Mere Engagement

Reflections about the Connections Between Online Learning, Student Agency, and Student Engagement

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Our circles of family and friends in education are submerged in the academic, safety, and security efforts of continuing a school year like no other in recent history. Teachers, administrators, support staff, and families are thinking about the physical layout of classrooms, hand-washing, masks, temperature-taking, and closing learning gaps. Essential school shopping now includes custom-made masks with sports teams, popular movie characters, or cartoon logos.

We get it. Everyone must be concerned about the first two tiers of the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs, as we consider the physiological and safety needs of adults and children during this time of pandemic. However, at some point, we must visit the reality of large numbers of students, wholly or in part, who have moved away from daily face-to-face interaction. Within this context, we must move beyond the logistics and focus on re-establishing relationships and buy-in with students in this "brave new world."

Big Things Versus Small Things

The title of this brief, *Mere Engagement,* invites reflective thinking as we rise to the challenges of schooling during the pandemic. The word "mere," based on the Macmillan Dictionary, has two supporting definitions relevant to this conversation. Mere can mean "emphasizing something that is small or unimportant." It also carries a second meaning, "emphasizing the importance or influence of something—although it only seems like a small thing."

The big things compete for our attention: most importantly, the wellbeing of all students, adults, and families in the everyday operation of school. Big things also include technical support required for transitioning instruction and assessment to online platforms like Google Classroom, as well as somehow creating and delivering learning support materials to each child's home. There are lots of big things. Once we become operational, however, the issues linked to the "mere engagement" of our students loom large.

Without considering issues associated with student agency and student engagement, all our work to prepare may be in vain. Engagement has not yet moved to the front burner in our minds. This lack of consideration of mere engagement can be like the story of the nail and the horse's shoe. As the story goes, the nail was lost, so the shoe was lost, so the horse was lost, and the battle was lost. This small thing can lead to big losses in learning.

Most of us have been involved since March of 2020 with remote schooling, community meetings, and other conversations with friends and family on Zoom or other platforms. There were clearly times and places where virtual schooling worked very well, where connections were made, and learning flourished.

Still, the quick shift to remote or distance learning left little time to plan and prepare for online learning for most schools and districts. The shift was complicated by learning new platforms and tools, navigating student privacy rights, and resolving technical issues like "Zoom-bombing." Many of us were learners when it comes to the widespread implementation of remote and blended learning.

We are gathering evidence and experience along the way to build a system for our students. If we are to learn from our experience, it is important to get feedback from the stakeholders. We cannot rely on our memories alone. Documented conversations, questionnaires, listening forums—all of those methods and many others—can and should be a way to make informed decisions. And we should challenge ourselves to ask the questions along the way: What evidence shall we use to ensure that this is working? What feedback or cues should we be looking for to determine whether students are engaged? How can we ensure student agency is promoted and supported as we design our lessons?

Given the reality of our current environment, it behooves us to take the experiences of last spring, both weak and strong, and share lessons learned. This brief invites readers to share in our reflections about connections between online learning, student agency, and student engagement.

First Things First

Of primary concern is the wellbeing of our students in the context of these times. Admittedly, we are not psychologists, and we are uncertain of exactly how to define what our students may be feeling. However, there are some things we know for sure. Life for the whole school community shifted dramatically overnight. There is the real possibility that students have experienced or will experience the loss of loved ones to COVID-19.

This school year does not mirror any that we have faced as a student or an educator.

Obviously, we can't fix what we don't control, but we

must be certain not to exacerbate the fears that we all have in this troubling time. Whether in-class or virtual, it is imperative that we create conditions that stimulate trust. Many schools used advisory periods as a way for students to check in with a trusted adult for support, academically and socially. During advisory periods students could talk about what was working for them and what was not. Students could privately pose questions that could be addressed with the right person in the right context. The need to check in and communicate still exists, and we need to create time and mechanisms for it in virtual situations. To get to the deeper learning required by our students, we will be challenged to change their focus and attention away from the fears of the day, to the learning of the day. Giving students time to build relationships through conversation is one way to give students an outlet.

