Patti Drapeau

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# Inspiring STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

## Moving Beyond Engagement, Refining Differentiation

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# Praise for *Inspiring Student Empowerment*

"In her latest work, *Inspiring Student Empowerment,* Patti Drapeau focuses the spotlight on meeting the social, emotional, and instructional needs of students in the classroom. This book brings student voice and empowerment center stage, which is exactly as it should be. The many, varied strategies that she includes to support effective student learning and engagement are both realistic and user-friendly. Kudos to Drapeau for continuing to highlight the importance of the connection between the teacher and the learner as they create an effective learning environment for all students. Well done!"

–**Dr. Anita M. Campbell,** University of Maine at Farmington

"This powerful, insightful, and thought-provoking book adds a new dimension to teaching and learning. The four main areas of emphasis are differentiation, personalized learning, engagement, and empowerment. How these concepts differ and how they interact with and build on one another is the focus of this book. Throughout her practical book, author Patti Drapeau shows teachers and administrators ways to empower students to be self-directed, responsible, and confident learners. This book contains a plethora of excellent ideas—such as using games and competitions to develop student empowerment and giving students choices in designing their own learning concepts and activities. Finally, Drapeau emphasizes the importance of social and emotional learning within the framework of student empowerment. Because the topics covered are not only timely but also essential for teaching 21st-century students, I highly recommend this book to both experienced and new teachers."

–**Carolyn Coil, Ed.D.,** educational consultant and author

"Patti Drapeau takes on the bold task of clearly defining some of the big ideas currently being discussed and implemented in schools: student engagement, differentiation, student empowerment, and personalized learning. Drapeau is clear that personalized learning is not differentiation, although differentiation is a component of personalized learning, and that student engagement is not the same as student empowerment. She then introduces us to frameworks, expansive strategies, templates, and tools as she guides our understanding of personalized learning and student empowerment. Drapeau presents an exciting vision for classrooms and enables school leaders and educators to confidently put its elements in practice."

–**Diane Heacox, Ed.D.,** educational consultant and author of *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom* and *Making Differentiation a Habit*, and coauthor of *Differentiation for Gifted Learners*

"How do teachers move beyond their commitment to meeting individual student needs with a basic menu of differentiation strategies to a deeper understanding of personalized learning that motivates students to engage more fully—and to achieve? *Inspiring Student Empowerment* has answers. Each chapter provides detailed descriptions of evidence-based strategies, sample lessons, templates, and reproducible handouts. Whether you are a new teacher looking for practical ways to get started with curriculum differentiation or a veteran program coordinator, you will find powerful support for becoming a more effective educator."

–**Dr. Sally Krisel,** director, Innovative and Advanced Programs, Hall County Schools, Gainesville, GA, and past president, National Association for Gifted Children

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# Inspiring STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

## Moving Beyond Engagement, Refining Differentiation

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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to educators who dare to question, try new ideas, and help move the field of education forward. This book is also dedicated to educators who inspire their students and empower them to be all they can be.

# Acknowledgments

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# Foreword by Heidi Hayes Jacobs, Ph.D.

How do we infuse genuine power into learners' hearts and minds? In *Inspiring Student Empowerment: Moving Beyond Engagement, Refining Differentiation*, Patti Drapeau inspires us to inspire our students. With grounded reasoning and thoughtful conviction, she launches us on a dynamic professional journey to lift our practice to a new and timely level.

Discussions about curriculum engagement, learner engagement, and instructional engagement are ubiquitous in professional learning communities and leadership planning. Even so, Drapeau has opened my eyes. She proposes a striking and powerful shift in the way we hold current practice. She contrasts engagement with empowerment, explaining that empowerment is distinctly more important than engagement to our learners. As a reader, I find her thinking to be both expansive and highly practical.

She begins by detailing various forms of engagement—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. An arsenal of engagement strategies and tools for classrooms from early childhood through high school are on offer. She also provides easy-to-use rubrics and guides, such as the Engage-O-Meter, to reveal the degree of student involvement in a given undertaking. Any educator will benefit from employing Drapeau's suggested engagement strategies. But she doesn't stop there. Her discussion of engagement lays a pathway to empowerment.

Drapeau develops a clear and practical distinction between big *E* and little *e* empowerment. Rather than judging the level of empowerment a teacher aspires to, she provides a menu of possibilities. For example, a chapter devoted to game-based education and competitions shows how we can support and channel learner focus on a journey to empowerment. Drapeau demonstrates how these strategies can lead to power and confidence in students' school lives.

In her view, empowerment grows from relationships, capabilities, and accomplishments. She deftly makes the case that lurking behind many school-based accomplishments is compliance—following rules and meeting expectations. Empowerment, she argues, is cultivating independent learners with a keen sense of purpose, competence, and impact. Drapeau demonstrates particular compassion in her detailed discussion of what empowerment might look like in—and why it is so critical for—specific student populations. Her exploration of the needs of girls, boys, nonbinary children, English language learners, and students with special needs is extraordinary. This exploration underscores the need for both big *E* and little *e* empowerment. It also sets the stage for the second half of the book, which clarifies the importance of personalized learning in modern classroom life.

Motivating students by empowering them to personalize their learning is the ultimate goal of this book. Drapeau takes on this challenge by exploring the relationship between differentiated instruction and personalized learning. She asks us to consider eight key elements of differentiation that require high-quality choices by educators: learner academic, social, and emotional characteristics; preassessment and formative assessment; pacing; flexible grouping; open-ended tasks and questioning; simple to complex content; low- to high-level thinking; and product options for summative assessment. She examines each of these elements in detail, with rich examples that make sense to teachers. These elements help us recognize what our students need, how to group them effectively, and how to calibrate curriculum choices to match students' needs in various learning situations. Drapeau's fresh look at differentiation leads us to the heart of the book, personalization.

Personalization is a subject of much debate and discussion among today's educators. Their pedagogy is shifting to more student-facing methods, providing learners with critical competencies to determine their own futures. Yet we are in need of an inspirational and practical definition. Readers will find one here. Drapeau says, "Personalized learning has three objectives: learning content, learning how to learn, and learning about the self." She shows us how we can customize instruction to match our learners' needs and grow their ability to be



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independent and self-navigating. She provides strategies for engaging learners in investigating meaningful content and, more importantly, for lighting a fire of fascination to propel individual inquiry.

As the culmination of her rich discourse on personalized learning, Drapeau investigates and integrates social and emotional learning (SEL). Educators recognize the importance of addressing SEL skills within meaningful learning experiences in supportive environments. However, it can be challenging to embed SEL into practice. Drapeau answers this challenge by connecting SEL directly to empowerment and personalized learning. She shares a variety of workable models and resources to support the integration of SEL, empowerment, and personalized learning. Her approach is a promising antidote to the complex social, emotional, and intellectual challenges our children face today.

*Inspiring Student Empowerment: Moving Beyond Engagement, Refining Differentiation* is keenly relevant and exceptionally helpful. Drapeau declares her intention in writing this book to be eminently practical, and indeed, she keeps that pledge. She writes with power and offers critical considerations for our field. Through her personal journey as an educator, she gives us each a compass for our own journey.

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# Introduction

I always thought engagement was the magic ingredient in learning. After all, when students were engaged, they were on task and focused. Isn't that what we all want? Research indicated that if I used certain strategies, students would be engaged and would learn. This approach was likely to minimize behavior problems and increase academic success. For me, these assumptions proved to be mostly true. My students were learning, and they were generally happy. So why did I have this nagging feeling that my teaching techniques and strategies were still not enough?

