

An introduction to engagement in educational settings



School resources

Within an educational context, engagement means students directing their attention and energy 'in the moment' towards a particular task or activity. In the classroom, the term 'engagement' is often used to refer to the extent of students' active involvement in a learning task.

What is student engagement and why is it important?

Engagement can be broken down into four interrelated types:

- **Behavioural engagement** – the amount of effort and involvement the student directs towards the activity in terms of attention, effort and persistence
- **Emotional engagement** - the interest, boredom, happiness, and other affective states that affect learners' sustained effort in learning
- **Cognitive engagement** – the nature and quality of learning strategies used by the student; for example, using active strategies for understanding (such as elaboration and organisation) rather than superficial or more passive strategies (such as memorisation)
- **Agentic engagement** – the extent of the student's proactive role in instruction; for example, in terms of expressing preferences and needs.

Engagement with learning is essential to academic progress, as engaged students are self-motivated and direct their own learning, while disengaged students are mentally (and often later physically) absent. It is a recursive cycle, causing and being affected by student motivation, subject interest, and positive social interaction. Engagement is also most often associated with other characteristics in students, such as self-regulation, conscientiousness, and agency. Student academic outcomes are affected by the extent to which students display all four aspects of engagement listed above; that is, the extent to which they exert effort, demonstrate enthusiasm, think strategically, and constructively contribute to learning plans.

Engaged learners have the ability to regulate and adapt their behaviour to particular situations in order to achieve goals. Students can direct their engagement towards goals they personally value or those they know others (such as their parents) value, or to reap extrinsic rewards. However, the depth of engagement is moderated by the level of intrinsic versus extrinsic value the student places on the task. Students are likely to persevere and demonstrate prolonged attention to a high-value task. Engagement might even involve an intense absorption with an experience to the exclusion of other stimuli. Engaged students are agentic in that they express their preferences, ask questions and contribute in various ways while being instructed or taught. A teaching style that supports autonomy encourages students to develop such agentic engagement.

How to promote student engagement

High levels of engagement are supported by the students' **interest in a task and in a specific subject**. Interest in the task influences students' attention, persistence and – ultimately – their acquisition of knowledge, skills and strategies. Sometimes students hold a pre-existing interest in the task, but often that interest will have to be developed by the teacher's instructional strategies and learning materials. It is important that teachers aren't limited by students' existing interests, but rather that they consider

how interest in a new subject or task may be developed by sharing their own passion and enthusiasm for the topic or by building students' background knowledge. Providing students with **a sense of ownership and choice** also promotes engagement, as students are more likely to engage in a task they have chosen or a task that is a good match with their interests. These strategies are supported by **a learner-centred teaching style** whereby teachers use their expertise and knowledge to cater to the needs of individual learners and to promote perceptions of **relatedness and belonging to the classroom community** (nurtured through quality of teacher-student and student-student relationships and interactions).

Teachers can also promote engagement by increasing opportunities to learn by using a variety of techniques and providing **meaningful, authentic, challenging (yet achievable) tasks** which require higher levels of thinking. Understanding the importance of an activity can also enhance engagement. Teachers can use **groupwork**, in which students work with their peers to enhance interest and engagement, which can be particularly important for inherently uninteresting tasks. Engagement is also supported by **activities which provoke curiosity**, or which enable students to personalise knowledge, or to which students can bring their own cultural knowledge. Asking students to justify and explain their answers also promotes engagement.

Teachers can also support engagement by promoting **experiences of success** through realistic goals, appropriate challenge and constructive **feedback that focuses on comprehension, mastery and strategies**, rather than feedback which defines competence in comparison to class performance.

References

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