4 (Secret) Keys to Student Engagement

As teachers, we look for the strategy, activity, resource, or tool that will enrapture our students and make them eager to learn more. We yearn for students who ask intriguing questions, seek and act on feedback, and take pride in their progress and accomplishments.

Although we know these things are vital, the realities of our routines—the rush to cover information before the test or graduation day—often make it difficult for us to do what's best. We need students' undivided attention to keep up with the pace of learning; yet we often settle for something else.

Compliant—Or Engaged?

We all recognize our compliant learners. They're the ones who follow directions, diligently complete assignments, and get good grades mostly because of their effort or adherence to directions. They do the work because it's assigned, not because they find it interesting or relevant. They'll respond to straightforward questions, but they usually require

When students are engaged, they're motivated to learn. Here's how teachers can secure real engagement.

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support to pursue more complex ideas. If they need assistance, they often wait patiently for the teacher to help them or decide it's not worth the effort because their question goes beyond the scope of the directions. The compliant, dutiful learner is easy to manage, does what's expected, and participates when there's little risk of being wrong.

Unfortunately, we often take this quiet cooperation in class as a substitute for real engagement. (See "Compliant vs. Engaged" at www.ascd.org/el0914jackson.) Engagement tends to look quite different. Engaged learners often pursue their own train of thought about the topic under study, regardless of the task at hand. They may not always participate in group activities if they're still mulling ideas over—or if they're immersed in finishing that assigned task that they're just now getting around to doing.

Engaged learners tend to focus on the learning and share their thoughts unprompted, without consideration for those around them. Straightforward questions bore them, but questions that are personally relevant or that require teasing

out ambiguity fascinate them. These learners take risks; they're not afraid to try something new.

Engaged learners can be needy. They're often annoyed by interruptions, they question everything, and they'll follow an idea even if it takes them outside the parameters of the assignment. Compliant they are not.

So here's another truth: *Real engagement is not compliance.* We can't pine for engaged learners when our policies and practices tend to focus on producing compliant learners. If we want to grow capacity in our students; unearth student talents, dreams, and

graded assignment back and saw that he'd received an *A.* He put the paper in his binder and moved on to the next assignment.

What Am I Asking Students to Do?
Every day, students complete assignments without really understanding what they're being asked to do; they're simply going through the motions. To secure real engagement, be clear on what you're aiming for.

For example, rather than just having students complete a unit on energy sources (nuclear, coal, oil, solar, and wind), be clear about the

conversation is connected to a clear learning goal. For example, if your learning goal is for students to use textual evidence to support their ideas in writing, it doesn't make sense to ask them to supply their own opinion during class discussion or give them assignments that summarize text.

Begin by showing students how what they're doing fits together so they can see the logic in the activity or assignment. Directly connect this to the larger purpose of what you want to train your students to do independently. For instance, if you want your students to be able to collect, analyze, and evaluate the quality of evidence in relation to a question, then the first day you go to the media center to do research, explain how understanding the difference between primary and secondary sources will eventually help them do just that.

You must be able to answer the question, "What's the point of it all?" for students before they'll engage meaningfully with the work. You must think carefully through your standards or course objectives ahead of time and ask yourself why a particular learning goal is important. What will it help students know and be able to do *on their own*? Then, as you decide on the assignments, questions, or conversations you'll engage students in throughout the unit, you have to be ruthless about selecting only those learning activities that will best help you reach your goal. When you rule out learning activities that don't directly move students toward the learning goal, they can more easily recognize the point of the unit.

Next, provide clear structures for helping students reach that goal. That may mean explaining each step in the process, providing clear examples, or creating analytic rubrics that help students track their performance.

For example, a Spanish teacher wants students to share a story about a childhood artifact that has sentimental

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aspirations; and instill perseverance through a focus on doing hard work, learning from mistakes, and revising one's work, we need to design classroom practices around securing real engagement.

Four keys can unlock this kind of learning. See Figure 1 on p. 21 for a discussion of what each key looks like from both the student's and the teacher's perspective.

Key 1. Provide clarity.

Mason stared at his paper. He had just finished reading a story, and now he was supposed to construct five meaningful questions about the text. He wasn't quite sure what constituted "meaningful," so he surfed online for some ideas. After reading a relevant blog post, he copied the sample questions, changing a few words to make the questions fit the story, and turned his paper in. A day later, he got his

point of the unit by proposing an essential question, such as, "How can the United States become more energy independent?" This enables students to go beyond memorizing the differences among the various energy sources. Instead, they can compare the benefits and challenges of harnessing and consuming each source.

