

Enrolled or ENGAGED?

Teacher Mediation Makes the Difference

BY JOANN M. HERRINGTON

On the first day of school, you stand at the door, cheerfully welcoming the students into your classroom. Their parents have paid tuition and have high hopes for their achievement. Everything is brand new: clothing, backpacks, textbooks, pencils or pens, and notebooks. After taking their assigned seats, the students look up at you expectantly.

You're well prepared: Your lesson plans are written, graphic organizers are ready, and bulletin boards and learning centers are bright and appealing.

Yet sometime before the first grade report, if you are like a lot of teachers, you're feeling frustrated. Why aren't your carefully prepared lessons being more enthusiastically received? Why aren't students paying attention and staying on task? Why don't they have a better grasp of the essentials of the course? Why are their test grades so low?

A glance at the roster confirms that your students are enrolled. But are they engaged?

If students are not engaged in the total school experience physically and psychologically, then the efforts of the institution are for naught.

What Is Student Engagement?

Judgments about the quality of a typical student's educational experience are often based upon the institution's reputation and resources—the credentials of the faculty, the number of computers per classroom, the scores on standardized tests for incoming or exiting students, sports programs, library holdings, and the like.¹ However, students can be surrounded by all of the aforementioned resources and fail to learn much in their classes or other activities. If students are not engaged in the total school experience physically and psychologically, then the efforts of the institution are for naught. The amount of learning and personal development a student experiences is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of his or her involvement in the school program.

Student engagement is currently a hot topic. During a search, this writer found nearly 2,500 articles written in the years 2005 and 2006 on this subject. Myriad definitions and applications of

student engagement exist throughout educational literature. One succinct definition by Bomia et al.² states that student engagement “refers to a student’s willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process.”

Skinner and Belmont, cited by Brewster and Fager of the Northwest Region Educational Laboratory³ noted that students who are engaged “select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; and show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest.”

Less motivated or disengaged students, on the other hand, “are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges.”⁴

Learning Anchored in Experience

Research by constructivist Lev Vygotsky⁵ convinced him that optimal learning takes place when students build, rearrange, and organize internal

representations through experience— if they are engaged with a concept. As experience unfolds, the learners gather information, which they use to form new concepts, solve problems, and create meaning.⁶

In addition to experience, mediation is essential to help learners negotiate the path to understanding, according to Vygotsky.⁷ With the teacher’s help, students are able to grasp concepts more efficiently and accurately. This empowers them to achieve far more than they could have accomplished independently.

How does this work? Here is an example: Young children tend to label everything. However, once a label is attached to a concept, the child tends to resist any change in its meaning (e.g., the child may call all animals *puppy* because the first animal he or she identified was a dog). By exploring the child’s perceptions, a mediator—parent, sibling, or teacher—can help him or her understand that a variety of animals exist, and that each has its own name. As the result of mediation, the child’s understanding is

broadened, and misconceptions are corrected.

Shulman describes this process as the “essence” of understanding: the learner’s ability to transform the message embedded in instruction into his or her own cognitive configuration. He states that “the consequences of teaching can only be understood as a function of what that teaching stimulates the learner to do with the material.”⁸ Experiencing the lesson personalizes the learning for each student.

So Where Do Teachers Go Wrong?

Teachers typically start by describing the factual aspects of the lesson, saving the experience part for later— *if* there’s time. Unfortunately, this method often fails to ensure that students understand the content or become engaged in the topic. Knowledge is valuable, but it’s experience that makes knowledge meaningful. Quantum Teaching,⁹ a dynamic instructional model, offers a methodology whose foundation rests on the tenets of Piaget and Vygotsky: Experience Before Label. Humans learn by



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doing; consequently, it is experience, rather than discussion, that locks information in the brain.

Start With an Experience

While enjoying a cruise to Alaska last year, my traveling companions and I noticed that our waiters were incredibly attentive to us, treating us royally and with such flourish that we could hardly wait to see what they'd do next.

In the same way, teachers must take time to present lessons with verve and vivacity to help students focus and learn. They should give special attention to the activities during the first part of the class because this is when students often decide whether they will stay on board for the class period or become disengaged. Their emotional buy-in affects memory and recall.

Ask any woman to describe the setting when her husband proposed to her. Ask a co-worker where he was on the day when Princess Diana died or on 9/11. They are likely to recall specific details because of their emotional reaction to the event. The amygdala, which is the emotional center of the brain, plays a strong role in storing memory. According to Joseph LeDoux, of New York University's Center for Neural Science, “Amygdala arousal seems to imprint in memory most moments of emotional arousal with an added degree of strength. The more intense the amygdala arousal, the stronger the imprint.”¹⁰

But Does It Work?

Fast forward to my Content Reading and Writing course at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. Early in the semester, the topic is Affective Learn-

ing. In the past, I typically taught Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, conation, and downshifting.¹¹ My assessment of students' mastery of these concepts showed that during discussion, they showed a rudimentary understanding of the topics, but later were unable to define or give examples of the terms *conation* or *downshifting*, in particular. Determined to improve my students' mastery of these concepts, I set out to use the Experience Before Label strategy.

I reserved an alternate classroom—one too small to hold the number of students enrolled. I also secured heaters to make it hot and stuffy, in contrast to our usually comfortable, air-conditioned classroom.