The phrase, "we do it best when we do it together," speaks to the need for maintaining and strengthening solid relationships between students, between the adults, and between students and adults. To get to the deeper learning required by our students, we will be challenged to acknowledge their fears and new realities while building support for learning.

Establishing Distance Learning Relationships

Yes, it can be done. Let's start with that assumption. It's not a case of being better or worse. It's a case of recognizing that for many, distance learning is the option they must work with, and that with careful and informed design it is possible to create and sustain the sorts of learning relationships that are critical to success for learning to occur. And, as with each transition from in-class to distance learning, we need to tweak our skill set and apply it to online learning.

Just as we establish roles, relationships, and responsibilities for the traditional classroom, it is essential to clarify distance learning roles, relationships,

and responsibilities with each of the partners in the learning process: the student, teacher, and parent (or guardian). This includes the establishment of norms that support optimal distance learning.

Parents, guardians, and students should be given guidance on how best to structure a home-based classroom. Just as you would in the school-based classroom, inviting students to create conditions for learning can be tailored to each student's circumstance. Creating an "environmental learner profile" can help promote a more optimal time and place for learning.

Some sample questions for the environmental learner profile could include:

- When we are online, can you hear me?
- Is there a quiet space for you and your computer?
- Can you see me on the screen?
- Where in your home is the best place for you to listen and participate?
- Do you know where your assignments are located?
- Do you know how to contact me if you have a question?
- Do you know the schedule for our online classes and how long they will last?
- What would prevent you from joining class?
- Do you have your own computer, or do you share it with other family members?

By baselining each student and their potential for online engagement and gaining insight into the students' access to technology, level of parent or guardian support, and general sense of comfort with online learning, the partnership for learning can be established on a solid footing. Those with a lot of experience with online learning have found that where schools and teachers had a good understanding of the home context of each learner, and were respectful of that in

the way they then designed the learning and connected with the learners remotely, the outcomes were far more fruitful.

Renewing a Sense of Student Agency

We need to provide additional incentives and support to help students move from compliance to authentic engagement during these transitional times. Just showing up, whether it is in class or in remote settings, without real effort to own the learning, will not result in optimal learning outcomes. And generally speaking, without the teacher being physically present, it is more difficult to pick up on the signals that show when students are distracted, only partially engaged in the activity, or in need of assistance; something that teachers are so skilled at doing in person.

During a transition to remote or distance learning, students need a renewed sense of agency. They must understand what they are to learn and how to demonstrate their learning. They must know how to ask for assistance and exhibit self-direction and efficacy when working on assignments. They own their work and put forth their best efforts. When these attributes of student agency are in play, authentic engagement is occurring.

The expectation to generate a virtual class learning environment affords a unique opportunity to exercise student agency in broader context. Students may find themselves needing and desiring to solve their own learning environment issues. With so many gathering places closed, a small group of enterprising young people found a way to create a quiet place to read, outside under the shade of trees in the park. Their desire to book-share and the challenge to find a quiet space led them to a pleasant and practical solution. That's student agency at its best!

In the following section, there are some concrete ways in which student agency is supported and engagement is strengthened in online learning models. Not unexpectedly, these common-sense ideas are taken from and built on the best practices of the in-class model—and then adapted to the online platform.

TAKEAWAY

When in-person education went virtual last year, the entire population of students (and many teachers) became language learners. We were thrown into a world where one could not rely on their peers to model the expectations of the teacher, and where one could not raise their hand and ask for immediate clarification. Thus, teachers had to learn how to provide that clarification and modeling before being asked for it. Here are some things that help mitigate student confusion:

◎ Assume students will need extensive clarification and provide information to them in every way possible. Write out your directions, make videos reading your directions using Screencastify or another screen-recording app, make videos modeling the activity or assignment, create models of the assignment, and provide students with sentence starters or frames to help them with speaking or writing.

◎ If you're using Google Classroom, use the Invite Guardians feature to provide parents and guardians with information about class assignments. They will get an email summary weekly that will include their child's completed assignments, incomplete assignments, and upcoming assignments.

