

Student Engagement: Tips & Resources

Pottruck Technology Resource Center, Simmons College

What does it mean to be “engaged” in learning?

Go with the Flow: About 25 years ago, Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term “flow” as a state of deep and meaningful engagement. Flow is an engrossing experience during which energy, thought, and creativity are focused on a project or goal. We see flow at work in the performing artist on stage, the Olympic athlete, the novelist scribbling ideas on a napkin, the historian digging through archival artifacts, and the research scientist immersed in lab research. The concept of flow also applies to student learning. Engagement refers to the “flow” or energy that a student invests in her learning. She talks about coursework to friends and family at home, spends extra hours researching a topic, and uses each learning experience as an opportunity to generate (and pursue) new questions.

Motivating Factors: Engagement is also about motivation. For most students, motivation to learn is external – to please parents with good grades, be the most competitive candidate for a job after graduation, or even enjoy elevated status among peers. But external, or extrinsic, motivation rarely deepens engagement. Intrinsic motivation is key to student involvement – and to the kind of independent learning that lasts a lifetime.

The Social Dimension of Learning: But if a student is only accountable for her own learning, she misses out on another opportunity for deepened engagement – intellectual dialogue and collaborative meaning-making. Research indicates that student engagement is directly related to the quality (and quantity) of interactions with faculty and with other students. So the fully-engaged student is both an independent and an interdependent learner.

What encourages engagement in learning?

Campus-wide Engagement: According to the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), five “benchmarks” determine how effective a college is in fostering student engagement:

1. The level of academic challenge;
2. Active and collaborative learning;
3. Student-faculty interaction;
4. Enriching educational experiences; and
5. A supportive campus environment.

“Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, both during and after college.” *NSSE Annual Report*

Fostering Engagement in the Classroom: NSSE’s benchmarks are a useful tool for looking at student engagement on the institutional level, but to identify classroom strategies, we need to dig deeper.

Some of the Items Assessed in The National Survey of Student Engagement

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| • Doing research with faculty and peers | • Applying course material (projects, case studies) | • Participating in a learning community |
| • Working outside class with faculty (project, committee) | • Making judgments about the value of information | • Dialogue (written or verbal) within diverse groups |
| • Receiving prompt, substantive feedback on work from both faculty and peers | • Synthesizing and organize ideas into new, more complex, interpretations and relationships. | • Using an electronic medium (listserv, chat, web board) to discuss or complete an assignment |

Kathleen McKinney offers the following tips for faculty on engaging students:

- Know where your students “are” – learn about the background of your students and develop opportunities for incorporating their life experiences into the class.
- Openly discuss the topic of motivation – share stories of successful, intrinsically motivated students you’ve taught.
- Don’t “dumb down” course content – build scaffolds to help students succeed instead (e.g., review and comment on multiple drafts, structure peer-to-peer feedback, model the processes you expect them to perform, organize study groups, etc.)
- Help students become reflective on how they learn best – through the use of portfolios, learning logs, brainstorming ideas for learning the material, etc.
- Offer them control and choice – for example, let them select among different assignments that meet the same learning objectives.

What role can technology play in fostering engagement?

Technology Helps Transcend Time Limitations: According to NSSE, “A worrisome gap exists between the amount of time students spend on educational activities and what faculty members and others say is optimum.” To become fully engaged, students need time to immerse themselves in a topic. Sometimes one to three hours in class just isn’t enough. And, unlike faculty and other professional practitioners, students often don’t know how to pursue a topic outside of class for hours on end. Fortunately, technology can be used to extend and scaffold student learning over the web.

For example, New York University’s Caroline Persell was frustrated that students in her sociology seminar seemed to be distracted by many things – work, illness, social plans. Because her course met once weekly, students also lost their train of thought from one session to the next. She wondered if web-based discussions could help deepen student engagement. With funding from the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, she documented and researched the experience.

“I began to think about whether digital technologies could be used to foster social interactions in ways that might change the relationships among students ... I wondered how digital technologies might be utilized to further the development of a community of learners. And, I wondered if changes in those relationships might affect students’ deep understanding of sociological ideas.” *Caroline Persell*

The web-based discussions she developed for her course were carefully designed and well structured. Before each session, “starters” posted messages about the most important things they’d learned from the readings. They also identified concepts they were having difficulty with and raised questions that they wanted to discuss in class. After each session, “responders” replied to the messages – addressing both difficulties and questions. Finally, “integrators” used readings, in class discussions, previous posts to compose a message that synthesized and integrated what they had learned. Students’ designated roles changed each week.

Analyzing student messages and the quality of their work, Persell observed that, “Using the web is correlated with more interdependency, more engagement, and greater complexity of thought through time.” She concluded, “students can learn a great deal from their peers if we can design creative ways of structuring their interactions.”

Technology Can Engage the Whole Student: Many strategies for increasing student engagement are experiential in nature – conducting original research, project-based learning, service learning. With a bit of advance planning and creativity, technology can be used to document and support these valuable experiences.

For example, students might develop a web-based presentation of their research, construct multimedia simulations that can they use to teach others about what they've learned, or present their work in an e-portfolio they share with prospective employers or others in the field.

The possibilities are endless, but these types of projects are best developed in collaboration with academic technology specialists. If you have an idea, want help with brainstorming and planning, want software training for yourself and your students, or need help integrating technology into your teaching, contact The Pottruck Technology Resource Center. You may even be eligible for mini-grant funding or a fellowship that provides course development release time.

Where can I go to learn more about engagement?

Bransford, John, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking, eds.

1999. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. National Academy of Science. <http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1> (downloaded 2/04)

Center for the Advancement of Teaching

2001. *Engaging Minds: A Conference on Student Engagement*. Conference Proceedings. Illinois State University. <http://www.cat.ilstu.edu/conf/index.shtml> (downloaded 2/04)

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly

1997. *Finding flow: the psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York: BasicBooks.

Hayek, John and George Kuh

2002 "Insights into Effective Educational Practices" *Educause Quarterly*, 25:1:60-61 <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm02113.pdf> (downloaded 2/04)

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning

2003. *National Survey of Student Engagement* <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse> (downloaded 2/04)

McKinney, Kathleen

2001. "Encouraging Students' Intrinsic Motivation," in *Engaging Minds: A Conference on Student Engagement*. Conference Proceedings. Illinois State University. <http://www.cat.ilstu.edu/conf/intrinsicmot.html> (downloaded 2/04)

Persell, Caroline Hodges

2002. "Using Focused Web-based Discussions to Enhance Student Engagement and Deep Understanding," New York University http://www.cites.uiuc.edu/edtech/resources/pedagogy/persell_sociology_essay.pdf (downloaded 2/04)