

GOLDEN RULES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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Six factors to consider in designing lessons to help increase student engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively.

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When we think of student engagement in learning activities, it is often convenient to understand engagement with an activity as being represented by good behavior (i.e., behavioral engagement), positive feelings (i.e. emotional engagement), and, above all, student thinking (i.e., cognitive engagement) (Fredricks, 2014). This is because students may be behaviorally and/or emotionally invested in a given activity without actually exerting the necessary mental effort to understand and master the knowledge, craft, or skill that the activity promotes.

In light of this, research suggests that considering the following interrelated elements when designing and implementing learning activities may help increase student engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively, thereby positively affecting student learning and achievement.

1. MAKE IT MEANINGFUL

In aiming for full engagement, it is essential that students perceive activities as being meaningful. Research has shown that if students do not consider a learning activity worthy of their time and effort, they might not engage in a satisfactory way, or may even disengage entirely in response (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). To ensure that activities are personally meaningful, we can, for example, connect them with students' previous knowledge and experiences, highlighting the value of an assigned activity in personally relevant ways. Also, adult or expert modeling can help to demonstrate why an individual activity is worth pursuing, and when and how it is used in real life.

2. FOSTER A SENSE OF COMPETENCE

The notion of competence may be understood as a student's ongoing personal evaluation of whether he or she can succeed in a learning activity or challenge. (Can I do this?) Researchers have found that effectively performing an activity can positively impact subsequent engagement (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). To strengthen students' sense of competence in learning activities, the assigned activities could:

- Be only slightly beyond students' current levels of proficiency
- Make students demonstrate understanding throughout the activity
- Show peer coping models (i.e. students who struggle but eventually succeed at the activity) and peer mastery models (i.e. students who try and succeed at the activity)
- Include feedback that helps students to make progress

3. PROVIDE AUTONOMY SUPPORT

We may understand autonomy support as nurturing the students' sense of control over their behaviors and goals. When teachers relinquish control (without losing power) to the students, rather than promoting compliance with directives and commands, student engagement levels are likely to increase as a result (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Autonomy support can be implemented by:

- Welcoming students' opinions and ideas into the flow of the activity
- Using informational, non-controlling language with students
- Giving students the time they need to understand and absorb an activity by themselves

4. EMBRACE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is another powerful facilitator of engagement in learning activities. When students work effectively with others, their engagement may be amplified as a result (Wentzel, 2009), mostly due to experiencing a sense of connection to others during the activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). To make group work more productive, strategies can be implemented to ensure that students know how to communicate and behave in that setting. Teacher modeling is one effective method (i.e. the teacher shows how collaboration is done), while avoiding homogeneous groups and grouping by ability, fostering individual accountability by assigning different roles, and evaluating both the student and the group performance also support collaborative learning.

5. ESTABLISH POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

High-quality teacher-student relationships are another critical factor in determining student engagement, especially in the case of difficult students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Fredricks, 2014). When students form close and caring relationships with their teachers, they are fulfilling their developmental need for a connection with others and a sense of belonging in society (Scales, 1991). Teacher-student relationships can be facilitated by:

- Caring about students' social and emotional needs
- Displaying positive attitudes and enthusiasm
- Increasing one-on-one time with students
- Treating students fairly
- Avoiding deception or promise-breaking

6. PROMOTE MASTERY ORIENTATIONS

Finally, students' perspective of learning activities also determines their level of engagement. When students pursue an activity because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than merely obtain a good grade, look smart, please their parents, or outperform peers (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). To encourage this mastery orientation mindset, consider various approaches, such as framing success in terms of learning (e.g. criterion-referenced) rather than performing (e.g. obtaining a good grade). You can also place the emphasis on individual progress by reducing social comparison (e.g. making grades private) and recognizing student improvement and effort.

RESEARCH

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