Even though students participated in learning and seemed content, they did not appear invested in their learning or particularly excited about it. This level of learning was not changing the way they thought about the content and did not affect the way they might act in the world around them. I realized I was not satisfied when my students were learning at a surface level. I was not satisfied when my students learned content just for a decent grade or to do okay on standardized tests. I was disappointed when some of my students did not seem to really care about their learning—I wanted all my students to be fired up about it.

## In Search of the Golden Ticket

In my pursuit of the "golden ticket" to teaching and learning, I read books and attended workshops on differentiation and instructional strategies, and I pursued advanced degrees that focused on students with special needs and English language learners. I devoured strategies that challenged my gifted and talented learners. To learn how to reach my creative thinkers, I took courses in creativity. I differentiated instruction by collecting and using tools that targeted the needs of the outliers in my classroom. My advanced learners received acceleration and content complexity. I organized flexible grouping arrangements for my shy, quiet learners. In math, I provided hands-on options for students who preferred active learning. I met more of my learners' needs more of the time. And still my students were not particularly fired up. Something was missing.

I examined educational trends to see if I could discover what was still lacking. I decided to research the free school movement, which was an educational reform movement in the 1960s and 1970s (also known as the new schools or alternative schools movement). There was no universal definition for these schools, and each one seemed to march to the beat of its own drummer. Most alternative schools were elementary schools, some continued into middle schools, and a few continued through high school. They were both public and private and often were designed around personalized instruction and student empowerment. During the 1960s and 1970s, about six hundred alternative schools were created, and they varied greatly. Some were formed on philosophies meant to rectify political and social injustices. Some espoused a basic dismissal of standardized curricula. One such school is the School Around Us in Arundel, Maine, which was established in 1970 and is still in existence. The school operates on the premise that all its students, from ages five through fourteen, have an equal voice in the community. Teachers are encouraged to follow the students' interests. Each student's goals include academic, social, and personal goals. Parents describe the experience as having to "unschool themselves" (Jordan 2018).

The free school movement did and still does believe that learning is personal and that students will learn in their own way in their own time. Free schoolers believe in self-directed, hands-on, spontaneous learning. They also believe that learning how to learn is more important for students than what they learn. Free school philosophies gave me the idea to search for a variety of ways to empower students and personalize their learning. Could this be that golden ticket I'd been looking for?

I discovered that many free schools rejected the traditional textbook approaches to teaching. Instead teachers created their own curricula. Textbook sales dipped, and publishing companies started to worry.


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The companies responded by creating or acquiring individualized programs, such as the SRA Reading Laboratory. This reading program, still in existence, was designed for students to self-pace through a collection of leveled readers. McGraw-Hill described this reading program as individualized because it helped meet the unique needs of all learners. Some free schools used these individualized programs, but many did not. They relied on their teachers' creativity and empowered teachers to create their own materials.

Regardless of whether free school teachers used published curricula or created their own, they expected that students would learn only when they were ready. This belief is similar to the modern focus on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in early childhood education. Unlike in standards-based education, grade-level expectations in these alternative schools were almost nonexistent. Many of them were set up on a continual progress approach. As long as students continued to learn, or show growth, everything was fine.

For many of these schools, the goals were for students to leave with self-confidence and the ability to self-advocate and lead. Academic achievement was a secondary focus, at least in some of the schools. The free school movement was also nicknamed the feel-good movement, because many free schoolers believed it was more important for students to feel good about themselves than to focus on academics. There was an emphasis on praise. Everyone received stickers, happy faces, ribbons, and recognitions for something.

## Lessons Learned from the Free School Movement

Along with receiving rewards and praise, free school students did learn empowerment skills while engaging in personalized learning. Students became happier and less stressed. The drawback to the free school movement, however, was that many students fell behind in academic skills. Their writing skills suffered, and their range of general knowledge shrank.

The free school movement dissolved, but some of its tenets remain, and educators have learned some lessons from it. While we still want students to feel good and be less stressed, we also want them to achieve academically. Empowerment and personalized learning need not sacrifice either of these goals. It is important for students to learn content. Educators should define learning standards and objectives and share them with students. Expectations need to be clear.

Empowerment and personalized learning are still valued in today's classroom. Teachers foster student empowerment by teaching them strategies that help them learn responsibility, collaboration skills, and self-regulation. These skills help students cope with stress and empower them to become changemakers. When teachers give students such tools and when students have opportunities to use them, students find true self-confidence, and they thrive. One such tool used today is Carol Dweck's growth mindset. When students understand that intelligence can be developed and effort does bring results, they become empowered and embrace challenge. They learn that persistence matters and effort is key to mastery. They learn that criticism is a positive thing, because it gives them information they can use to improve. Teaching students about growth mindset supports their desire to learn. A growth mindset empowers students to learn required content in a way that is meaningful to them. It encourages students to become self-directed learners.

## A Shift Toward Personalized Learning

How is it that personalized learning is taking center stage in education again? After the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, mainstreaming made it evident that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching didn't work. General education classrooms adopted differentiation practices. Then the national focus shifted from differentiation to personalized learning for many reasons. Since 2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed more than three hundred million dollars to developing personalized learning programs in hopes of bringing up student achievement levels, particularly for economically disadvantaged students and students of color. In an attempt to improve student performance, the Investing in Innovation grant program encouraged schools to form public and private partnerships to develop district-wide personalized learning environments. The US Department of Education under the Obama administration gave five

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hundred million dollars to support personalized learning programs in sixty-eight districts across the United States. The Obama administration also established the Race to the Top program in 2009. This program awarded grants to eleven states and the District of Columbia, providing an opportunity for recipients to incorporate personalized learning into their goals. Many of these grants resulted in improved student performance and motivation (US Department of Education 2015). In 2012, the US Department of Education stated that its top priority for awarding further grants was the creation of personalized learning environments with personalized strategies, tools, and supports aligned to college- and career-ready standards. Under the Trump administration, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos endorsed personalized learning because she saw it as part of her platform supporting school choice.

At about the same time personalized learning rose in prominence, so did scripted math and English language arts (ELA) programs. Scripted programs are sometimes used in schools where teachers lack training; they tell teachers exactly what to say to all students and when to say it. Scripted programs are also a way to standardize instruction in hope of bringing up test scores. To me, it seemed odd that scripted programs would become popular alongside personalized learning. How could scripted programs work in classrooms consisting of students who come from diverse backgrounds with a variety of needs? Yet as standards and test scores began to take priority over students' needs, low-performing districts sought out scripted instruction to improve test scores. Even high-performing districts bought into the sales pitch. Districts required teachers to use programs that would guarantee their standards were covered, and this, they believed, would result in higher test scores.

In order to preserve the integrity of scripted programs, teachers sacrifice their own creativity and professional expertise. Many teachers who are forced to use such programs become discouraged. They know they need to differentiate instruction so that they can actually support all students' needs. Some of the scripted programs do provide modifications, but teachers often feel these modifications miss the mark. Teachers may end up feeling disempowered—that their hands are tied, and they can no longer trust their own professional judgment. I have seen the joy of teaching subside in the wake of scripted instruction. Unhappy teachers create an unhappy classroom climate.

Teachers may have no voice in decision-making. They comply with what administrators dictate. Whether the initiative is scripted instruction, personalized learning, student empowerment, or something else, I often hear experienced teachers say, "I've seen initiatives come and go. I'm going to wait this one out, and it will go away." To some degree, these teachers are right. The cycle of educational "reform" goes on and on. Some initiatives fizzle out. But student empowerment and personalized learning are not fleeting initiatives or fads. It is not likely that, in the future, we educators will want to disempower students or depersonalize their learning. We cannot go backward.

