Research on Engagement

Research tells us that the teachers who are most successful in engaging students develop activities with students' basic psychological and intellectual needs in mind (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Strong et al., 1995). In general, students need work that develops their sense of competency, allows them to develop connections with others, gives them some degree of autonomy, and provides opportunities for originality and self-expression (Anderman & Midgely, 1998; Strong et al., 1995). The challenge teachers face, then, is to create a learning environment that attends to all or most of these needs.

Following is a list of suggestions for designing more engaging in-class activities and increasing the amount of time students spend on task.

1. *Ensure course materials relate to students' lives and highlight ways learning can be applied in real-life situations* (Lumsden, 1994; Skinner & Belmont, 1991). Schoolwork should be meaningful to students outside the school building, as well as within. Students are more engaged in activities when they can build on prior knowledge and draw clear connections between what they are learning and the world they live in. They also need to feel that "school work is significant, valuable, and worthy of their efforts" (Policy Studies Associates, 1995).

2. *Allow students to have some degree of control over learning* (Brooks et al., 1998). This can be done in any number of ways, from giving students choices between different assignments, to minimizing adult supervision over group projects, to letting students monitor and evaluate their own progress (Anderman & Midgley, 1998; Dev, 1997; Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Anderman & Midgely (1998) note that this doesn't mean teachers must relinquish control of the classroom: "Even small opportunities for choice, such as whether to work with a partner or independently" (p. 3) give students a greater sense of autonomy.

3. *Assign challenging but achievable tasks for all students, including at-risk, remedial, and learning disabled students.* Tasks that seem impossible easily discourage learners, as do those tasks that are rote and repetitive (Dev, 1997; Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Remedial programs that limit students to repetitive basic skills activities actually "prompt students' lack of engagement in their schoolwork and frequently result in limited achievement" (Policy Studies Associates, 1995). Students need to feel successful and that they've earned success.

4. *Arouse students' curiosity about the topic being studied.* Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) suggest using the "mystery" approach, in which students are presented with fragmentary or contradictory information about a subject and are then asked to examine available evidence to develop their own hypotheses. This kind of activity also builds on students' needs for competence and autonomy, giving students an opportunity to direct inquiry and "discover for themselves."

5. *Design projects that allow students to share new knowledge with others.* Strong, Silver & Robinson (1995) observe that when students do assignments that only the teacher will read, they are entering into a nonreciprocal relationship. More often than not, the teacher already knows and has no real need for the information the student is providing him or her. Projects are more engaging when students share what they are learning in reciprocal relationships, as in collaborative projects where each student's knowledge is needed by others in the group to complete an assignment.

It is also important to note that, in addition to instructional practice, certain elements of the classroom environment, such as seating arrangements and student behavior, will influence how long students remain on task and engaged in their work. Bonus and Riordan (1998) suggest teachers consider the goals of individual activities when determining how to arrange seats in the classroom. In their research into on-task behavior in second- and third-grade classrooms, they found that students remained engaged in learning longer when desks were arranged appropriately for the task at hand: U-shaped arrangements for class discussions, rows for test taking, etc. (Bonus & Riordan, 1998).

Increasing Student Engagement and Motivation: From Time-on-Task to Homework

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