Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators This month the focus is on exploring options for promoting student engagement.

Engaging Experiences

Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

There is probably no more important factor that can impact learning than student engagement – or the lack of it. If students are not attentive and involved, learning will not happen. Teachers sometimes are frustrated when their students are not tuned in to the planned learning activities. In his analysis of how to re-engage his students, high school English teacher Andrew Marcinek shared his observation: "Last week I observed a tired classroom. My English class looked bored and uninterested in the discussion we were having. I observed one student intently working on a crossword puzzle. He was engaged. Another student was sneaking a peek at her mobile device every so often and then quickly looked back in my direction. She was almost engaged. Some students were simply staring at me so intently that I assumed they had painted eyes on the exterior of their eyelids." Mr. Marcinek's honest appraisal of his students led him to re-evaluate his expectations for student learning. His revised expectations, as presented in an Edutopia blog, included the following ideas: learn beyond the walls, collaborate, engage others, share, deconstruct an issue transparently, establish a class wiki to facilitate learning, make many mistakes along the way, and have fun. As Mr. Marcinek succinctly concluded, "I wanted them to not only write about this world, but also engage with it."

A veteran high school math teacher, Tristan de Frondeville, summed up his feelings by saying, "When 90 to 100 percent of my students are excitedly engaged in their tasks and ask deep and interesting questions, I experience joy, and joy is a lot less tiring than the frustration that comes with student apathy."

Mr. Marcinek and Mr. de Frondeville are like many educators today who are searching for ways to make sure their students are active participants and not passive onlookers who are logging seat time. With so many competing interests outside the classroom, it is important for teachers to not play the blame game and look for the bogeyman that is making life harder or to beat themselves up if their students appear to be inattentive. It is also imprudent to abandon current practices that have proven to be successful for decades. Instead, teachers can re-examine their thinking, seek to discover successes that other educators are experiencing, and add some fresh ideas to their existing repertoires.

As all educators know, not all ideas will work and not all students will respond to our best thinking and our most sincere efforts to create a learning-centered environment. But as professionals, it is our duty and

responsibility to be tenacious, to persevere, and to follow the advice of Albert Einstein who said, "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the condition in which they can learn." When teachers discover new ideas and approaches that result in achieving 90 to 100 percent student engagement, perhaps they too will experience the joy that Mr. de Frondeville felt because they captured their students' attention, kept them genuinely involved throughout the lesson, and students left the class fulfilled from having participated in an exciting learning experience.

One way to determine how to gain and maintain the focus of your students is to self-assess your current practices, determine what is working, and make a plan to add new and different approaches and ways of thinking that could have the impact you are seeking. The attachment on the next page presents a series of questions organized in categories, each of which can have an impact on student engagement in learning experiences. As you read and respond to each question, write in the space provided an **F** if it is a practice you **frequently** include in your instructional design and delivery, an **S** if you follow the practice **sometimes**, or an **N** if it is a **new idea** you do not yet include in your practice. After completing the self-assessment, consider which of the practices you marked with an **S** or an **N** might have the most impact on learning if they were regular and purposeful components of your teaching repertoire.

Student Engagement Self-Assessment

As you read, respond to each question by writing in the spaces provided an **F** if it is a practice you ***frequently*** include in your instructional design and delivery, an **S** if you follow the practice **sometimes,** or an **N** if it is a ***new idea*** you do not yet include in your practice. After completing the self-assessment, consider which of the practices you marked with an **S** or an **N** might have the most impact on learning if they were regular and purposeful components of your teaching repertoire.

As I plan my units and lessons, do I

_____ begin with end in mind by linking all learning to the Common Core Standards, state standards, and district outcomes, and determining what it will look like when students have mastered the standards?

_____ include clear, curriculum-based objectives, a pre-assessment, teacher- and/or student-led cycles of instruction, guided practice, independent practice, and frequent checks for understanding?

_____ keep abreast of and discuss with my peers updated research and new teaching approaches so that I can continue to expand my repertoire of teaching and learning options?

_____ connect my lessons to the world beyond the classroom by using technological applications such as mobile devices, Web 2.0, podcasts, digital dossiers, and wikis?

_____ prepare for student questions such as, "How am I going to use what I am learning?" by connecting the purposes of and uses for their learning to the real world?

_____ use the input and feedback I receive from students as I develop future lessons?

_____ make sure that standards, and not activity-level thinking, drive my planning process?

_____ incorporate 21st century skills in my plans in order to better prepare my students for their world beyond academia?

_____ keep in mind that my students are part of the digital generation and, thus, appropriately incorporate technology into my lessons?

_____ analyze the tasks and learning exercises I want my students to complete to make sure students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills to complete the assigned work?

_____ think beyond the standards and think about how to help my students become informed and involved future citizens?

____ create intriguing, open-ended questions in order to promote deeper thinking by my students?

As I build relationships with my students, do I

____ establish authentic personal relationships with each of my students that convinces them that I care deeply about each of them as a person?

____ greet my students as they enter class each day?

____ let my students get to know me as a person by sharing examples from my own youth and adult life?

____ connect learning experiences to the communities in which students live and to the issues which are impacting the citizens in their communities?

____ ensure that my students understand that they are valued members of our learning community and that they bring much to our learning environment?

____ demonstrate passion and knowledge of the content so that students may more readily share that passion and absorb that knowledge?