Our educational system tends to realign itself over the long term. Meaningful, positive change is slow to take place and may be cyclical. Consider how, fifty to sixty years ago, individualized instruction was the focus of educational change. This concept has resurfaced in the twenty-first century with a fresh look.

## A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

People are slow to change too. I am aware that pedagogy surrounding personalized learning favors a shift in language from *students* to *learners*. However, I have chosen to continue to use the term *students* in this book. All students are learners, and all learners are students.

We as educators should refine our goals to include personalized learning and student empowerment. Personalized learning is not the same as differentiation, and student empowerment is not the same as engagement. This understanding and these refined goals are reflected in a rising number of published books and information available on personalized learning and student empowerment, separate from differentiation and engagement. Many schools are telling stories of how they not only engage but also empower students, and how they not only differentiate but also personalize their students' learning.

Student empowerment and personalized learning are hot topics in education because teachers want to know how to use them. We know how important it is for students to feel they have control over their learning. They want to know that what they are learning has meaning for them and the world around them. They want to engage in learning that is personal. With the

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right tools, students can go much further and much deeper in their learning than they—or we—might have thought possible.

## About This Book

*Inspiring Student Empowerment: Moving Beyond Engagement, Refining Differentiation* provides strategies, frameworks, examples, suggestions, templates, and tools to help you shift your teaching practice from engagement to empowerment and from differentiation to personalized learning. This book is for classroom teachers and administrators who are looking for practical ways to empower students and personalize learning. It gives equal attention to both topics. The book describes engagement and differentiation as necessary, but often not enough. It offers you ways to initiate classroom change, school change, and district-wide change.

I wrote this book to provide useful suggestions to help teachers, principals, administrators, and curriculum coordinators move from their current practice—whatever that may be—to the next step on the road to student empowerment and personalized learning. The book takes you from vision to practice by providing examples and posing questions. You can reflect on your own answers to hard questions, to draw your own conclusions. **This book is not meant to be a directive. It is meant to guide teachers, schools, and districts to decide for themselves their best approach to the topics.**

My overall goal in writing this book is to address ten essential questions about empowerment and personalized learning:

1. Why is empowerment a philosophy of teaching and learning?
2. How is empowerment distinct from engagement?
3. What does it mean when we say that empowerment is personal?
4. What ignites empowerment, and what are the barriers that inhibit empowerment?
5. How does empowerment work for the everyday teacher in the classroom?
6. Personalized learning often creates self-directed learners. Why would you want your students to be self-directed learners?
7. Do your students want to become self-directed learners in your content area?
8. How is personalized learning distinct from differentiation?
9. Does personalized learning require a major overhaul of structure, schedule, and curriculum?
10. What role do nonacademic skills and behaviors play in personalized learning?

By responding to these essential questions, this book describes **how to shift the focus of instruction from student engagement to student empowerment and from differentiation to personalized learning**. The beauty of this book lies in the tools it offers to support you and your students in these pursuits. The empowerment tools are designed to foster both teacher and student empowerment. The personalized learning tools are designed to help students direct their own learning. The book includes references to technology tools, but most of the tools assume a district is not married to a particular technology program. The book identifies the problems and challenges facing educators and students today, such as lack of support, lack of resources and materials, lack of time, lack of freedom to create, lack of confidence, and pressure for all students to achieve on-grade-level standards. These barriers are holding teachers back from developing their teaching practices. This book proposes ways forward, demonstrated through vignettes, case studies, sample classroom practices, checklists, and templates.

**Figure 1** illustrates the approach to learning presented in this book. It also illustrates the relationship among the ideas discussed. The base of the diagram represents the classroom environment, which must be conducive to engagement, differentiation, empowerment, and personalized learning. The arrows show the relationships between and among the ideas. Engagement and differentiation are related because the same engagement strategies won't work for all students, necessitating differentiation. Engagement and empowerment are related because students must be engaged to be empowered. Likewise, students are engaged when their learning is personalized. Differentiation affects empowerment because students are empowered in diverse ways. Differentiation is part of personalized learning but is not synonymous with it. Personalized learning provides conditions for empowerment to occur, and empowerment does the same for personalized learning.

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I have divided this book into two parts, the first focusing on the shift from engagement to empowerment and the second focusing on the shift from differentiation to personalized learning. I demonstrate how empowerment is a vehicle for personalized learning, and personalized learning is a vehicle for student empowerment.

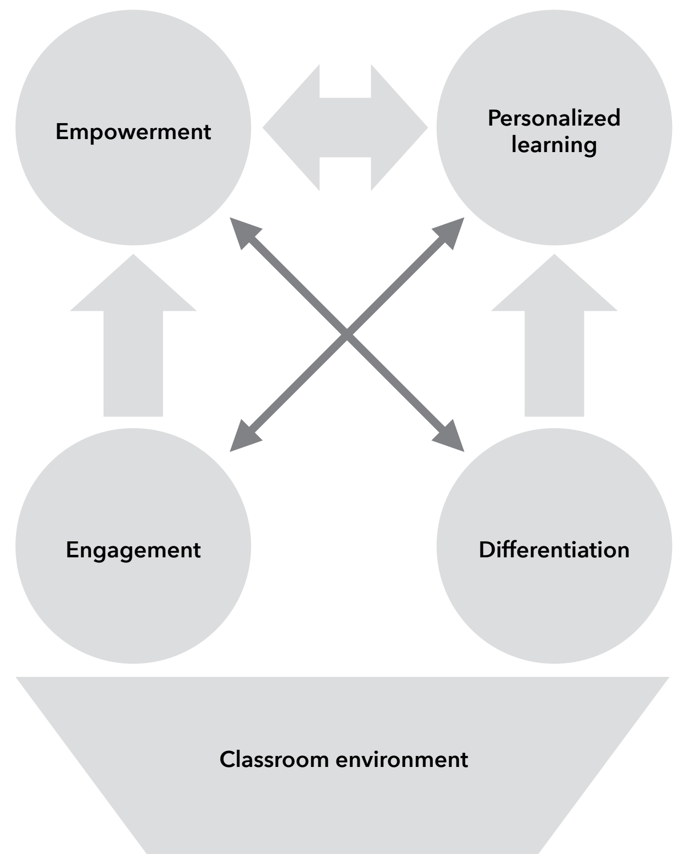
The first half of this book, **Part 1: From Engagement to Empowerment**, describes ways to engage and empower students and reviews the effects of this type of learning on students and their achievement. Chapters 1 through 4 look at the relationship between engagement and empowerment, showing how engagement is one of many igniters that spark empowerment. These chapters also address student behaviors that can warn teachers of false engagement or empowerment. The chapters caution that engagement and empowerment should be assessed in terms of degree. All four chapters contain how-to information, lists of strategies, and practical ways to make engagement and empowerment work in the classroom.

**Chapter 1** discusses the **benefits of engaged learning** and describes **ways to encourage engagement**. Everyone likes engagement strategies and tools, but this chapter addresses broader issues beyond just adding things to your teaching tool belt. It discusses student behaviors and degrees of engagement. It explains that one of the reasons why an engagement strategy is effective is because the student's brain responds to and likes particular types of strategies. The chapter ends with a sample lesson that demonstrates an engagement strategy in action. This chapter lays the foundation for the empowerment chapters that follow.

**Chapter 2** discusses **types of empowerment** and **ways to empower students**. It explores self-empowerment and group empowerment, the possible impact of gender on empowerment, cultural differences in empowerment, teacher empowerment, and how all these factors play out in an educational context. The chapter proposes action research and offers examples to help you compare student comments on what empowers them to teacher comments on what they think empowers their students. Empowerment is discussed in terms of relationships, sense of accomplishment, power, freedom, control, independence, motivation, grit, and the importance of feedback. The teacher's role shifts from facilitating to coaching. Mentoring and technology both support student empowerment.