Make the Implicit Explicit

There needs to be an abundance of communication that gets to the heart of what you want the students to know and be able to do. Great teaching is about much more than delivering content and ensuring content coverage. It also involves support, feedback, encouragement, and identification of next steps in learning.

Providing a clear overview of what is expected, with timeframes and guidance on how to allocate time for learning, is essential. The design of the learning sequences should focus on the purpose of the activity and what needs to be demonstrated to achieve success—with links to appropriate resource material, including readings, videos, samples of work, recommended timelines, deadlines for submissions, and so on. Because the work may be supported by family members who are not professional educators, the clearer and more concise the communication, the better chance that students will respond.

Whatever tool you use should define week by week or day by day what is expected from the student. This should include a clear indication of the tasks to be completed asynchronously and the timing and purpose of synchronous connections. This allows students and families to plan ahead and manage very complicated home, work, and school schedules.

You cannot simply rely on verbal information presented during the class time. Kid-friendly language (which is parent-friendly, too) about learning expectations is critical. This is the time to keep the main thing the main thing—explicitly state the essential learning progressions in small chunks. State the specific expectations in writing regarding assignments supported by a rubric, and provide essential questions to guide reading assignments.
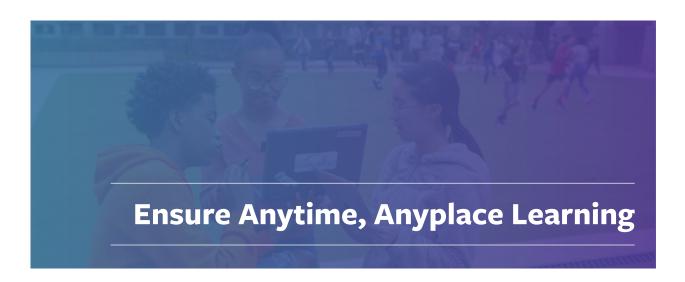
Repeat the important information in as many ways and places as you can. It may be useful to carry on conversations in print to clarify assignments and answer other questions in a timely way. Keep in mind that with online learning, our ongoing conversations in print will be needed by both the student and the parent; thus, the great need to make the implicit, explicit with clear, direct language.

Finally, make sure you understand the ability of your students and their families to access and understand directives, directions, and all communications. You may have students who are still learning English, but you also need to know which languages are commonly spoken at home. Find ways to check in and ensure your messages are received and understood.

Flexibility is an overused word when we talk about teaching, but it really was the key to success with supporting students when we switched over to distance learning. I made as much time as possible available to students and families for support with assignments, one-on-one reteaching, or just to check in to see how they were doing. Here are some ways to schedule your time:

◎ SignUpGenius. Teachers can create a free account and then choose days and times for meetings. They can then create time slots that can be sent out to families. When families sign up for a time slot, the teacher receives an email notification. After I would get the notifications, I would add it into my calendar and put the Google Meet link into my Google Classroom for the student to access.

◎ Google Calendar Time Slots. Teachers can use their Google Calendar to create appointment times as well. After setting up those time slots, there is a link that you can send out where families can sign up directly in the teacher's calendar. This feature also provides email notifications when an appointment is scheduled.

Ensure Anytime, Anyplace Learning

Plan for a mix of synchronous and asynchronous communication. You should not expect your students to be online and available all the time, but scheduling times for whole class and small group work in advance is very helpful. Likewise, you should schedule time for individual consultations, family meetings, and check-ins, and office hours regularly and let people know.

Establish a system for asynchronous communication (like email or text) and set reasonable time limits for responses. Being available and in touch with students and families builds a lot of credibility and enhances relationships. Students quickly get the sense that you care about their questions and concerns—anytime, anyplace.

Enable Competency-Based Learning Where Students Demonstrate Mastery of Content

Historically seat-time has become the proxy for engagement. When learning occurs virtually, we are forced to consider other, more meaningful measures of engagement. The concept of seat-time becomes essentially meaningless in a remote or blended learning environment.

