**Student Engagement**

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Countless surveys are conducted every year by organizations and secondary schools and universities attempting to find the magical answer to the question, “what keeps our students engaged in learning?” The fundamental idea underlying engagement theory is that students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks. There can be various techniques of student engagement such as academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction or student role models and student effort. There are multiple ways in which students can become engaged in the learning process in order to help them feel better connected, interested, willing, and able to improve in the learning process and in comprehension throughout their learning career. This paper will explore the experimental learning theory and the ideas of several others, (Tinto, Kolb and Pave), but it will also investigate the conventional and nontraditional ways in which students become engaged in the learning process. Engagement activities include those techniques listed above but are not limited to academic effort, higher-order thinking skills, academic integration, diversity-related experiences and the practical experiences that help these occur such as learning communities, apprenticeships and internships, as well as participation in study abroad programs.

Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development for students. The more students study or practice a particular subject the more they will tend to learn about it. This is referred to as “time on task,” and although engagement is not the same, it may result in more time on task activities. Repetition and reflection also help with the cognitive learning process. Being engaged adds to students’ skills, motivation, and perhaps satisfaction with their own performance. Multiple studies have been done by researchers in education to help illustrate that student engagement is linked positively to learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades. Student experiences, engagement, and academic performance can also change over the course of a student’s learning career, and continuous encouragement of engagement activities should be the responsibility of teachers, family, and peer groups.

Dr. Vince Tinto, a professor of sociology and education at Syracuse University, believes that higher education should restructure itself in order for a successful social and intellectual integration to occur regarding student learning. Involvement and engagement both inside and outside of the classroom is important to student development. He believes that the degree a student is involved or integrated in campus and college life determines the degree he will persist in acquiring knowledge and skills. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian teacher before the First World War, stressed the importance of how each child learns distinctively as individuals. He believed that what students experienced throughout their education, life experiences, and influences helped them develop new skills. He also believed that learning is what leads to the development of higher order thinking. He stressed that the two primary means of learning occur through social interaction and language. Would he be a strong advocate for study abroad programs, learning communities, and social integration within student organizations around school campuses in our learning culture today?

The experimental learning model, created by David Kolb, is used as an instructional method with adult learning theory. According to the theory, for learning to occur, the learner must go through four modes of learning. Concrete experiences occur when the learner actually is involved in a situation and is fully aware of his personal experiences. The reflective observation is when the learner reviews his experiences and thinks about them after they occur. Abstract concepts encourage the learner to form theories about why something happens the way it does; active experimenting occurs when a learner tests a theory that he develops. The first two modes of learning lend themselves to engaged learning. The role a person’s experiences play in his learning process can help contribute to the idea that how much a learner experiences and is able to reflect upon and learn from is greatly influenced by what they engage in or with. Kolb’s model of experiential learning is most often found in many discussions of theory and practice in adult education, informal education, and lifelong learning. The term can also be used to describe the sort of learning that is undertaken by students who are given the chance to acquire and apply the knowledge they receive. Experimental learning is the learning or education that can occur as a result of direct participation in the events of a student’s life. Although Kolb does not directly take into account the different cultural experiences or conditions a learner might have, one can interpret how programs such as study abroad and internships (where students’ involve and immerse themselves in experiences that require language acquisition and cultural understanding) can only help contribute and enhance a higher understanding of learning.

The needs of thetwenty-first century, along with researchers’ strong recognition of its need, have led to the development of engaged learning. Several indicators of engaged learning can help educators reform instruction and maintain an understanding of what our developing students need in their educational experience in order to contribute the maximum amount to their learning process. Engaged learners are responsible for their own learning; they are usually self-regulated and recognize their own achievement and goals. They have learning as a lifelong passion, and engaged learning involves being collaborative (which the paper will explain later). Engaged learners choose tasks that are complex and involve continuous periods of time that correspond with tasks in the workplace and other aspects of the learner’s life as well as collaboration with peers and/or mentors and the “real world”. Performance-based assessments are usually used in generating performance criteria for students. The most powerful models of instruction are those that are interactive for students. It engages the learners and encourages them to construct and produce knowledge in a way that is meaningful and useful to them. The role of the teacher in the classroom has shifted from the information giver to that of a facilitator or guide. The teacher provides the interaction for learning experiences to occur through collaboration (groups, class projects, outside involvement, etc.). One of the most important student roles in engaged learning is that of an explorer. Interaction with the physical or “real world” and with other people allows students to discover concepts and apply the skills they learn. Students can then reflect upon the discoveries they make and the various experiences they have. This action is essential for the student as a cognitive apprentice. Another way to engage the learner is to take basic courses such as math and develop math assignments and connect to a major such as engineering. Learning communities, mentioned later, whether paired courses or topical learning communities, also can facilitate student engagement.