**Chapter 3** is all about **research-based best practices, strategies, and programs associated with empowerment**. The chapter is based on the premise that acts of empowerment may be big or little. Teachers customize their approach to empowerment and determine which type of empowerment they want to encourage and how often. This chapter introduces strategies that empower students, such as the Harkness table strategy. The chapter also identifies starter phrases that ignite empowering discussions. Educators need not think of empowerment as an add-on. Empowerment fits easily within the context of many existing educational curricula and programs. The chapter offers an example of an expeditionary learning middle school to demonstrate how its program empowers both teachers and students. Other program examples, such as global education, inquiry learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, genius hour, makerspace, and entrepreneurship education highlight a variety of ways to embed empowerment into instruction and curriculum content.

**Figure 1** **Approach to Learning**




**Chapter 4** is titled "In It to Win It" because it examines **the relationship between empowerment and game-based education and competitions**. Games

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empower students to speak up and collaborate on a team to achieve a common goal. The chapter offers a sample teacher-constructed game to show you how to create a game that engages and empowers students. It discusses large games that continue over time, short games that students play in ten minutes, electronic games and badges, and international competitions such as Odyssey of the Mind and Future Problem Solving Program (FPSP) as ways to empower students. In a personalized learning context, students can use tools provided in the chapter to help them create games that are designed around rigorous learning and challenge their classmates.

The second half of the book, **Part 2: Personalized Learning Plus Student Empowerment**, looks at how student empowerment can thrive in an environment of differentiation and personalized learning. When teachers share their differentiation strategies with their students, the students acquire the tools necessary to personalize their own learning. When students apply these tools and learn to use their voices, they gain control over their learning and their actions. In chapters 5 through 8, instructional tools along with a social and emotional model empower students to personalize their learning and to see themselves as self-directed learners.

**Chapter 5** reviews and revisits differentiation (assuming that all teachers differentiate to some degree). **This chapter emphasizes *intentional* differentiation and common sense.** Intentional differentiation means that a teacher is differentiating and using specific strategies to meet the specific needs of a student or group of students. It does not mean an instructional approach in which teachers use a random variety of strategies simply for variety's sake. Chapter 5 discusses eight elements of differentiation:

1. The characteristics of the learner drive the need for differentiated instruction.
2. Teachers use preassessment and formative assessment to inform their differentiated instruction.
3. Each student requires unique pacing of instruction.
4. Purposeful grouping is an effective differentiated instruction strategy.
5. Differentiation supports the use of open-ended tasks and open-ended questioning.
6. A key to differentiation is differentiating the content from simple to complex.
7. Differentiation means that students think along a continuum from low (basic) to high (abstract). High-level thinking can interact with simple or complex content.
8. Differentiation in product options allows students to show what they know in a simple product, a sophisticated product, or new product form.

**Chapter 6** examines the **relationship between differentiation and personalized learning** and **demonstrates how and why student empowerment works in tandem with personalization** to foster students' investment in their own learning. It also addresses student voice and choice. Since voice can be a change agent, this chapter offers information about voice as a tool for student leadership. Voice also plays a role in communication and assessment. Student choice occurs when teachers hand over control to students. Teachers identify the standards students need to cover and leave it up to students how they want to learn the content and how they want to show what they know. The more teachers hand over control to students, the more students experience empowerment, but choice can sometimes feel scary or overwhelming for students. This chapter offers several strategies to minimize such fears, help in moving from teacher-driven choice to student-driven choice, and guidance on helping students make good choices.

**Chapter 7** discusses and provides examples of competency-based, mastery-based, and proficiency-based education. **These types of education can align with personalized learning and student empowerment.** Districts deal with hard questions when they initiate this type of learning approach. Many districts have a hard time describing what goes beyond the level targeted in a grade-level standard. Districts also need to decide what constitutes competency, mastery, or proficiency. Is it 90 percent or 85 percent mastery? Are competency, mastery, or proficiency levels the same in all content areas? What if a student gets stuck on a standard? How long do students stay on a standard before they can move on? Districts must map their curriculum vertically to align with their state, provincial, or district standards. Everyone needs to know what to teach when, so there are no overlaps. Once curriculum is mapped, teachers can use the instructional design planner described in chapter 7. Teachers can organize instruction using pathways (paths to learning outcomes) and playlists

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(specific activities that happen along a pathway). The tools in this chapter are designed both for teachers who are starting to personalize instruction and for those who are refining their personalized instruction. Once teachers are comfortable using the tools, they can show students how to use them. These tools empower students to direct their own learning.

**Chapter 8** talks about the **social and emotional aspects of personalized learning and student empowerment**. It addresses classroom climate as well as the classroom community. We know how important it is to create a sense of belonging in a physically and emotionally safe place. The climate also depends upon the students' use of their social and emotional skills. The chapter refers to programs such as Open Circle, Superflex, Habits of Mind, Restorative Practices, and Responsive Classroom to foster social and emotional development. It includes information on executive function and self-regulation, along with tips for how to deal with the lack of these skills and students' negative reactive behaviors. This chapter also introduces the Affective Perspectives model. The model consists of five strands: understanding of self and others, leadership, risk-taking, insight, and goal setting.

Each of the eight chapters culminates with discussion questions that you can use to:

- reflect upon the chapter
- guide professional learning community (PLC) discussions
- spark further research on questions and topics of interest
- connect on social media with educators who have similar interests

At the end of the discussion questions, you'll find a web address where you can watch a video in which I share my thoughts about the chapter. For a video review of this introduction, visit freespirit.com/empower-videos.

The **Final Thoughts on Empowerment and Personalized Learning** remind you why we, as educators, want to foster student empowerment and embrace personalized learning. It offers you a list of questions to consider before embarking on any changes in instruction or programming and cautions you to think about not only what the research says, but also what would actually work for you. The conclusion reiterates that there is no one right way to foster student empowerment and personalized learning.

# How to Use This Book

Some people always read a book from cover to cover. My hope is that you will find this book so interesting that you read it this way not out of habit, but because you want to. If that's not your preference, I hope you **read the parts of the book that are most interesting and useful to you**.

If you currently engage your students and are always looking for more engagement strategies, chapter 1 may give you some new insights. If you are looking to shift your instruction to include more emphasis on empowerment, I suggest you read both chapters 1 and 2, because many educators confuse engagement and empowerment. These chapters should make the pedagogy clear so that you understand what type of learning you are targeting and why. You should read all three empowerment chapters (chapters 2, 3, and 4) to learn about the various aspects of empowerment and broaden your understanding of the many ways you can empower students.

I know most teachers already differentiate. However, I encourage you to read chapter 5 on differentiation anyway. In it, I may define differentiation in a way that's unfamiliar to you. There are also many tools in chapter 5 that you might find useful and want to add to your differentiation repertoire. It is also important to read chapter 5 so you understand the way I articulate the distinction between *differentiation* and *personalized learning* in this book. If you want to expand your personalized education approach, I encourage you to read all the chapters (5 through 8) in part 2. If social and emotional learning is of particular interest to you, you might want to read chapter 8 first. Since social and emotional learning affects engagement, empowerment, differentiation, and personalized learning, consider reading this chapter regardless of how many other chapters you read.

If you are a specialist, curriculum coordinator, gifted and talented teacher or coordinator, or a school administrator, this book can be a resource for you because it provides practical ideas, strategies, and templates as well as suggestions for big-picture planning. It answers many questions surrounding the shift from engagement to empowerment and from differentiation to personalized learning. If you are a classroom teacher who just wants to know where to begin, the answer is to start small. Use this book to find one idea to use in your classroom. Be willing to try new things. If you are not satisfied with your results,

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think about how you might use the strategy differently next time. Mistakes are okay; we learn from them.