A sign directed students to the new location. As the first students sat down, they looked quizzically around the room, but said nothing. After all the seats were taken, students reluctantly stood along the wall or flopped down on the floor. A murmur began to hum throughout the room, but I cheerfully ignored it and plunged into a review of the previous class session, followed by a brief quiz. I did not move around the room to receive the quizzes, but forced students to step over and around one another to reach my desk near the classroom door. In exchange for their quiz sheet, I gave them a slip of paper directing them to leave quietly and go to our regular location, where cool air, plenty of seats, soft music—and a plate of cookies—awaited them.

When all were reassembled, I asked them: “What did you think of me and of the classroom environment?” The answers varied, but most had an impression of disorganization

and poor planning. The most humorous reply: “I didn't think you were crazy, but when you did that, I wasn't so sure anymore!”

Reflecting on their experience, students achieved a better understanding of Maslow's theory, because their physical needs had been ignored. They remembered the terms *conation* and *downshifting* on the test, because they could recall that they lacked the motivation to care about my lecture, and that they had actually downshifted when they thought I didn't care about their needs.

Later that semester, a student told me about an incident that occurred as she worked with a middle-school student during her field practicum.¹² “My student wouldn't focus—I couldn't figure out why he was struggling so with the day's work. But as I looked closely at his face, I saw the beginnings of a bruise under his skin. I stopped trying to instruct him and asked how his face had gotten hurt. He told me about some incidents of bullying, and we had an opportunity to talk about ways he could deal with the problem.” The college student went on to say that she experienced a moment of recognition as she talked with the student. For her, *Maslow's hierarchy of needs, conation, downshifting*—heretofore theoretical concepts—leapt from textbook pages to life through the prism of experience.

As the semester went on, I experimented with various strategies, including simulations, games, opinion polls, and a mock quiz, to provide experiences that would scaffold students' understanding of course concepts. The results? Comments on the formal course evaluation, a teacher-adminis-

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tered exit survey, and student narratives showed they enjoyed learning in this way. It was also satisfying to grade mid-term and final tests, where students showed their understanding of important educational concepts.

A Scriptural Foundation

Learning anchored in experience finds its basis in Scripture. Ever the Master Teacher, Jesus personally undertook the training of those who would be the Christian Church's future leaders. These were not students who merely heard or read about the Kingdom, but disciples who followed their Savior, learning from daily interaction with Him.

The term *discipleship* has been described as a relationship which "connotes holistic education, engaging personal discipline, conceptual knowledge, heart, commitment, and behavioral focus" on the student's part.¹³ Teachers today who seek to pattern themselves after Him who said "Come unto Me" would do well to imitate His simple and appealing invitation: "Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you . . ." ¹⁴

Christ's methods were effective—just ask Peter if he "got it," as he dived himself off onshore after walking on the water with Jesus. Imagine how the disciples' effectiveness in casting out demons improved after Jesus' seminar, Exorcism 101. Descending from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus accurately pinpointed the cause of their failure to help a desperate father's afflicted son, and suggested remediation: fasting and prayer. As Christ sought followers for His kingdom, He first entered their world, showing through parables that He understood their situation. As teachers, we must do no less; for, though we have been granted the legal authority to teach, only our

students can grant us the right to teach *them*. Engagement is the bridge that allows us to enter our students' world and them to enter ours.

Now You Try It!

The unforgettable and climactic scene in the movie *The Miracle Worker*¹⁵ depicts the dawn of comprehension for Helen Keller as teacher Annie Sullivan holds Helen's hand under the stream of water gushing for a pump. As content—water—merges with experience, Helen becomes motivated to discover the objects and people around her. History bears witness that this remarkable woman, aided by the efforts of a persevering teacher, enriched the world. A miracle, indeed!

The good news is that every teacher can realize amazing results by implementing modern methodologies based on biblical principles. Lessons that grab students' attention, nudge their curiosity, and encourage increased motivation through experiential learning will help your class progress from simply being enrolled to becoming engaged. ✍



Joann M. Herrington is an Associate Professor of Education at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she teaches and supervises students majoring in elementary education.

Ms. Herrington has worked as a teacher in church schools and public schools, a principal, and a conference superintendent of education. She has done graduate work in curriculum and instruction and in educational technology.

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9. Bobbi DePorter, Mark Reardon, and Susan Singer-Nourie, *Quantum Teaching: Orchestrating Student Success* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), p. 24.

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11. Abraham Maslow developed a widely accepted theory that people must first have their basic needs fulfilled before they can concentrate on less urgent needs such as learning or pleasure. (See Abraham Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology* [Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007], pp. 374-375.) Conative variables are defined as "energy, persistence, desire, determination and the desire to learn" (Judy S. Richardson and Raymond F. Morgan, *Reading to Learn in the Content Areas* [Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003], p. 35). "Downshifting" refers to the response of the brain to trauma, crisis, or fear. Attention and energy are transferred from the thinking part of the brain to its emotional and sensory/motor parts. This response is commonly known as the "fight or flight" response (see Arlene Taylor, seminar "Downshifting—A Natural Brain Phenomenon": <http://www.arlenetaylor.org> (retrieved March 26, 2007); and Walter B. Cannon, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear, and Rage: An Account of Recent Researches Into the Function of Emotional Excitement* [New York: Appleton, 1939]).

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