

The Engaged Classroom

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Nothing deflates a teacher more than bored students. Here's how teachers can get teens energized about learning.

I do my research by shadowing teenagers in school. Even though I'm a veteran high school and college teacher and the father of three, I figure the truest and most accurate way I can learn about the way teaching and learning happen in high schools is to experience what adolescents experience throughout a school day. I recently spent 130 days shadowing students in a diverse California high school. As I sat side by side with young people in classrooms and later debriefed them about their experiences, I focused on two central questions:

- What is happening in students' heads and hearts as they experience school?
- What characterizes classroom episodes during which students become wholly engaged and energized, finding genuine meaning in academic experiences?

My questions have their genesis in my teacher's heart. One of my best memories of the dozen years I spent teaching high school is the day my classroom sprang to life in a

fierce, dazzling discussion of how themes in Billie Holiday's recording of "Strange Fruit" connected to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Even after the bell rang, the students wouldn't stop debating.

It's been almost 20 years since that day, and I now teach at Smith College. Moments when I see the collective attention of my students and feel their energy for the subject at hand still represent the grail I pursue in teaching. When I stand before my class, I scan the rows of faces and wonder whether the students are with me—and if they're not, where are they? In my research, I seek to understand the experiential terrain of students' class time and detect links between what teachers do and what young people take in. Here is what I am learning.

DREAM FACTORIES OR DESERTS?

Classrooms are powerful places. They can be dynamic settings that launch dreams and delight minds, or arid places that diminish hope and deplete energy. The students I shadowed experienced them as both, but they generally described their academic experience as listless and tedious. My observations and conversations with students affirm prior research, such as that conducted by John Goodlad in his massive study of U.S. secondary schools. Goodlad (1984) concluded that the typical classroom possessed a "flat neutral emotional ambience [where] . . . boredom is a disease of epidemic proportion" (p. 9). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson's study (1984), in which teenagers carried electronic pagers and self-report forms to monitor moods, reflected the same trend. The beepers were randomly activated, signaling students to fill out self-report forms on

what they were doing and their immediate state of mind or emotion. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson found that

Compared to other contexts in their lives, time in class is associated with lower-than-average states on nearly every self-report dimension. Most notably, students report feeling sad, irritable, and bored; concentration is difficult; they feel self-conscious and strongly wish they were doing something else. (p. 9)

To characterize class experience as merely boring overlooks important facets of student experience. Boredom by definition is a feeling of “weariness brought on by tedious iteration or dullness” (Stein, 1975). Through my research I observed students experiencing class time several different ways, often drifting from one state of experience to another.

FLAVORS OF DISENGAGEMENT

Slow time. Students often described class time as monotonous and classroom activities as predictable, mechanically routine, and dull. As one student put it, “Sitting in class is like being in the car with your parents on a long road trip without your CD player.” When students experience slow time you can watch them trying to invent ways to occupy themselves. They read magazines, listen surreptitiously to headphones, or drift off into daydreams.

Lost time. A more intense form of disengagement I observed possessed strange, almost eerie properties. During lost time, time unfolds without students being able to describe or articulate any form of experience. They do not describe themselves as daydreaming but as passively waiting for class to end. As one student said, “I enter a zone where time bends, but does not move.”

Fake time. Aware that teachers monitor their engagement and attention, teenagers tactically position themselves to appear attentive. They devote energy to what Denise Pope (2001) calls “doing school,” by which she means going through the right motions to appear as though they are learning and focused. One student told me that

I set up my books, position my calculator, and sit forward in my seat not because I’m interested, but because I know my teachers like to see me looking like I’m paying attention.

This charade of attention often masks students’ crafty and surreptitious efforts to undertake projects unrelated to the class unfolding before them. Students do homework,

pass notes, generate to-do lists, and study for quizzes—all the while monitoring the teacher and classroom activities.

Worry time. High schoolers spend vast stretches of time worrying and strategizing about nonacademic matters. Students describe a host of distractions to their attention that drain their capacity to emotionally and intellectually connect with what happens in class—from romantic spats to impending athletic events or drama performances.

Play time. I’ve observed students as they watched movies, listened to wonderful musical recordings, and sat through interesting lectures. Students in this state of experience are generally attentive but passive. They watch with the vigor of a popcorn-scarfing sitcom viewer. I’ve also sat with students who were purportedly engaged in collaborative group work, but who were actually deep in off-topic social conversation that would tactically shift upon arrival of the teacher.

ENGAGED TIME: THE GRAIL OF TEACHING

The final category of student experience I identified, *engaged time*, represents students deeply immersed in learning. From my vantage point as the shadow, I witnessed students becoming roused to life, animated with feelings and ideas. Episodes of intense concentration occurred. High schoolers experienced these moments as provocative, enchanting, memorable, and enjoyable. They described feeling immersed and involved and said things like “I can’t believe how fast class went!” or “That was intense!”