You can use this book in a PLC, as a required or supplemental text in a university course, or for your own individual needs. You could use it for professional development in a school district that is focusing on engagement, empowerment, differentiation, and/or personalized learning. One advantage of using the book for professional development in a PLC, a webinar, or a face-to-face workshop is that teachers can work together and discuss ideas. A second advantage is that many teachers in one district will receive the same information. A third advantage is that all teachers will be using shared language to communicate their ideas. Many districts prefer to have a consultant explain the ideas from the book in a professional development workshop setting. The information and tools in the book can be shared this way, or the book can stand alone and be used for a small group or individual reading.

Not every idea presented in the book will work for you. Do not worry about that. This book is not meant to provide a step-by-step recipe. You should read its ideas and personalize them. As you read, think about how an idea might work for you. Feel free to alter any idea to suit your situation.

## The Journey of Teaching and Learning

Education is a journey without a precise destination. There is no one golden ticket that leads you down a perfect path. There are actually many golden tickets and many paths to empowerment and learning, so choose the ones that are right for you. I hope you collect enough golden tickets from this book to gain courage to move your own student empowerment and personalized learning practices forward.

The journey of teaching and learning is one you take with your students. Enjoy the journey and your travel companions. When you allow your students voice and choice, you also allow yourself voice and choice. When you embrace your own empowerment, you see the value of ownership and freedom. When you embrace student empowerment, you allow your students' young minds to soar. Once you see that look in your students' eyes, the expressions on their faces, and the excitement in their voices, you will understand why infusing your practice with student empowerment and personalized learning is a journey worth taking.

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# Part 1

# FROM ENGAGEMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

Part 1 provides information about how to refocus teachers' efforts and shift instruction from student engagement to student empowerment. Student engagement is important and should not be minimized, but engagement does not ensure that students will experience empowerment. The purpose of this shift in instruction is to promote the development of autonomous, self-directed learners (as opposed to engaged students who may be compliant, dependent leaners). A variety of tools and strategies can be used to help teachers make this shift a reality. Chapters 1 through 4 provide tips and strategies to help students become empowered learners.



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CHAPTER 1

# Engagement: It Matters

Engagement provides the launchpad for empowering students. I'm sure there are engagement strategies that you and your students like to use. Have you ever considered whether those strategies are effective enough? For example, most students like to work in a group, but is grouping the best strategy to use in every situation? Of course not. Not all engagement strategies work in all situations. Chapter 1 takes a hard look at what engagement really means and the many ways in which strategies can engage the brain. Some commonly used research-based strategies can become more engaging just by making small adjustments. However, it is not only making a strategy more engaging or choosing to use an appealing research-based strategy that matters. What matters is choosing the right strategy for the right purpose and then reflecting upon the results and being willing to adjust if the results are not what you want. Most of us do not take the time to truly analyze the effectiveness of a lesson. We tend to generalize and think a lesson went well or did not. It can be helpful to carefully plan or review how engaging a lesson really is. To make engagement matter, we should make our efforts mindful and intentional.

## Engagement Defined

Are your students active, enthusiastic learners in your classroom? Do they willingly participate in learning activities? While it is critical to identify *what* to teach—that is, to know your program's objectives—it is equally essential to know *how* to accomplish these goals. Student engagement is critical to making progress toward learning goals.

According to educational researchers Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering (2011), engagement is based on students' answers to these four questions: *How do I feel? Am I interested? Is this important? Can I do this?* To determine how engaged you are in reading this chapter, you might consider your own answers. How do you feel about the information provided here? How interesting do you find it? How important is it to you? Can you transform the information into practice?

Another definition for student engagement is simply the students' willingness to participate actively. Once they begin to participate, students often demonstrate curiosity, interest, commitment, and achievement. This definition of engagement aligns with Helen Marks's definition of conceptualized engagement as "a psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, and investment and effort students expend in the work of learning" (Marks 2000, 154).

So, why should you care about engagement? Is it because engagement makes learning more fun and motivates students? Or because engagement makes learning more meaningful? Or because you want to avoid boredom at all costs? These are all good reasons to care about engagement. Another important reason is that research has shown that engagement is a critical component of achievement. According to learning strategists Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey, "Engagement has been found to be a robust predictor of learner performance and behavior in the classroom" (Bray and McClaskey 2017, 42). Literacy researcher John Guthrie points out, "Higher achievers read more and the more engaged these students become, the higher they achieve. Likewise, lower achievers read less, and the less engaged decline in achievement" (Guthrie 2008, 3). In a research report on student engagement, Krystina Finlay writes, "Students who were considered below average in engagement were 30 percent more likely to do poorly on student outcomes" (Finlay 2008, 3).

Since engagement is critical to achievement, try to enhance engagement whenever possible. Engagement increases when students attend to:

- purpose—know why they are being asked to engage in the lesson
- meaning—know and understand what they are being asked to do
- effort—are willing to put in the energy and time to do the work
- commitment—are willing to commit to the content, activity, and/or assignment


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- interest—are interested in the content, activity, and/or assignment
- curiosity—are curious about the content
- attention—maintain focus throughout the activity or assignment
- participation—are willing to participate in the lesson
- sense of belonging—feel a sense of community in a safe environment

When these factors are ignored, disengagement can occur. According to the 2016 Gallup Student Poll, 74 percent of fifth graders from three thousand schools said they were engaged in school, while only 34 percent of twelfth graders claimed to be engaged (Calderon and Yu 2017). Engagement figures are similar to these in many countries. How and why does engagement drop over time? One reason may be that a mismatch exists between what teachers think are engaging ideas and what students think are engaging ideas. Teachers may think it is important to engage students with specific vocabulary tied to content; to limit lecture; to provide for high-level thinking; and to target rigorous, relevant, and real-world application of learning. Yet, when asked what engages them, students say things like loving what they do, being understood, having choices, getting out of their seats, and working with peers (Wolpert-Gawron 2015). To rectify this mismatch, we educators need to dig deeper to understand the types and degrees of effective engagement.

# Types of Engagement

Let's explore the three types of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). These three types of engagement will help us understand in what ways a student may or may not be engaged.

## Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement has to do with following rules. It also includes doing schoolwork, demonstrating effort, asking questions, participating in discussions, and completing homework. It is demonstrated in the student's attendance, participation in classwork, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Behavioral engagement is what we observe while we watch a student who is involved in the learning process (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin 2009). Research indicates behavioral engagement is linked to academic performance (Archambault et al. 2009). However, according to a 2009 high school survey of student engagement, behavioral engagement is not what students think of when they consider what engages them (Yazzie-Mintz 2010). According to Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, director of this survey, many students said they "would be more engaged in school if they were intellectually challenged by their work" (Indiana University 2010). In other words, they wanted more cognitive engagement.

## Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement involves motivation, mental effort, and strategies that students use to exceed proficiency and embrace challenge. It is a preference for hard work and a willingness to go beyond behavioral engagement. Students who are cognitively engaged are doing higher-level thinking. Cognitively engaging lessons have a clear purpose and involve multiple skills. They may ask students to apply learning to a new situation, make inferences, and take their learning to a new level. The teacher has high expectations of students, demonstrates perseverance by sharing personal examples or examples from students, and provides an accepting classroom environment that welcomes mistakes and encourages risk-taking.

