

Six Things Faculty Can Do to Promote Student Engagement

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Last week's [post](#) encouraged us to reconsider what student engagement means and entails. Today I'd like to explore just some of the things teachers can do to better promote it. I'm offering six ideas here and encourage you to add to the list.

Redefine participation. Let it include more than verbal comments. Invite students to contribute electronically—with an email or post on the course website—with a question they didn't ask in class, a comment they didn't get to make, or a thought that came to them after class. Remind students that listening is also part of participation! Model and promote good listening skills. "Did you hear what Fredric just said? That's an explanation that belongs in your notes." Let the definition of participation honor silence—and give students the time needed to think about a question and assemble an answer. Maybe it's time to stop grading participation and let students speak because they have something to say.

Cultivate a teacher presence that invites engagement. It starts with being present. This means not just being there physically but also being mentally attentive to what's happening every day and in every interaction. An engaging teaching presence is communicated by nonverbal behaviors that convey confidence, comfort, anticipation, and great expectations. The classroom space, whether it's physical or virtual, is one you share with fellow learners. Move about in it. See who's in class. Smile, extend a greeting, or comment on the weather or a current event. There are lots of different ways you can show that you are present. Your actions will promote student engagement so long as they're genuine and authentic and so long as you are engaged—with the content, with the students, and with the learning.



Devote time to talk about learning—what it entails and why it's important. This is not the same tired old lecture about how this is such a hard course and a certain percentage of students won't make it through. Yes, there's tough content to master, but with effort it can be conquered. It's about your own ongoing love affair with learning. Most students haven't yet fallen in love with learning. They think they like easy learning, memorizing bits of information they can then forget, or getting by doing the bare minimum. Let yours be the class that introduces students to learning that captivates their attention, arouses their curiosity, stretches their minds, and makes them feel accomplished.

Give students a stake in the process. Teachers make all the decisions about learning for students. They decide what students will learn, how they will learn (taking tests, writing papers, etc.), the pace at which they will learn, and the conditions under which they will learn. Teachers then decide whether students have learned it. Students can be given some control without abrogating responsibilities associated with the teacher. Let students start making small decisions about learning—what topics they want discussed in the exam review session, whether quizzes will count 10% or 20% of their grade, whether the teacher calls on them or they volunteer, whether their final project is a paper or a presentation—and watch what happens to their engagement.

Design authentic assignments and learning experiences. Doing the work of the discipline is more likely to engage students than hearing how the discipline does its work. Try presenting students with a hypothesis and asking them to predict the results or introducing them to the concept of literary criticism and having them critique a reading. Will they do the work of the discipline well? Probably not. They're novices working with difficult content in front of an expert. But making mistakes is how we learn. Furthermore, doing the work of the discipline feels like work that matters—and that motivates engagement.

Use cumulative quizzes, finals, and exams. If you're interested in long-term retention of course content and if you want students to transfer and/or apply knowledge, then their exposure to the material needs to be ongoing. Every time they retrieve what they've learned, that material becomes easier to remember. Students would rather have unit exams. Three weeks of content is easier to manage than six weeks of content. Teachers can help students prepare for cumulative exams by creating activities that require regular reviews of course material, such as challenging them to find something in their notes or opening class with a short review session—not on the content covered in yesterday's class but instead on the content covered last week or the week before. Scheduling regular quizzes can also provide low-stakes opportunities for learning and support the intensive study students will require before a high-stakes exam.

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