Or perhaps you've asked students to read Vera B. Williams's *A Chair for My Mother* (Greenwillow Books, 1982), a picture book that tells the tale of a house fire and how the family saves money to buy one really comfortable chair. Talk with students ahead of time about the idea that sometimes people curb their spending in the present to save money to buy something for the future. Then, when students read the story, they can focus on the theme rather than just the plot.

When you're in the weeds of daily instruction, you may lose sight of the larger purpose. It's vital you make sure that every assignment, question, and

value (for example, a blanket, bedtime story, or baseball mitt). This is connected to a goal of the world language department: to communicate effectively for a particular purpose, task, and audience, using appropriate conventions. The Spanish teacher leads a conversation with his students about what makes a childhood story compelling from a listener's point of view. The students then collaboratively create the evaluative criteria for the assignment—for example, an effective story gets to the point quickly, clarifies why the artifact is important, and shares a side of the person that the listener didn't know about before. The teacher might share his own story of a childhood artifact and have students use the criteria to rate his story. Students can then use the evaluative criteria to guide their own performance.

When students are clear about the goals of a learning activity, when they understand not only what success looks like but also why it's important to their own learning; and when they see how to track their progress over time, they'll be more purposeful as they go about completing their work.

Making It Clear for Mason
What if Mason's teacher had started the unit by explaining that the goal of the unit was for Mason to be able to make meaning of *any* text—even a very challenging one—by asking questions and digging deeper into the words, ideas, and evidence? When giving the assignment, what if she had explained that although the reading might be difficult for many 7th graders, asking meaningful questions of the text would help them dig deeper and understand a reading assignment that was written above their grade level? What if she had modeled the types of

questions students could ask? What if she had shown Mason how, by asking such questions, he would be able to enjoy the reading more and actually use what he read to participate in a robust class discussion on the topic the following day? Mason would have been more careful about the questions he posed of the text and more intentional about what he read because he would see how it connected to upcoming

assignments and how he might use his developing skills to engage more deeply with the content.

The intention is to move from a cursory exercise to a deeper investigation into the author's purpose, a close textual read, and an awareness of the importance of evidence both within and across texts.

Key 2. Offer a relevant context.

Mrs. Alston opened the textbook to the new unit on perimeter and area and began to introduce the lesson.

After she explained the basics of how to calculate area and perimeter, she asked the class if there were any questions.

Julia raised her hand. "Why do we need to know this?" she asked.

Mrs. Alston resisted rolling her eyes. Julia was always asking questions that derailed her lessons. "Because it's a crucial concept in math. It will get you ready for high school geometry."

Julia raised her hand again. "But why is it so important to be able to do this?"

Mrs. Alston glanced at the clock. They only had 20 minutes left in the period, and she wanted to get students through the practice exercises so she'd be sure they could do the homework that night. She didn't have time for this.

"In geometry, you'll deal with a lot of shapes, and so you need to know how to calculate area so you can calculate a lot of other things about shapes. It's an important formula to know," Mrs. Alston explained quickly. "Now, turn to page 76 in your textbooks, and let's try one of the practice problems."

Julia interrupted. "But why will we ever need to know area in life?" she insisted. The other students started to shift impatiently in their seats. They, too, were watching the clock. They knew that if they didn't get through the practice problems, they'd have more to do for homework. Some of them tried to shush Julia.

Mrs. Alston sighed. "There are lots of reasons to know this. For one, if you ever want to lay carpet or install a pool someday." She turned back to the board and began writing the first practice problem.

"But what if I don't ever want to install carpet or a pool? Or maybe I can just hire someone to do that for me," Julia pressed.

"Look, Julia," said Mrs. Alston, at the end of her patience. "We don't have time for this right now. We need to get these practice problems done."

Julia put her hand down, slumped in her seat, and turned to page 76 in her textbook.

Why Is This Important?
In a recent workshop during which several of us were talking about the importance of work that matters to students, one of the participants quipped, "*Someday* is not a day in the week." Our students need to know that the work they're being asked to do is relevant and important to them—right now. That means we teachers need to start with the *why* of our learning activities: Why is it relevant to students? How can students connect what they're learning to their own lives?