Students who are cognitively engaged are often students with high self-confidence and self-esteem. They are conscientious and timely workers. Gifted and talented students are often cognitively engaged. However, some of these students may limit their academic growth because they are unwilling to take an academic risk. They tie their self-worth to their academic achievement, and they will not risk failure. They value effort only if it helps them reach their end goal of doing well in school. When placed in an unsure situation, some gifted and talented students avoid taking academic risks and may be unwilling to take on a true academic challenge. They believe that if they do not exert effort, they can always use that as an excuse that they could have been successful if they had really tried. Students who exhibit this behavior fall back on a fixed mindset, which affects their willingness to cognitively engage.

In order to be cognitively engaged, students need a good working memory. They must rehearse, or use, information to move it from working memory into short-term and long-term memory. Students rehearse information to assign personal meaning and to make

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connections with prior knowledge. Once information makes it into short-term memory, with more rehearsal, the hippocampus can move it to long-term memory. Short-term memory has limited capacity. For adolescents and adults, the short-term memory can store four items, and for preadolescents, the short-term memory probably stores fewer than four items (Sousa and Tomlinson 2018, 52). It is difficult to remember something that makes no sense or has no meaning. Meaning influences which information gets stored in short-term and long-term memory. Therefore, the most effective engagement strategies target meaning and sense-making.

## Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement involves students' interests, values, and feelings. According to Sousa and Tomlinson, neurons fire when we experience a task or an emotion. The more neurons fire, the more engaged we are. You see emotional engagement demonstrated in students' affective reactions, their appreciation of school success, and their sense of community and belonging. Emotionally engaged students interact with peers and choose friends. They use collaborative learning to solve problems and use inquiry to learn new things.

Students want to be part of a community, but in a 2009 survey of three hundred thousand students, only 55 percent felt part of their high school community (Yazzie-Mintz 2010). If we educators do not provide classroom communities in which students feel comfortable engaging, they will find their own communities outside our classrooms. It's up to us to create classroom communities that are welcoming, safe, and respectful, and that make students feel capable.

Emotional engagement means getting students excited about the content as well as catching and holding their attention. Neuroscientist Jaak Panskepp proposed that the brain contains neural networks that generate emotions (cited in Gregory and Kaufeldt 2015). These emotional networks keep humans motivated, interested, and energized in what they are learning or doing. Emotions help people make connections, and they spark eagerness to learn.

Emotions such as happiness, confidence, enthusiasm, and fascination set the tone for engagement. It is easy to see how an expression of a positive emotion such as laughter alleviates stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Laughter can also increase attention and memory. These are all good reasons to strive for laugher and include it as an effective engagement strategy. The average four-year-old laughs three hundred times a day (Gerloff 2011). The average forty-year-old, by contrast, laughs four times a day. I wonder how much less a student laughs from age five to age eighteen. Do we lose some of our sense of humor during the school years? When promoting laughter, instead of coming up with adaptations that are humorous yourself, ask your students to alter information in order to make others laugh. (Not all students have the same sense of humor and not all students will think the same thing is funny. Before doing so, have a discussion with your students about the differences between silly and humorous and appropriate versus inappropriate.)

Humans sense and watch facial expressions and nuanced behaviors to determine other people's intentions and feelings. Your attitude, expressed emotions, and behavior affects your students' perception of how capable you think they are as learners. Developmental psychology researchers David Yeager and Gregory Walton have found that "brief exercises that target students' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in and about school can lead to large gains in student achievement and sharply reduce achievement gaps even months and years later" (Yeager and Walton 2011).

Behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement are not isolated processes. These categories simply help us build a conceptual understanding of engagement. Students tend to identify engagement more with emotions and behaviors, because for most students, school is a social experience. On the other hand, many teachers focus primarily on cognitive engagement. Consider whether you are barking up the wrong tree with your engagement efforts. You might be bending over backward to engage students, but what type of engagement are they, not you, seeking?

# Student Behaviors

What do student behaviors tell us? Can we use this information to engage students more effectively in learning? Let's look at some data and examples.

When students say they are bored, can they tell you in what ways they are bored? In a survey, Ethan Yazzie-Mintz reported that when students were asked why they were bored, 81 percent said the material was not interesting, and 40 percent said that because the material was not relevant to them, they became bored

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(Yazzie-Mintz 2010). Other reporting from this survey found 33 percent of students were bored because the work wasn't challenging, 26 percent said they were bored because the work was too hard, and 35 percent were bored because they had no interaction with the teacher. In another survey, the students said they wanted a learning situation that included control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring (Kanevsky and Keighley 2003).

In one high school where I was brought in to consult with teachers on differentiation, I observed a science classroom where the teacher was having trouble controlling the class. I was there to observe the differentiation lesson. Her differentiation was skilled and thorough. She differentiated her students' lab work, students moved at their own pace, and she helped struggling students. All students should have been engaged. So what went wrong? I met with a student who was acting out and asked him why he was behaving that way. He replied, "The teacher does not respect me, so I don't respect her." This statement reminded me that we can adapt curriculum for our students, and we can use many varied engagement strategies, but if students don't think we care about them or respect them, all our efforts will be in vain. The statement was a wake-up call for his teacher to be honest with herself and assess her own behaviors, not just student behavior.

Both positive and negative student behaviors can affect degrees of student engagement. These behaviors are based on learner characteristics. If we look closely at these behaviors and characteristics, we can figure out how to tweak our instruction to better attend to the needs of our students. Let's consider the following students and examine how their characteristics and actions relate to their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement:

- **Emilio** is enthusiastically engaged. He can get so involved in a project that it is hard for him to stop. He wants to do his very best all the time. If the teacher is using a rubric for a learning activity, he is not satisfied with proficient performance. He wants to take on a challenge and do advanced work. His effort and commitment sometimes cause him stress, but he seems to thrive on stress. He has a hard time with moderation.
- **Dalia** does her work, gets it in on time, never causes problems in the classroom, and engages moderately in classroom activities. She is not enthusiastic, nor does she demonstrate boredom. She will do whatever the teacher asks of her. She is a rule follower and works for the top grade.
- **Zahra** asks questions because she likes to appear engaged; however, she rarely answers questions. She often leads discussions off track and talks just to hear herself talk. She does not worry about doing her best work, because okay work is fine with her. Just getting by is the standard she sets for herself. She is friendly and likable. Her engagement is dependent upon her comfort level with the activity.
- **Marcos** does not like attention. He rarely contributes in class discussions because he is afraid of what others might think of him. He dislikes working in small groups for this reason and because it is hard to hide in a small group. His level of engagement is limited by his fear of participation, of being wrong, and of what others think of him.
- **Luciana** is highly engaged, but in a negative way. She constantly questions why she must do something or learn something and often says something is boring. She can be disruptive and argumentative and often leads other students toward joining in her negative behavior. When she is absent, teachers notice fewer interruptions, and class goes more smoothly.
- **Jadyn** does not perform in classroom activities or assignments. He is not engaged in schoolwork. He may wander alone or daydream. He works slowly, if at all. He may be engaged in other types of learning at home on his own. However, Jadyn may be at risk for more serious problems beyond engagement issues. When students become loners and set themselves apart from day-to-day activities, it may be that there are problems at home or possibly some social and emotional problems that should be addressed. The teacher needs to keep a close eye on Jadyn so he does not slip through the cracks.

**Figure 1-1** shows possible ways to increase engagement for this group of hypothetical students, who have a variety of positive and negative behaviors. As you read about the engagement strategies described in the rest of this chapter, think about which strategy would be the most effective with which hypothetical student—and with your own students. Choose your engagement strategies intentionally.

