. The contrast to the lack of engagement with tweeting as a reading response mode was noted.

The next step was demonstrating how to fold a paper crane. With all the flips, slides and turns it was easy to link this ancient art to math learning in transformational geometry. What we did not expect was how quickly the multi-step process frustrated the students. The precision required to make a beautiful crane was foreign to almost every student in the class. As the students related later, that first crane was almost a deal breaker.

After each child had been successful in folding a crane, the teacher asked another open-ended question: “How can we reach our goal of 1,000?” The students suggested that we suspend all other activity and focus only on folding cranes. The teachers shook their heads no. Finally, someone suggested that once we are comfortable folding cranes we can teach others and add their cranes to our collection. The students offered crane-making workshops to all the classes in the school. Our business partner from “Venture Café” suggested that we host a community event at a community centre. As a team we decided to launch A Dream Made of Paper at the community centre. Right then and there a philanthropist donated \$1000.

After the excitement from this generosity sank in I wondered, what would happen to our engagement now that we have met our fund raising goal?

The students’ enthusiasm grew stronger and their ideas were coming faster than the teachers could keep up with. Their questions were: “Can we post a Youtube video?”, “Can we show a video at a student of the month assembly?”, “Can we create a Facebook page?”, “Can we ask for business to sponsor cranes?”, “What is the smallest crane that we can fold?” They came to school with research to share about nuclear power plants, geography, politics, they discussed what happens to funds donated to the Red Cross with family and friends, they looked into hosting an event at a local mall, they decided to adopt the funding model of the World Wildlife Fund, inviting people to sponsor, rather than buy a crane.

Each student was expected to write a letter to some form of media or corporation asking them to promote our venture. In their working groups they were given chunks of a business plan to write. As our venture was part of an awards judgment, each student was asked to determine which of four points the judges should pick to judge us as winners. The success criteria: include a rationale and give a specific example. As we neared the end the students were asked to share our accomplishments in a formal letter with their parents or write an article for the school newsletter. They were thrilled to share that we won Judges Choice due to being strong in all four of the award categories. That they had raised over \$2000 for the people of Japan, shipped over 1,000 cranes along

with an original manga comic created by one of my Community Class students and a t-shirt donated by Blue Notes to our adopted school in Japan.

The homeroom teacher reflected that she was astounded to see abilities in her students that she would have not known existed. A reluctant learner created and posted a Youtube video that gained him the admiration of his peers and many other members of the school community. Students were using their big brains and their critical thinking skills, often challenging their teachers and business partner all of whom would require research of their own to answer their questions.

One thing remains clear, everyone was engaged, all were changed by the experience and each student felt empowered to make the world a better place.

Why is engagement important? It is the difference between knowing what to think and knowing how to think!

From our experience, the inquiry-based method of teaching increased our students equity as stakeholders in their own learning. It naturally facilitated differentiation, which increased the inclusion not only of our special needs learners but also of our at-risk and disenfranchised learners. Our original question about Web 2.0 tools and Twiducate in particular invited a wide range of digital media into our classroom. The students were eager to share their digital literacy by accessing on-line videos, Youtube, creating a website and making a Facebook page. We got ahead of ourselves, or found our edge, when we collected donations through our website using Paypal. In hindsight we could have registered as a charitable organization and continued with these transactions, however this teacher was unable to keep up with the tsunami of new learning that resulted from this venture.

## REFERENCES

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