Let's look at some 2nd graders who are working on three-digit addition and subtraction problems. One student, clearly agitated, mutters under her breath, "I hate lining up the numbers right. Can't I just use a calculator?" Her teacher responds, "When you're trying to get an exact count on 'how many'—because you want to make sure you have enough items to go around, enough time to get to your friend's house, or enough donations for a community service project—precision matters. Lining up the numbers correctly shows you get the importance of the place value system—and that's so important in the rest of elementary school mathematics and will really prepare you for higher mathematics."

Making It Relevant for Julia
Reimagine or tweak the task and audience to encourage students to become immersed in the challenge. Students eagerly do hard work in sports, fine and performing arts, vocational programs, and a myriad of other endeavors because they see

the relevance of these pursuits. But they can also do this regularly in their academic work if the task is relevant, designed for a broader audience than the teacher, and meaningful.

For Julia, what if the teacher had explained the need to know area, not in terms of laying carpet or installing a pool, but in terms of how that knowledge actually enables students to think differently. Once they understand area and perimeter, students have a much greater understanding

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of space, and they can use what they learn to make all kinds of decisions about space—from installing carpet or a pool, to figuring how many books they can reasonably stuff in their lockers, to determining how many props can comfortably fit on the stage for the spring play.

Have students come up with their own real-world applications. Some students might determine how to use their knowledge about area to design an animal shelter that will house a variety of animals. Other students might use this knowledge to plan their future dream home. And still other students, perhaps concerned by the crowded school hallways and by the fact that it takes so long to get to class, might find ways of using their knowledge to design better halls.

We teachers don't have to always come up with the real-world applications. By explaining to students the

importance and relevance of what they're learning and guiding them to come up with their own real-world examples, you not only deepen their understanding of the concept, but also engage them in making learning relevant to their lives.

Key 3. Create a supportive classroom culture.

Nikita looked at the draft of her "This I Believe" essay, based on parameters for the series of essays aired on National Public Radio (a statement of a core belief, relayed through a story, in 350–500 words). She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. Another *D*. It was the third one in the last two weeks. Fighting back the tears, she stared at the red marks covering her essay. She'd done her best, she really had. She tried to figure out what she'd done wrong this time. What did her teacher mean by "needs more focus" and "narrow down your topic"?

During the rest of the writing block, Nikita sat quietly, pretending to follow the lesson on sentence variety. But inside, she was making up her mind. *It doesn't matter what I do*, she thought. *It's hopeless. I'm just not good at writing. Next time, I won't even try.*

How Do I Show My Support?
If you want more engagement from students, be sure they're able to access the material, the discussion, and the challenge. What we know about learning (regardless of the age or activity) is that the learner stops expending effort if he or she believes there's little chance for success. But students are willing to think, struggle, and fail *if* they have the space—the time, a low-stress environment, collaboration with others, and unfailing support from their teacher.

That's why it's so important to anticipate confusion ahead of time and have structures and supports in place

FIGURE 1. Keys to Engagement: Student and Teacher Perspectives

Keys to Engagement	Student Perspective	Teacher Perspective
Clarity	*What am I aiming for?* I can see how the pieces fit together. I can see the logic of what I'm being asked to do. I can track my progress over time on a goal.	*What am I asking students to do?* Provide clear goals and structures for each task. Explain the key steps and give examples. Show students what success will look like.
Context	*Why should I care?* I can use my strengths to complete the assignment. I can publish my work for a target audience. I can be a change agent in my community.	*Why is this important?* Determine the "why" of your curriculum first. Activate or provide background knowledge. Help students connect what they're learning to their own lives.
Culture	*Who is invested in my success?* I can frame ideas, questions, or predictions and take action to figure the problem out. I can play, problem solve, and fail in order to dig deeper into the challenge. I can be held accountable to high standards.	*How do I show my support?* Anticipate confusion. Identify red flags. Implement progressive interventions.
Challenge	*How is it working for me?* I can identify what I don't know. I can use resources to work through challenges. I can think about my progress and whether I should start over.	*How do I balance challenge and skill?* Provide growth-oriented feedback. Focus on effort rather than ability. Teach students that they can get smarter. Build resilience over time.

from the very beginning. If you think students will have trouble with the vocabulary of an upcoming reading assignment, preview the vocabulary with them. If you think they'll struggle to remember the steps to cross-multiplying fractions, give them a heuristic they can use to remember. If you suspect that some students will get frustrated with an upcoming long-term assignment, prepare task break-downs that carve the assignment into more manageable chunks.