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**Figure 1-1 Student Behaviors and Engagement Strategies**

| Student | Positive Behaviors | Negative Behaviors | Strategies to Improve Engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Emilio** | Is engaged<br>Is enthusiastic<br>Likes challenge<br>Works hard<br>Performs at a high level | Doesn't like to stop<br>Often expects high-level performance from others<br>Is often stressed | Set clear expectations<br>Agree to time constraints<br>Provide leadership opportunities |
| **Dalia** | Does what is expected<br>Meets deadlines<br>Is academically capable | Needs teacher to tell her what to do<br>Lacks independence<br>Lacks self-confidence | Use emotional engagement strategies<br>Reduce teacher dependency |
| **Zahra** | Asks questions<br>Is friendly<br>Is likable | Doesn't answer questions<br>Does just-okay work<br>Daydreams | Connect to student's interests<br>Help student make meaning |
| **Marcos** | Is quiet<br>Completes work | Doesn't share ideas<br>Won't participate in groups<br>Dislikes being called on in class | Assign a partner who will not overpower him<br>Use emotional engagement strategies<br>Call on student when you know the student knows the answer |
| **Luciana** | Is academically capable | Forms identity by opposition<br>Dominates group activities in negative ways<br>Gets attention through anger | Connect with student<br>Foster respect for one another<br>Help student see real value in the work |
| **Jadyn** | Attends school<br>May have friends | Feels loss of control<br>Sees no way to accomplish goals<br>Has blank affect | Seek help from guidance counselor for student |

# Engagement Strategies

In this section, there are a variety of instructional strategies and tools that engage students. I've identified seven types of strategies the brain prefers, based upon neuroscience findings. When we use strategies the brain prefers, it is easier to engage students. I also examine eight common and perhaps not-so-common engagement strategies, and ways to make them just a little more engaging. When using a specific strategy, teachers or students may also use the Engage-O-Meter to identify or predict in what way and to what degree the student is or may be engaged.

## What the Human Brain Likes

The brain is wired to like certain things. When the brain likes something, it learns better. Our brains like the following things because they bring us joy. When these elements are present, they enhance engagement.

### NOVELTY

The brain likes to be surprised. This can mean anything that diverges from the routine. For example:

- Have your students create plans to rearrange the classroom. Their plans can involve scale drawings or cut paper laid out on a larger sheet of paper. Your students agree on the best layout and proceed to rearrange the room. This engages them in the design process and empowers them to create a novel space for themselves.
- You dress up as a character from a story or a famous person from history. When your students walk into the classroom, they are surprised to see that you look different. To make this novelty even more engaging, let students create costumes for themselves or for each other.
- When your students walk into the room, you immediately engage them in an activity. Don't let them sit down! Don't talk! Let them read written directions from the board and immediately engage in the interactive lesson.

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## LAUGHTER

Here is a quick reminder to lighten up and laugh. If you are too serious, your students will model your behavior—which is fine some of the time, but being serious all the time will put a damper on engagement. If you are serious by nature, and humor does not come easily to you, here are some activities to try:

- Give students the responsibility of providing a cartoon or joke that teaches a lesson for the day.
- Challenge your students to find cartoons or jokes that relate to the content of a specific lesson. The more students laugh, the more things they will find that are funny.
- Humor is personal, and not everyone will find the same things funny. Discuss the nature of humor. Ask, "What makes things funny? Why is something funny to one person and not so funny to another person?"
- Challenge your students to create a product with something that is funny about the content they are learning. Have other students locate the funny part that the student added to the assignment and explain why they think it is funny.

## SENSES

Use sensory experiences, such as images or videos, startling sounds, things to taste, or aromas to draw students' attention. It takes three to five seconds for the brain to process sensory input, and then the input moves immediately to short-term memory. The short-term memory makes connections between the sensory input and content knowledge. Here are some sensory examples that target seeing and hearing:

- Ask your students to find multiple cartoons, images, and quotes that relate to the topic of globalization. Students work in groups to determine which cartoon, picture, and quote they like best. They share their final choices with the rest of the class and explain their choices. By looking at a variety of resources, students build a deep conceptual understanding of the topic, concept, or problem you've posed. Since most students enjoy visuals and cartoons, their degree of engagement, attention, and interest is generally high.
- A video holds students' attention if the music grabs them, if the format grabs them, if the content grabs them, if they understand and relate to the message, if the video is not too long, if the pacing is just right, if the video evokes emotion, or if the video is simply enjoyable to watch. A video notes sheet (see **Video Notes** reproducible, page 25) helps students pay attention to the video and attend to the information in it.
- Videos can be more engaging—even empowering—if students make the videos themselves. If you provide instructions on how to create a video, the products are often more successful. Students are more engaged when they have focus questions to answer before they begin making the video. For example, in planning the video, the students decide whether it will have a narrator or host, and who it will be. Will this narrator or host be a person, a computer-animated character, a cartoon, or just a voice? Will the voice be a real person's voice or an electronically modified voice? Will the video be a demonstration, a game, or a slide presentation? What will the format be? Will the students need to make a list of key words and phrases, vocabulary words, or symbols that should be included in the video? Will there be music or sound effects? Have students view a video with and without music or sound effects to determine which they like better. Do students know how to make a storyboard that delineates scenes?
- Music is a very effective tool that's often underused in the classroom. Most students enjoy music. It has a way of lifting the mind and taking it places. Don't get stuck with only one kind of music, such as classical. Play music that is uplifting and inspiring in addition to relaxing. Use music to key in to content, attention, and mood. You may want to use quiet, calming music if you are about to go over some important information and you need your students focused. If you want to energize your students, play music with a strong beat and with a strong message. For example, songs like "We Are Brave" by Shawn McDonald, "Try Everything" by Shakira, "Torches" by Daughtry, and "Live Like a Warrior" by Matisyahu are fun to play as students are entering the room. Use music to spark discussion. What happens if you play something like "Destiny Awaits" by Audiomachine as students enter the room? Ask them why they

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think you chose this song to play and what they think will happen next. If you want to change your classroom tone to a light, happy atmosphere, play "Lucky Day" by Tomás Doncker. You can also use music to tie into content. For example, if you are studying globalization, you could play "Conscience of the World" by Tomás Doncker.

## INTEREST

When students are interested in the content of an activity or an assignment, they are willing to engage in it. To engage a disengaged student, try to connect the student's interest with the required content. For example, the student's interest is knitting, and you are a math teacher. Although there is no time available in school for knitting, some knitting skills are transferable to math content. A knitter needs to understand how to read and apply number patterns in order to create specific designs and shapes. You could help your student knitter see that patterns serve similar basic purposes in knitting and in math. Patterns repeat, patterns have order, patterns allow for prediction, and patterns help us understand.

## QUESTIONS

The brain likes questions. "Questions can generate mild pressure that helps stimulate attention" (Marzano and Pickering 2011, 12). When a student's attention is activated, the student's working memory is keyed into the learning activity. If *you* create questions about a topic, the questions may not interest your students. But if students generate the questions themselves, they are more likely to be interested in the content. Students need tools to generate engaging questions. If you teach your students about the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework, or Marzano's strategies, students will be better equipped to create meaningful questions at challenging levels.

The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy connects the level of thinking (or thinking dimension) with the type of knowledge (or knowledge dimension). The dimensions of thinking are remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The dimensions of knowledge are the types of content covered in a unit. These dimensions are factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive (Anderson et al. 2000).

DOK is a framework for cognitive rigor in the classroom. The DOK model focuses on the setting, the situation, and the scenario in which students produce learning. The levels are not designed as a taxonomy, which means students do not have to master one level before going to the next level. DOK analyzes the specifics of assignments in four levels: recall (level one), concept and skills (level two), strategic thinking (level three), and extended thinking (level four).

