



Going Beyond Motivation to Engagement

Small distinctions make all the difference

By Ellin Oliver Keene

I've been thinking about motivation. From my early years as a teacher, I thought of motivation as something I did to students. If a lesson didn't go as planned, I was the one who hadn't motivated them enough. I hadn't gotten them "into it."

I now understand that learning itself isn't something

we do to students; neither is motivation. Learners meet us halfway—we set up the conditions for learning and make certain that the content is important and relevant, but I always tell students, “You choose what is important to remember.”

The same is true with motivation, at least the kind that comes from the inside. I wonder whether it's even possible to cause another person to feel internally motivated. We can try to get students to work for rewards, but we can't ignite the fire of internal motivation.

I believe that there is an important difference between compliance, participation, motivation, and engagement. Some students are more than motivated and we seem to have very little to do with it. They are lost in thought; they're not just participating, they are urgently “after” understanding. “They are fervent and it comes from within. These kids are engaged” (Keene 2008).

It's also interesting to note that “to motivate” implies an action done to others—passive form—whereas “to comply,” “to participate,” and “to engage” are about an active form—a choice we make to respond to others.

Small Distinction, Big Difference*

Engage: to occupy the intentions or efforts of a person(s) – syn. absorb, engross, interest, involve

Motivate: to incite or impel – syn. provoke, cause, propel

Participate: to take or have a part, to share, as with others, partake – syn. share

Comply: to act in accordance with wishes, demands, requirements, or conditions – syn. acquiesce, conform, obey

*Adapted from Dictionary.com.

Pause and Ponder . . .

Think about a student you've known who personifies, more or less, each of the definitions above. Jot some notes that describe each student. What patterns do you notice when you compare the four profiles?

What Is a Working Theory of Engagement?

Where does this capacity for deep engagement come from, and can it be learned by those who don't seem to have it? Let's start by describing engagement in the context of teaching and learning.

- Engagement is born of *intellectual urgency*—engaged children often tell us through talk and action that they “have to know more.” They are willing to put time and considerable effort into learning more. In these situations, children may want to take action to mitigate a problem in their community or the world.
- Engagement is born of *emotional response to ideas*—engaged children can describe experiences when a concept is imprinted

in the heart as well as the mind. They are certain (and I believe them) that they will remember the ideas because a strong emotion is tied to a concept they're learning.

- Engagement is deepened by *perspective bending*—engaged children are aware of how others' knowledge, emotions, and beliefs shape their own. They are willing to change their thinking and particularly relish the idea that their ideas can impact other learners.
- Engagement is, in some way, dependent on our *sense of the aesthetic*—engaged children are able to describe moments when they find something beautiful or extraordinary, hilarious or unusually meaningful. They speak of a book or an illustration that seems to have been created just for them.

Can Engagement Be Learned?

In her seminal book, *Mindset*, psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) shows that people can learn behaviors associated with engagement. She quotes Robert Sternberg who suggests that achieving success “is not some fixed prior ability, but purposeful engagement.” Engagement.

If we accept their argument, the question for educators becomes, how do we foster engagement? We know that engagement emanates from within the learner, but that doesn't mean we are passive observers.

We model intellectual engagement.

We begin by thinking aloud and modeling. So many educators have become skillful in these areas—for example, thinking aloud about how to generate questions as a reader, or modeling ways a writer crafts a magnetic lead.

Do we, however, even *mention* how it feels to be engaged? Even very young children can learn to identify when they feel intellectual urgency or an emotional response to an idea. We put up the posters in the classroom and give lip services to phrases like “We all work together!” and “Persevere!” but do our students have ample opportunity to discuss what it means to be engaged with their teacher and other learners? Have we thought aloud about how someone “bent our perspective,” changed our thinking or beliefs in some significant way? Do we talk with students about our aesthetic experiences and invite them to share theirs?

We label children's behaviors and thoughts.

We can also catch kids in the act. Students show signs, even brief flashes, of engagement all the time. Do we notice and label those moments with the children? I'll never forget watching Kevin, a kindergartner in Alabama, spend days with a book trying to figure out why seasons change. As he closed in on an explanation (an accurate one, by the way), his teacher and I decided that the best way to capitalize on Kevin's important new learning was to help other children understand that he was captivated by his question and to recognize the energy he put in to solving it. It wasn't a priority for every child in that kindergarten to understand the vernal and autumnal equinox, but they could absolutely learn about and strive toward Kevin's curiosity, independence, and intensity.

No one can be engaged all the time but, in the coming school year, I hope we can pause to consider the small distinctions between compliance, participation, motivation, and engagement. If we devote

Behavioral Markers of Deep Understanding and Engagement That Can Be Observed in the Classroom

- **Learners are deeply engaged.** We experience a sense that the world around has disappeared, and we are subsumed by the world of the text. We choose to focus on particular ideas for longer periods of time; we may need to focus in silence and/or in conversation with others. We apply fervent attention. We can observe others concentrating with a focus that is nearly impenetrable.
- **Learners want to take action in the world based on what they have read.** Through discussions, writing, drama, or art, we feel an urge to do something or act in some way to mitigate or resolve related conflicts in the world. We can talk about how a book changed us, caused us to think and act differently in our own lives. We may want to leave a written, artistic, or dramatic legacy. We want to make an observable contribution to the world around us based on what we read.
- **Learners show willingness to struggle.** We choose to challenge ourselves to understand more deeply. We consciously fight any influence of negative self-judgment, and we seek with a sense of efficacy to solve complex problems.
- **Learners can describe their progress.** We can describe our own processes, preferences, and progress. We can describe, for example, how we used a comprehension strategy and how such use improved our understanding. We define and describe how our thinking has changed and can ascribe those changes to particular experiences or insights.
- **Learners engage in rigorous discourse.** We speak with others to develop deeper understanding and/or defend our ideas. We remain open to multiple perspectives (perspective bending) and consider others' ideas seriously, often integrating them into our own background knowledge. We argue/defend. We may discuss, challenge others' ideas and beliefs, and/or defend our own with evidence from the text and from background knowledge (schema).
- **Learners experience a renaissance.** We meander among a wide range of topics, interests, genres, and authors, and we pursue study in areas we find compelling or aesthetically rewarding. We pursue a compelling question. We may decide to tackle a topic of intense interest to build a knowledge base or satisfy curiosity.
- **Learners achieve insight.** We experience and can describe a moment of clarity, of "seeing" for the first time, possibly due to our efforts to recognize patterns in text or conceptual material.
- **Learners remember.** We reapply previously learned concepts and ideas in new learning situations.

even a bit more time to modeling and labeling moments of true engagement when we see or hear them, the dividends in children's learning and their sense of agency will make all the difference. We have far more capacity to foster engagement than we may believe. It isn't up to us to "motivate" students, but it is our job to show them how we and others live fully engaged lives.

For a shareable document with expanded content from Ellin on this subject, go to heinemann.com/pd/journal and download "Outcomes of Understanding."

Dweck, Carol. S. 2006. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Random House.

Keene, Ellin O. 2008. *To Understand: New Horizons in Reading Comprehension*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Sternberg, Robert J. 2005. "Intelligence, Competence and Expertise." In *The Handbook of Competence and Motivation*, edited by Andrew Elliot and Carol S. Dweck. New York: Guilford Press.



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