

Student Engagement

Phillip Schlechty

Indicators of Responses to Work

In the effort to help teachers and other educators assess the presence or absence of engagement and to develop a classroom or school profile to guide action, I have developed a list of possible indicators of engagement, as well as the other four reactions that I have suggested might be used to characterize student responses to the work they are expected to do:

Engagement Indicators

- The student is attentive to the task because he or she finds personal meaning and value in the task; the student sees the task as responding to motives and values he or she brings to the work.
- The student persists with the task even when he or she experiences difficulty and does not compromise personal standards for completion of the task even though he or she might be able to negotiate a lower standard if he or she wanted to.
- The student volunteers resources under his or her control—time, effort, and attention—which is to say that the student is committed to the work and places moral value on its completion.

Strategic Compliance Indicators

- The student is attentive to the task because he or she perceives that the receipt of some desired extrinsic reward is conditionally available to those who pay attention to the task and do what is required of them.
- The student persists with the task only up to the point of ensuring that the desired reward is offered, and the student is willing to accept the reward and abandon the task even though he or she may not be personally satisfied that the work done is of the quality that he or she could produce.
- The student allocates only as much time, energy, and resources as are required to get the reward offered or desired.

Ritual Compliance Indicators

- The student pays minimal attention to the work, is easily distracted, and is constantly seeking alternative activity to pursue. For example, it appears that texting has now become a favorite pastime for those who are ritually compliant.
- The student is easily discouraged from completing the task and regularly tries to avoid the task or get the requirements of the work waived or compromised.

- The student does only those things that must be done and does little or nothing outside the context of direct supervision by the teacher or other adults.

Retreatism Indicators

- The student does not attend to the work, but does not engage in activity that distracts others. Indeed, the student often employs strategies to conceal his or her lack of involvement—for example, sleeping with eyes wide open and smiling from time to time.
- Because the student does not do the work, persistence is totally lacking.
- The student does nothing and, when forced through direct supervision to do the task, either engages in ritual behavior or rebellion.

Rebellion Indicators

- The student overtly refuses to comply with the requirements of the task. This refusal may involve cheating, refusing to do the work, or even doing other work in place of that which is expected.
- Because the student does not do the work, persistence is totally lacking.
- Alienation rather than commitment is evident. Unlike the retreaters, students who rebel are likely to be active in their rejection of the task, up to and including efforts to sabotage the work, cheat, and build negative coalitions of other students around the work and the rejection of the values the work suggests.

Schlechty, Phillip C. (2011-02-16).
Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work (p. 36).
John Wiley and Sons.

ENGAGEMENT DEFINED

Four components are always present when a student is engaged:

1. The engaged student is attentive, in the sense that he or she pays attention to and focuses on the tasks associated with the work being done.
2. The engaged student is committed. He or she voluntarily (that is, with-out the promise of extrinsic rewards or the threat of negative consequences) deploys scarce resources under his or her control (time, attention, and effort, for example) to support the activity called for by the task.
3. The engaged student is persistent. He or she sticks with the task even when it presents difficulties.
4. The engaged student finds meaning and value in the tasks that make up the work.

Sometimes on-task behavior is confused with engagement. On-task behavior indicates only that a student is attentive to a task. It says nothing of the student's willingness to persist with the task when he or she experiences difficulty. It also says nothing about the value the student attaches to the task or the meaning he or she associates with the activity related to it. A student might persist with a difficult task simply because he or she places value on some extrinsic rewards promised for successful completion of the task—for example, a good grade, admission to college, or eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities. Take the promise of these extrinsic rewards away, and the student is likely to abandon the task since completing it has no other meaning or value for him or her. For example, students who aspire to enter highly selective colleges are more likely to do whatever it takes to get a good grade than are students whose college aspirations are less lofty.

Even when a student is attentive and persistent, there is no assurance that the student is engaged. Engagement involves commitment as well as attention and persistence. Attention can be focused through fear and the threat of punishment, but those who are attentive because of fear and threat are not engaged. Neither are those who pay attention and persist because they place a high value on some reward that is extrinsic to the work. Commitment, attention, and persistence must be present to justify the claim that the student is engaged.

Schlechty, Phillip C. (2011-02-16). *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work* (p. 15). John Wiley and Sons.