Students, as well as teachers, need to be creative in shaping their learning and demonstrating what they know. A core principle of competency-based learning is providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of content. We need to be flexible with deadlines and assignments. We also need to be flexible and respectful of student agency by giving students real control over their work. Allowing students to create visual art, poetry, or a video as a way to demonstrate learning can give a teacher insight and provide a healthy outlet for the reality of distance learning.

Students who do not turn in work as expected may be impacted by an internet cut-off due to lack of payment, a little brother who dropped the cell phone into the bathtub, a dad who went out of town and took his computer with him, and so on. We can't assume that the assignment was clear, the materials were available or that the student knew how to secure help to complete the assignment.

These are challenging times for students, as well as adults.

Keep Families in the Loop

All research supports strong parent engagement as a fundamental asset for student success. Online learning is no different. In fact, it becomes even more important. However, it may require a little more ingenuity on our part as roles and relationships change.

Remote and blended learning partnerships require significant and detailed connections with parents, mentors, or significant support system people. We cannot ask parents to teach subject matter. That is our job. But, just like the parent engagement efforts of traditional school, remote learning must have parent engagement expectations. Staying in contact by telephone or through email surveys (Doodle Polls, for example) periodically updates parents and can gather their input and feedback.

We need to make sure parents know when class is held and how long classes are online. Parents need access to the expectations for learning and the activities that support them. These steps are among the reasonable expectations for the communication between parents and teachers. Parents and guardians are key to helping the online learning experience be successful by setting expectations for attendance, finding a quiet place for classes, and keeping distractions to a minimum.

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Design Lessons that Link Student Interests with the Environment

Just like in-person learning, remote learning requires imagination and invention to ensure learning is relevant to students' interests and authentic to their interests. We know that students respond best when their interest is piqued. Personal conversations, interest surveys, and background information all help the design of assignments. Students can be invited to share ideas about what books they like to read, what personal narratives they want to write, and what additional supports they need to do the work.

Being aware of the environment students find themselves in at home can be fertile ground for building engagement between student and teacher. We should not overlook the fact that all community and home environments provide rich opportunities to engage in learning activities that are meaningful and authentic.

If books are hard to come by, having a drive-by book pick-up may be an option. Choices of assignments can build on materials and resources students may have

at home and promote a healthy exchange of culturally relevant and personal learning. We need to engage with our students as we build and design activities to ensure that there is some sense of reality about our expectations. Remote learning can offer a broader environment for learning than traditional in-class experiences, and we must encourage students to explore their homes and neighborhoods.

Check for Learning Along the Way

The expected outcome of our instructional design is learning, to state the obvious. What may not be so obvious at a distance is the ability of the teacher to discern who needs additional instruction or support. Although feedback to students is an established essential best practice, it takes on an ever-greater role to determine levels of engagement and learning with distance learning.

Establishing systems that frequently check for learning, with an intensified use of feedback loops with each student, can provide insight into the level of engagement. This responsibility shouldn't fall only on the teacher. Many online learning systems generate automatic feedback, such as a positive message when questions are answered correctly. Then there is the feedback that can be provided by parents and by the student's peers. When carefully designed as a part of the learning process, these forms of feedback can contribute positively to a student's sense of growth and success.

Formative assessment refers to explicit practices used by teachers to inform ongoing learning. Through authentic self-assessment, students develop self-regulatory processes and can assess how they are progressing and engaging in "school" in any format. Formative assessments can be as simple as a "how are you doing" question put to individuals. Responses provide teachers with student perspectives and affect, and they illuminate progress toward learning goals.

Formative assessments are enabled by the use of rubrics or guiding questions as students evaluate the quality or accuracy of their work. At their core, rubrics are tools that provide guidance from the teacher to the student about expectations. This is particularly useful to enhance the students' ability to self-reflect and learn. Beyond that, and very importantly, rubrics can provide additional support to parents who may be called upon to monitor and assist a student in the course of completing an assignment.