Cognitive apprenticeship is a model of learning based on the situated cognition theory. Students collaborate with one another as well as their instructor in order to reach a shared understanding. Students can process concepts and information more thoroughly when multiple opinions, perspectives, and beliefs are encountered. Students understand an issue or concept only through recognizing and hearing various viewpoints, opinions or other ways of life in contrast to their own; this strengthens their knowledge. Jean Lave, another theorist, founded the situated cognition movement. Most learning occurs naturally through activities, contexts and cultures, and situated examples should include more apprentice-like situations. Perhaps the idea of internships originated when educators realized the benefit early apprenticeships with sculptors and painters afforded students in the learning process.

Contrasted to the traditional approaches in the classroom, apprentices continually evolve with each new situations or occasion of use. They are able to reason with unique cases and resolve complex problems. Before schools appeared, apprenticeships were the most common means of learning and were used to transmit the knowledge required for expert practice in fields from painting and sculpting to medicine and law. In today’s society, many complex and important skills, such as those used for language and social interaction, are learned more informally through apprenticeship-like methods, such as observation, coaching, and real life experiences that are coupled with knowledge acquired in the classroom. Internships that match school-based learning with practical experience for student learning relates to the apprentice perceptive or the education theory of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is the process of learning through physical integration into practices associated with the subject, like work-place training. Along with developing their knowledge gained by traditional instruction, learners can understand the informally taught duties of a particular position. During this process, a learner can affect their environment and acquire specific talents and make contributions within their field. According to Barab and Hay, “apprenticeships include the development of learning contexts that model proficiency, provide coaching and scaffolding as students become more immersed in authentic activities, and gain independent practice so that they gain an appreciation of the use of domain-related principles across multiple contexts” (Barab & Hay, 2001). Apprenticeship is a teaching method that can be utilized by educators to teach students how to solve problems, understand tasks, and deal with difficult situations. Students need to know how to react when faced with a similar situation on their own. The learning process must be active, social, and authentic and will help lead the learners to a greater understanding of the field they are studying and could improve their future contribution.

 The apprenticeship perspective includes a series of phases that help define the roles of teacher and learner during the process. Modeling allows learners to observe performances of an activity by more experienced members. Approximating allows the observer to mimic the actions of a teacher and begin to articulate more clearly the actions of the teacher. Fading is when the learner’s capabilities are increased, and the more experienced teacher will decrease assistance. Self-directed learning is when the learners will attempt actions within real society and limit their actions to those that are well understood. Lastly, generalizing is when the learners are able to generalize what they have learned and apply those skills to multiple scenarios and continue to grow in their ability in the field. The main goals of apprenticeship should be for the learners to discover what works, to recognize tasks, problems or situations and know how to handle them and perform at an acceptable level.

 How relevant are apprenticeships (or for our present day terminology internships) to a student’s learning? How relevant are apprenticeships for professional training? There is a need for internships currently in current educational theory because some problems exist such as lack of practical knowledge provided by an abstract education, the lack of a positive learning environment, difficulties with student motivation, and problems of discipline and authority. The apprenticeship model can overcome some of these issues by embedding learning activities in a natural context. The main components of apprenticeship training or internships include production in a community with common skills, knowledge and values, professional identity, learning through practice, evaluation through practice, and formal and informal training.

 Another strong engaged practice of learning is the immersion of a learner in another culture and language. Study abroad programs provide students the opportunity to become fully engaged and immersed in a different culture other than their own in order to become more proficient in language and learn knowledge through personal experiences. The idea is that through immersion students will benefit by increased opportunities for sustained language production, and interaction with native peers is supported by the social learning theory of Lev Vygotsky. Language is acquired most effectively when it is learned for communication in meaningful and significant social situations.

A research study conducted by Indiana University about the impact of study abroad on senior year engagement analyzed the effects of study abroad claims that many positive and substantial outcomes resulted in the areas of cognitive, affective, and cultural development. The study also investigated as to whether these students were also more immediately engaged in college upon their return. The study applied the experiential learning theory to model the impact of study abroad on the student’s deep learning, diversity experiences and self-reported gains in college. The results (using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement as well) reported significantly higher levels of engagement in integrative and reflective learning and stronger gains in personal and social development. Along with the expected increase of academic knowledge and language skills and increased levels of cognition, the study abroad program reported as being linked to enhanced international perspectives, and cross-cultural interests, as well as the personal development of growth such as independence, social confidence and sensitivity toward people from other countries.