The idea is to anticipate the common mistakes or misconceptions that learners may have or the obstacles they may come up against and put supports in place ahead of time to eliminate or mitigate as many of these

as you can. Then, as students learn, look out for early warning signs that students are struggling and provide the supports you've prepared to clear up their confusion and quickly get them back on track. When learners know there are supports in place to keep them from getting into a free fall of failure, they're much more likely to take risks to deepen their learning.

Making It Doable for Nikita
Many people have trouble narrowing down their core beliefs to just one—Nikita had included a whole list of them in her paper. What if the teacher had led students in an exercise ahead of time to show them how to do this? What if she had cautioned students,

"If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about one core belief"? What if she had been more proactive about guiding students as they wrote?

Instead of handing back the paper with a grade on it, what if she had invited Nikita to revise? The teacher might go through the several beliefs that Nikita had listed and help her narrow her list down to one. Nikita might review the teacher comments delineating key strengths—such as the places where she tells her story with humor and warmth—as well as one major area of focus—such as describing that one belief through a personal story—before she began work on the revision. With these supports in

place, Nikita could feel confident that she had learned from her mistakes and could now meet the demands of the assignment.

Key 4: Provide the appropriate challenge.

James sat looking at the lab assignment. His science teacher expected him to build a clinometer—a device that measures the altitude of an object or event above the horizon. Then, each evening during a four-week period, he was supposed to track the azimuth and altitude of the moon, describe the moon phase, and estimate the percentage of the moon that was illuminated. The intent of this individual data collection was to see whether there were any discernible patterns when the students pooled their observations.

But James had football practice every day after school. Afterward, he had to take a city bus home to watch his two little sisters. Between this and squeezing chores and homework in, he just couldn't imagine how he could do the assignment with that level of precision.

So he opened up the app store on his smartphone. Sure enough, there was an app for that. He simply needed to take a picture of the moon; the algorithm would take care of the rest. He experienced a fleeting moment of guilt but quickly abandoned that thought. After downloading the free app and putting the completed assignment in his binder, he muttered to a classmate about how dumb the assignment was.

How Do I Balance Challenge and Skill?
Students will never be inspired by pulling something from their memory banks and regurgitating it on cue or being asked to work their way through a prescribed process when there's a more efficient way to get that task done. We have to train them for the world they'll inherit, and in that world it's unlikely that employers will pay them to solve a nonproblem.

So offer work that can't be "Khan-ified" or "Googled." Offer assignments and learning tasks in which students are asked to frame ideas, questions, or predictions; take action to figure the problem out; and sometimes even fail and learn from their failures. Offer learning experiences that enable them to play with ideas; solve complex, real-world problems; and dig deeper.

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For example, ask students to interview a personal hero, high-lighting how he or she has influenced others. Have them take a problem and creatively solve it. Students might describe a breathable covering to wear in summer to avoid contact with poison ivy, suggest ways of designing the school day on the basis of a variety of student sleep schedules, propose how to compose a love letter that isn't lame, or come up with a way of engineering headphones to minimize long-term hearing problems.

Making It Challenging for James
The point of the moon assignment wasn't the data collection per se; it was about the overall pattern that students would discern over a given period of time and whether that pattern held up, considering such variables as location, time of day, and time of year.

Instead of focusing on the individual data collection, the teacher could frame her students' thinking around the prediction of where the moon would be in the sky and the shape it would have during the two to four weeks following the initial data collection. Rather than have everyone individually collect the data, the teacher could organize data collection teams to test out the precision of the clinometers, verify the accuracy of the data, and engage in the wonderment of conducting a scientific investigation. There's no app for that!

The Four Keys
Compliance may make for a smoothly run classroom, but it doesn't help students expend the effort they need to meet the demands of challenging standards or take what they've learned and apply it to their lives.

If you want real engagement rather than mere compliance, provide clarity about the goals of learning. Offer the right context so students can make their learning relevant to their lives and to the worlds they live in. Create a classroom culture that signals that you're genuinely invested in their learning and that they have the space and room to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from their mistakes. Finally, provide the appropriate challenge so students find real meaning in their learning and persist even when faced with difficulty along the way. **EL**

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