Explicit support from the teacher to student is essential in face-to-face and remote-learning environments. Response to submitted work with feedback for improvements or corrections is the most direct way to advise the student, while allowing for support from parents. Formative assessment work can be done by conference call, small breakout groups, or other innovative systems based on your distance learning platform.

A word of caution: As educators, we may need to suspend judgment when we don't get the responses we might expect. When the presenter asks for questions and no one responds, does that really mean there are no questions? When folks have a frown on their face, does that mean they are bored, mad, or in deep reflective thinking about the issue at hand? A rush to judgment can lead to mistaken assumptions.

TAKEAWAY

The virtual classroom necessitates constant feedback to ensure student success. Parents and guardians are the teacher's partner in this process. Here are some ways I provided feedback to students during distance learning:

- ◎ Keep families informed. Parents and guardians want to know how their child is doing. Let parents and guardians know when you will be providing feedback to students so they can check in with students as well. This will also help facilitate that ever-important communication.
- ◎ Provide a rubric/checklist for students. With my assignments, I would often create a virtual checklist for my students to complete as they did their assignment. I made them using Google Drawings and they were made up of a list and drag and drop checkmarks. This helped students stay on track with the expectations for the assignment, and it was fun for them.
- ◎ Google Classroom private comments. I can't tell you how many private comments went back and forth between myself and my students between March and June last year. We constantly were communicating using the private comments when they had questions. They would also write to me to let me know they wanted me to check their work in progress. This allowed me to give them feedback before they turned in their assignments, and it gave them the chance to advocate for themselves.

Create Equitable Opportunities to Learn

The rapid shifts to online and blended learning approaches dramatically highlighted resource inequities. We have had to face the issues associated with an uneven distribution of resources required for online learning. And, of course, the lack of access to technology resources leads to lost opportunities for our students to learn. How can you engage when you cannot meet in person or online?

We recognize that many students and families lack devices or reliable internet service. We now know that some students may not have control over the use of the device for school. Students may be sharing one device for school work and other family needs. Some students may not have cameras on their devices and have no visible presence. We found out that even if the internet is available, there is potential for internet instability. Your words may be jumbled, and your picture may be frozen on their screen just when you are offering the great takeaway of the day. And, to attend class remotely, students may be sitting in the internet shadow of school, at a fire station, or at a library if they do not have internet service at home.

We must be on watch for those students who are struggling or absent due to a lack of resources. We must become advocates to close the equity gaps to ensure that no opportunity for learning is lost.

TAKEAWAY

No matter how hard we try, there are going to be barriers to accessing online learning. We learned this the hard way last year with one of our students. They were logging in to Google Classroom daily and not completing any work. There would be five minutes here on one program, two minutes there on another program, then there would be radio silence. In the end, the classroom teacher, the math specialist, and I worked together to plan paper assignments for this student that his mom picked up every other week at the food distribution site. Mom would send us photos of his completed assignments as he finished them. This student completed all of the assignments that were sent home for him that way. The lesson here was to keep trying and lean on collaboration. It would have been a huge task for the classroom teacher to complete on her own, but because we all took it on together, this student did not miss out on educational opportunities.

No Mere Thing

Mere engagement, that "small thing" of great influence needs to be on the agenda as we think seriously about what ensuing school terms will look like in the COVID era. For those students who come to school in the traditional way, engagement and student agency may take on more traditional methodology. For those children and families for whom remote learning is the preferred or required system, our ingenuity and empathy with the conditions of learning, outside of traditional experience, will require a lot of reflective thinking. Now that we reflect on the challenges that lie ahead, establishing authentic engagement—renewing a sense of student agency and minimizing lost opportunities in this time and place—is no "mere" thing.

FOLLOW-UP

COVID-19: 10 Recommendations to Plan Distance Learning Solutions

We would like to refer you to a recent UNESCO article. The article itself isn't about distance learning per se, but with remote learning continuing as an option in many states, and the increased use of technology to bridge the gap between home and school, these recommendations are very practical and reinforce a number of the key points we've alluded to in this brief. Here's the link for consideration: https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-10-recommendations-plan-distance-learning-solutions

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