Rethinking student learning and the role of engagement

By Amy Kellen

amy.kellen@henderson.kyschools.us

Educators agree engaged students learn more and increasing learning is our paramount goal. That is why we spend so much time, money and effort seeking, developing and implementing engaging instruction.

This has certainly been my experience. As an adherent to the idea that engagement is key to learning, I’ve devoted countless hours learning about and planning instructional strategies in an effort to engage my high school social studies students.

I never contemplated the validity of whether or not engagement is really important to learning because I just knew it to be true. Engagement, so I thought, is what students do when they’re working in a lesson, and if they like what they’re doing, they’ll learn more. And, like all of us, I instinctively know kids are less engaged in instruction when

I’m doing the work (e.g. lecture) than when they’re doing the work (e.g. inquiry).

That’s the thinking that drove my project this past year with Classroom Teachers

Enacting Positive Solutions (CTEPS), a group of Kentucky’s National Board certified teachers working to solve problems of practice in our classrooms, schools, and/or districts. I quickly decided my CTEPS focus problem would be to increase student learning by improving engagement in social studies lessons, not only in my own classroom, but in social studies classrooms across my district.

Since I had already begun using inquiry-based instruction with my students, I didn’t expect to learn much myself. Instead, I wanted to share what I already knew with other teachers wanting to improve student engagement. Looking back on it now, I realize how arrogant I was to assume I had an answer to the problem without considering I had anything to learn from my work.

While I didn’t really think I needed hard data to support that inquiry is more engaging than lecture, I decided it might lend even more credibility to my cause if I could produce some quantifiable evidence clearly demonstrating inquiry’s prowess as a more engaging instructional strategy. So, almost as an afterthought, I decided I’d do some data collection and present it as part of my project.

Holding to my thinking that engagement is what kids do while learning, I researched ways to actually measure their engaged activities. I learned of the BERI (Behavioral

Engagement Relative to Instruction) protocol which measures engagement in 2-minute intervals through a class period by observing student behaviors like listening, reading, writing or the students’ interactions.

I collected behavioral data of 20 students – who were unaware they were being monitored – across four inquiry and four direct-instruction lessons. Given my certainty of the outcome before I even began the project, you can imagine how shocked I was when the [findings](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12uiKUnWpewpmtS_BEehB06s3o5SipYMpk4V5OK5rzjg/edit?pref=2&pli=1) showed no great difference in engagement levels between the two instructional strategies.

This was a watershed moment for me. When I first considered it, the evidence seemed to indicate that inquiry lessons, which require students to be critical consumers of information as they thoughtfully develop arguments about big ideas in social studies, were no more engaging – and possibly less so – than direct instruction lessons. That means, if everything else holds true, that students do not learn more when they are engaged in inquiry than when they are receivers of information through lecture.

This evidence contradicted assessment data I also had collected that showed students learned more content in inquiry compared with direct instruction. So if engagement levels are similar in both types of instruction, but there is evidence of increased learning in inquiry-based lessons, a larger question now loomed. Does engagement matter to student learning after all?

In my heart, I know the answer is, “yes.” We’re all familiar with the old adage, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” Educators don’t need to be sold on the idea that engagement is good. It’s reinforced by Component 3c of the

[Kentucky Framework for Teaching](http://education.ky.gov/teachers/pges/tpges/pages/kentucky-framework-for-teaching.aspx) and by Section 3 of the [Characteristics of Highly Effective Teaching and Learning](http://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/teachtools/Pages/Characteristics-of-Highly-Effective-Teaching-and-Learning-%28CHETL%29.aspx), documents we use to inform and sometimes evaluate our practice. Even more importantly, and probably something that carries more weight with us as evidence, we see the light in our kids’ faces when they’re really into what they’re doing.

So if engagement does make a difference in how and what students learn, why didn’t the data I collected indicate that? My exploration to find an answer eventually led me to [Dr. Richard Elmore’s Instructional Core](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Z3goceUPyGeMeHkXP4kRaYLip_z1m4qiIPDvYGwYz4s/edit?pref=2&pli=1). The core has three components: student engagement, teacher knowledge and skills, and rigorous/relevant content. Elmore points out all three elements, not just one, are key to improved learning.

In my project, I measured behavioral engagement, only looking to see if students’ behaviors indicated they were “into” their learning. But, according to Elmore, my focus on the “what” and the “how” of my instruction is insufficient if my end goal is to increase student learning. As part of the Instructional Core, student engagement is not only how students’ behaviors indicate they are engaged, but also includes their interest levels in what they are learning as well as their abilities to explain what they’ve learned to their teacher.

As Elmore points out, to increase student learning, we cannot ONLY improve teaching; we cannot ONLY increase rigor of tasks; we cannot ONLY strengthen the content. We must address all three components. The fact I measured only a sliver of one of these components revealed I didn’t really understand how to increase learning. Instead, I was haphazardly applying strategies without a true understanding of how and why some things worked and some things didn’t.

By recognizing the importance of each piece of the core and by fleshing out precisely what is required for excellence within each component, I exponentially increase the likelihood my students’ learning improves.

My evolving understanding of the Instructional Core makes me think about all our collective endeavors to increase learning by trying to improve engagement levels, only to feel frustrated when those endeavors don’t yield the results we wanted. How often has a school or district trained teachers in an engaging strategy like inquiry-based instruction, only to find the ultimate goal of improved learning goes unrealized or falls short of expectations?

Improving learning, our ultimate goal, requires an integrated approach rooted in a fundamental understanding of the Instructional Core and the interdependence of its parts. Devoting resources disproportionately to improving any single component of the

Instructional Core at the expense of the other two results in frustration when we don’t meet our goal of increasing learning.

Districts, schools and teachers must efficiently allocate their available resources to improve practice, curriculum and task rigor in tandem with one another. The enormity of meeting this challenge emphasizes the importance of building effective, efficient and collaborative systems.

Engagement, I learned, is important to student learning. But I see now that engagement is not the Holy Grail I once thought it was. Improved student learning can only be achieved through a combination of efficient and effective teaching, challenging tasks, and quality content. When these meld together, they form a strong Instructional Core, and that is really the foundation that leads to learning.

Interested in joining the 2016-17 CTEPS team? Contact Lauren Hill at

lhill@kycteps.org.

<https://magic.piktochart.com/output/12636745-engagement1>

*Amy Kellen, a National Board certified teacher, is a teacher at Henderson County High School. She was named 2015 High School Teacher of the Year by the Kentucky Council for the Social Studies, and is part of the 2015-16 CTEPS team.*