The current theory of student engagement can be rooted in experimental learning theory because of the concept of deep learning. By partaking in the active, learner centered environments, students commit to understanding the material by applying knowledge in real world situations, reflection, and experiencing what they have learned firsthand. The study is just one of many that concluded study abroad participants were more engaged that their peers and were more inclined to make progress in their college learning and development. This paper would argue that not only should teachers recognize the opportunity to maximize learning with their other students by collaborative learning with those that participated in study abroad programs but also that similar results related to student engagement could be found with secondary students participating in cultural exchange programs.

Another important idea regarding student engagement that has emerged over recent years is that of learning communities or communities of practice. Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning. They are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better if they interact with one another more frequently. Not only does a community of practice involve the technical knowledge or skill but it also involves the relationships maintained and evolved over time. The development of learning communities within schools was based on the growing interests of educators and the need of how valuable they could be regarding student learning. Learning through participation in group or collective life and engagement helped make educators take notice of how important they could be used in the school setting to grow student’s engagement, interest and knowledge base with their peers with similar experiences and skills. Learning occurs in the conditions that bring people together and in the understanding that there is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity.

Learning communities receive additional attention by higher education because it helps socialize learning. Many forms exist, but usually the same groups of students take two or more classes together so that they see each other frequently and spend a substantial amount of time engaged in common intellectual activities. Some schools have incorporated teaching the common course structure assignments that require students to apply what they study in one course to a different one. A sense of community, therefore, begins to build between students, and these collaborative learning activities can promote involvement in academic as well as social activities extending beyond the classroom. Positive behaviors such as increased academic effort and outcomes such as personal and interpersonal development can occur throughout the learning process. Learning communities help students become members of a community focused on academic content that will help further develop their identity and integrate what they are learning into their real world view and other academic and social experiences, perhaps just as internships, apprenticeships and study aboard programs also provide through engagement.

The use of technology can also be used to facilitate engagement, and, therefore, engagement theory can be a framework for technology-based learning as well as teaching. The role of technology can be used to facilitate all aspects of engagement, through the use of email, online conferencing, web databases, and audio and video conferencing. These tools can be used to increase the extent and the ease of interaction among students as well as increase the level of information available to students. Technology provides an electronic learning method that helps foster creativity and communication that can help foster and nourish engagement in students. Teaching and learning strategies need to be adapted in order to provide students with the interaction needed to keep them engaged, because with the increase and convenience of distance education and online classrooms, the level of student involvement could diminish if educators aren’t forward-thinking. Access to real-time interaction with instructors and classmates, as well as the use of synchronous conferencing techniques, can help offer opportunities for social interaction in a virtual classroom.

Advancement in technology that has made its way into the classroom is the interactive whiteboard. If students are not engaged in the learning process, they may become apathetic toward learning, and this could affect their motivation to learn. Whiteboards can be used to deliver instruction in a variety of ways and has the ability to allow students to physically interact with the board and can assist with meeting the needs of learners. Schools and administrators need to realize the potential for whiteboards in increasing student achievement through increased student engagement. This technology, along with other developments, has the potential to assist educators in their efforts to attract and maintain student attention and to improve student achievement through engagement.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an example of one of the many organizations that attempts to measure the level of student engagement in learning. NSSE was created in 1998 to provide evidence for the effectiveness of undergraduate teaching and learning so that colleges and universities could improve and draw attention to engagement and how much it matters in student learning. The Association of American Colleges and Universities also investigates the most promising practices that colleges and universities should be aware of. Some of them include first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, study abroad and other experiences with diversity, internships and capstone courses and projects. Some accreditation agencies look for capstone courses in the programs of study. So what is one thing schools can do to enhance student engagement and increase student success? They can make it possible for every study to participate in at least one or two high impact activities such as the ones described throughout this paper. If effective educational practices are more readily available at secondary and post-secondary institutions, schools would perhaps do a better job in helping students compensate for other shortcomings during their academic preparation and would foster a culture that creates student success.

High motivation and engagement in learning help with many cognitive elements of students’ knowledge and achievements, but it has also been linked to reduced dropout rates and other increased levels of student success. There are many reasons why students become less engaged in learning as they age; it often includes influences outside of school as well as within. The level of interest and desire to engage in learning is heavily influenced by teachers, administrators, the school environment, and peers or classmates. Therefore, teachers have greater control over students’ attitudes about learning than they may believe. Sometimes, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to; it’s raising those expectations in order for students to attempt to reach those goals that are set for them. The older students become, the less likely they will be to take risks and engage themselves fully in activities; therefore, the role of teachers can be monumental in post-secondary institutions to contribute to student engagement, learning and success. Student motivation “refers to a student’s willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in the learning process”. Therefore, schools should be motivated and encouraged to help create opportunities and experiences for students to stay motivated and successful and provide programs such as study abroad, internships, learning communities, and other student activities that promote student engagement.

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