____ pay close attention to quiet and/or resistant learners and devise ways to engage them in learning experiences?

In order to motivate my students, do I

____ encourage students to take risks by assuring them that mistakes are part of the learning process?

____ focus more on encouraging students rather than pointing out mistakes and poor behavior?

____ give students a sense of control over how lessons will unfold and progress?

____ select controversial and provocative materials to pique my students' curiosity and involve them in critical analysis?

____ continuously monitor the level of students' engagement as well as the quality of their engagement?

____ promote student self-efficacy by instilling in them a belief in their capabilities to achieve goals and clearly articulated outcomes?

____ give feedback that is descriptive rather than judgmental and that includes identification of strengths as well as a next steps?

____ catch my students off guard by including surprises and unexpected occurrences?

____ fill classroom walls with stimulating, but not cluttered or distracting, materials including current student work, other exemplars of high-quality work, and word walls?

To create a learner-centered classroom, do I

____ use high-interest hooks at the beginning of lessons to captivate student attention?

_____ make expectations for student behavior and participation clear from the beginning of school, orchestrate practices of routines and procedures, and repeat expectations as necessary?

_____ demonstrate a commitment to creating a culture of ideas rather than a culture of right answers?

_____ create and maintain a respectful classroom that is a safe, non-threatening environment, with no put-downs, no sarcasm, no belittlement, and no intimidation by students or teacher?

_____ make learning an enjoyable experience and promote laughter and camaraderie throughout classes?

_____ group and regroup my students purposefully and involve them both formally or informally in cooperative learning experiences?

_____ encourage students to ask deep and interesting questions that do not have simple answers?

_____ monitor student engagement during group work by moving around the classroom, making eye contact, listening in discussions, questioning, encouraging, and redirecting as appropriate?

_____ foster the qualities of wondering, dreaming, and to spark creativity and promote problem-solving skills?

_____ develop a regimen of high-quality anchoring activities so that students know what they are expected to do when they finish assigned tasks?

_____ purposefully build movement into lessons to address the needs of kinesthetic learners?

_____ collaborate with peers to discuss strategies that will more readily engage students in the learning?

_____ learn as much as possible about the use of classroom technologies such as iPods, interactive whiteboards and Smart Boards?

When students are reading, writing and working together do I

_____ provide pre-reading activities to help activate prior knowledge?

_____ introduce and clarify new vocabulary words that could impose roadblocks for students when they are reading?

_____ conduct class discussions prior to reading that will help students set a purpose for reading?

_____ avoid practices such as round-robin reading, reading the text aloud as a class, or having students read silently and answer recall questions related to the reading?

_____ carefully select reading materials that are especially intriguing and interesting to students, and have the potential to result in critical reflection?

_____ make public a series of focus questions that guide reading assignments?

____ train my students to be better oral communicators by including a variety of opportunities for students to talk with one another using strategies such as reciprocal teaching, learning buddies, talking tokens, and lectures with discussion partners?

____ provide opportunities for students to reflect, both orally and in writing, on how they are reaching their beliefs, opinions and values as a result of their learning experiences?

____ establish that writing is an important life skill and provide multiple and ongoing opportunities for students to write such as quick writes, short reaction papers, text messages, Twitter entries, journal entries, and lesson summarizers?

During class discussions, do I

____ share my excitement for the topic through my tone of voice, body language, and facial expression?

____ explicitly ensure that students do more talking than I do?

____ encourage multiple and varying opinions and conclusions during discussions by not telling students what they are supposed to think?

____ tolerate silence during a discussion to allow more time for students to think?

____ model critical thinking processes, using practices such as **Think Alouds**, so that students can better participate in class discussions?

____ provide graphic organizers or other visuals during discussions to support comprehension and involvement of visual learners more fully?

____ incorporate research-based practices into my classroom discussions including the **10:2** process, wait time, frequent checks for understanding, and requiring students time to summarize their learning at the end of a discussion or a class period?

____ have students stretch their thinking by arguing the opposite of what they think or believe during a class discussion?

____ ask students to explain the thinking process they used to reach their conclusion?

____ insist on high-quality student answers to questions by having students speak in complete sentences and defend their responses with appropriate rationales?

____ promote participation in class discussions by periodically requiring students to bring prepared questions or reactions to class as their **Ticket to Enter** to the classroom?

To set my students up for success, do I

____ provide scaffolding supports throughout lessons so that students do not encounter frustrations or shutdowns?

____ Provide extensions for students who are accelerated and ready to engage in advanced work?

____ frame upcoming learning so that students are clear on the standards that they are to master, the type of learning experiences in which they will participate, and how their learning will be assessed?

____ give students choice in materials to use during learning experiences so that they can build their ability to choose learning resources more independently?

____ adjust instruction based on student responses and reactions to lessons?

____ maintain momentum by having materials readily available and avoiding transitions that are cumbersome and time consuming?

____ minimize confusion and questions by providing clear directions before students begin a task?

As I assess student learning, do I

____ explain how to prepare for upcoming assessments so students use their study time more judiciously?

____ emphasize learning and not just grades by giving students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery level learning?

____ use ungraded formative assessment data to make instructional decisions and summative assessments to measure overall student learning?

____ make the grading system transparent so that students fully understand how their learning will be assessed?

____ give students different ways to demonstrate their learning so that they view grading practices as fair and balanced?

____ help students monitor and take responsibility for their own learning by giving them opportunities to self-assess and reflect on their learning?

____ provide students frequent, specific, growth-producing feedback so that they can improve their academic performance?

____ look for evidence of continuous improvement in student achievement rather than simply focusing on isolated grades and assignments?

____ build on past learning experiences by including cumulative reviews of prior learning?