After sitting with students through hundreds of class sessions and engaging in postmortem analyses of how they experienced class time, I’ve come to believe that these episodes of engagement represent formidable triumphs of teaching. I believe they happened because a teacher made crucial pedagogic decisions in the short term and cultivated a powerful classroom ethos over the long term. Watching different teachers during these episodes of potent teaching, I noted one commonality—these teachers fought fiercely to hold their students’ attention. They appeared to recognize that teenagers are unabashed and savvy consumers of many things. Our youth carry credit cards, cell phones, pagers, and car keys. Teens intuitively grasp that the inalienable right of a consumer is the power to choose. They are full-fledged shoppers with a ubiquitous taste for things fast, jazzy, and loud. Global marketing executive Elissa Moses (2000) notes that

Global teens have been brought up to experience and expect sensory stimulation. This generation is constantly looking for new thrills that entertain. The pre-

ferred music is loud. The movies enjoyed feature fast action. The dances are rhythmic and frenetic. . . . Global teens have a very low threshold for boredom. . . . Do not bore this generation or it will abandon you. (p. 45)

The teachers who successfully held the attention of students used a variety of approaches and techniques. Generally, they practiced anti-boredom pedagogy and were relentlessly attuned to the attention-scape of their classroom. When attention waned, they intervened. Here is a sampling of approaches.

Manipulate Classroom Pace

One teacher veered between a frenetically paced question-and-answer discussion and long spans of quiet journaling time. She told me that her model for pace was MTV:

I try and jar students into paying attention with lots of transitions, quick back-and-forth followed by some slow times. I see myself as a deejay at a party.

Teachers also broke routines to get students' attention. Taking students outside for class, introducing a subject with dramatic footage from a video, bringing visitors into the classroom, or dressing up in costume were all strategies teachers used to be novel and garner attention.

Feed the Need to Create

Students were most vibrant when creating or thinking about something new. I can't emphasize enough how invigorating it was for them to be part of a discussion or project that allowed them to express their originality. Students tuned in when they felt ownership over ideas expressed in class and felt they were in a safe place to share their own ideas. They yearned to be listened to and have their insights taken seriously.

Share Your Personal Presence

Energy and passion matter. We all know that if you are in the presence of someone who yawns, in a short time you'll be yawning yourself. When I observe students, the same phenomenon holds sway. Energized, expressive teaching fosters energized learning; sedentary, monotonous teaching sabotages attention. Personal presence does not need to be boisterous, but it must be authentic. Teachers who connected with students told poignant personal stories, conveyed their passions, and expressed emotion and vulnerability. Time and again, I heard students say about teachers who were capable of snaring attention, "Mr. X is a real person."

Students also responded when teachers shared their own love affair with learning and scholarship. When teachers showed wonder and passion for what they taught—sharing what they were learning from their own reading or in courses they were taking—students sometimes rolled their eyes. But I rarely thought they meant it.

Know Students as People

The young people I spent time with wanted their teachers to know them as people. They wanted teachers to understand their experiences, interests, aspirations, needs, fears, and idiosyncrasies. Feeling known, understood, and appreciated matters.

The teachers I observed in turn genuinely enjoyed young people. They were kid-savvy and created opportunities to get to know their students beyond the classroom—attending after-school events, devising assignments that gave appropriate access to the personal realm, and working to stay connected. Effective teachers used this knowledge of the personal to create bridges between their students and course content. For example, one teacher I observed would frequently frame questions using snippets of personal information: "John, you've told me about your passion for weightlifting. Linda, you've described your fascination with theater. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, what are Holden's passions?"

Connect Content to Teen Questionings

The teenagers I shadowed were on a journey, striving to figure out who they are, to whom they belong, what talents and potential they have, and where they might end up. Teachers who engaged young people used virtually any subject matter as an opening to meaningful conversation about big ideas like these. Questions that focused attention were often connected to psychosocial dilemmas that many students were already working out for themselves.

For example, to emphasize that statistics is a potent tool for highlighting inconsistencies in our culture, one math teacher capitalized on the adolescent sensitivity to paradox. This teacher had students develop a survey and poll the school about its civic values: Results showed a student body that cared deeply about community issues. The students then analyzed survey results from the New Millennium Young Voters Project, which showed that only one in five young people between the ages of 18 and 20 voted. They learned not only the process of polling and tabulating survey results but also a means to interpret their world and understand their generation through statistics.

One English teacher designed an assignment asking students to construct an "experience wheel" that compared

Huckleberry Finn's developmental journey with their own journey to adulthood. One student reflected that

I like the story about Huck, but what I found more interesting was how the assignment made me think about my own journey. I'm not heading down the Mississippi, but connecting each stage of life that Huck experienced with my own helped me think about my own journey as well.

HEARTS AND MINDS

During the past year, people in the United States have heard a lot about "winning the hearts and minds" of others. This term suggests gaining the positive attention of a group of people for a virtuous purpose. Although the term has been co-opted by the media and politicians, it has a deeper meaning for teachers. We must win students' hearts and minds by engaging them in whatever subject we teach, so

they can discover genuine meaning and value in their academic experience.

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