Marzano identifies four thinking processes that include specific verbs. For example, level one is the retrieval level and is associated with verbs such as *recognize*, *recall*, and *execute*. Level two is the comprehension level; the verbs associated with it are *integrate* and *symbolize*. Level 3 is focused on analyzing and consists of *comparing*, *classifying*, *analyzing errors*, *generalizing*, and *specifying*. Fourth is the knowledge utilization level. These mental processes include *decision-making*, *problem-solving*, *experimenting*, and *investigating*.

There are other strategies besides sharing lists of verbs that can help students create engaging questions. One such strategy is question cubes, which you can make or buy. Students are actively engaged when they toss the cube and create questions tied to their content based on the verb on the top face of the cube.

## CURIOSITY

Sparking students' curiosity grabs their attention and promotes engagement. You can try to spark curiosity by providing a hook to a lesson, as in the following examples:

- Introduce a topic by showing a quick video. Although this may hook your students' interest, be aware that this strategy targets passive engagement. There is nothing wrong with some passive engagement, but try to avoid too much of it. You can increase the engagement level a little by requiring students to fill out the **Video Notes** reproducible on page 25.
- Another way to spark curiosity is to show your students an object and ask them what they think the object is. Once the students guess what the object is, ask them what they think it has to do with what they will be learning.
- Engage students in a game. Many teachers like to create games using kahoot.com. The teacher generates a list of questions, and the teacher uses these questions to create a multiple-choice game using the Kahoot platform. Students try to answer each question in ten to twenty seconds. The scores are displayed in a bar graph for the whole class to

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see. If you use this strategy as a hook to spark curiosity, it is unlikely that your students will know the answers to the questions, because you have not yet taught them the content. After each answer is displayed, you can teach the information particular to the question right on the spot. In this way, the Kahoot game can be used both as a preassessment and as a way to engage students and get them excited about an upcoming unit of study.

### RELATIONSHIPS

Are you building bridges with your students? "It is not what a teacher thinks and feels about a particular student that forges a positive relationship with the student. Rather, it is how the teacher speaks to and behaves with the student that communicates respect and acceptance" (Marzano and Pickering 2011, 36). Students want to connect with you. Research supports the importance of relationships between students and adults in school. Strong relationships with both adults and peers are predictors of student engagement (Tucker et al. 2002; Perdue, Manzeske, and Estell 2009; Yazzie-Mintz 2010).

In a graduation speech, one high school senior chose not to talk about the accomplishments of the students in his class. Rather, he chose to speak about diversity and relationships. He said that relationships are the strength of our schools. He asked all the students to simultaneously stand up and shout the name of their favorite teacher. The students shouted many names. The student pointed out that school is a web of relationships. The strand that connects each student with each teacher is a unique bond. Each bond, created from interpersonal similarities and differences, creates a relationship that matters. When relationships matter, students engage.

## Instructional Practices for Engagement

Instructional practices for engagement are techniques that you can use to engage your students in the learning process. You can tweak these practices to make them more engaging or more personalized for the learner. Even though you can increase levels of engagement in a variety of ways using these instructional practices, it's important to realize that they don't necessarily empower students. That's because you make all the decisions: choosing the technique, grouping the students, identifying the content, and planning the lesson. You are the planner and organizer.

### WEBBING

How can we take a simple strategy such as webbing and make it more engaging? In webbing, the concept or problem at hand is placed in a center circle. Students free-associate related words and place those words in circles arranged around the center circle, then connect them with lines to the center circle. This simple strategy is more engaging when teachers encourage students to connect more than two words. The more ideas generated on the concept web with multiple connections made, the deeper the level of understanding. When creating webs, students work alone, with a partner, or in a small group. Generally, a group web is more engaging than one generated by a single student, because the group web represents multiple perspectives and viewpoints.

### THINK-PAIR-SHARE

How can we make a Think-Pair-Share simple review strategy in which students work with partners more engaging? To begin this strategy, you ask a question. First, the students **think** individually and write down their answers. Then the students **pair** up, and one partner explains their answer to the question to the other partner, who then agrees, disagrees, modifies, or expands the answer. Together the partners synthesize their response to the question. Finally, the partners **share** their response with the whole class. In order to increase engagement, you can vary this strategy. Instead of pairs sharing with the whole class, one member of each pair travels to share with a different student. The traveling partners then return to their home partners with ideas gained from the other students. The home pairs decide whether to maintain or change their original responses.

### VERBAL BRAINSTORMING

Most teachers use verbal brainstorming to get students to generate ideas. This engaging strategy can be more effective when teachers share the following rules of brainstorming with their students: quantity is encouraged, criticism is not allowed, piggybacking is permitted, and wild and zany ideas are welcome. Students who do not like to share ideas orally may prefer written brainstorming, in which students write ideas on a piece of paper and then pass it around for others to add ideas. Written brainstorming can increase engagement for quiet students, who do not have to compete with talkative ones, and allows anonymity and more time for reflection.

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## VOCABULARY STRIPS AND VOCABULARY CARD GAMES

In this strategy, students cut out small pieces of paper about the size of small index cards or use actual index cards or sticky notes. For each vocabulary term, students use six cards, writing one of the following on each:

1. the vocabulary term
2. the definition of the term in their own words
3. a synonym for the term
4. an antonym for the term
5. a symbol that represents the term
6. a sentence that contains the term

Then students connect the cards to make a vertical strip using a long piece of masking tape. Alternatively, these same cards can be turned into a matching game. Instead of creating vocabulary strips, the student arranges all the cards facedown and finds a partner to play the game with. Each player turns over two cards and tries to find a match. For example, the partner chooses a synonym card that has the word *happy* on it, then turns over a vocabulary card that has the word *elated* on it. The two words are a match, so they are removed from play. Then the card-creating student turns over two cards. If the cards match, they are removed; if not, they are turned back over. The game continues until all cards have been matched, and the winner is the student who located the most matches. Both the vocabulary strip activity and the vocabulary card game strategies are engaging. Both include a hands-on element. But the student works alone with the vocabulary strip activity, while the card game is more social.

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Graphic organizers are useful visual tools for all learners. They are particularly effective with English language learners (ELL students) and students who are unable to or do not like to write a lot. Engagement will vary according to the type of organizer. Story-based graphic organizers, which focus on story elements or character development, are simple and familiar. But graphic organizers can also be more sophisticated. In my book *Differentiating with Graphic Organizers: Tools to Foster Critical and Creative Thinking,* I provide and explain cognitive graphic organizers that target higher-level thinking skills. For example, one critical-thinking graphic organizer targets prioritizing, one focuses on judging, and one targets inferring. One creative-thinking graphic organizer focuses on making unlikely connections, and another targets elaboration. In order to increase engagement, instead of using templates, students can write their ideas on sticky notes and move them around to organize their thoughts and give verbal justifications for their prioritization, judgements, or conclusions.

## SIMULATIONS

Simulations can be based on real or imaginary situations or problems. Begin by posing a situation or problem. For example, in a simulation that focuses on a real situation, the teacher gives her students the following scenario: "We know how important it is to eat healthy foods. Your team noticed that cafeteria food is being wasted because students are throwing a lot of it away. In our study of nutrition, what have you learned in our unit that may be information you could use to defend a new menu that you propose to our food services director? Your team is to come up with a menu for a month that includes healthy eating choices and present it to the director. Make sure you can defend your suggestions both nutritionally and financially."

In an imaginary simulation, the teacher sets up a situation where students must use newly acquired content knowledge to solve an imaginary problem. For example, "The town water commissioner has discovered a high level of iron in the town water. Even though the iron level is high, it is still considered borderline normal. But citizens are complaining that the water turns their white clothes a reddish orange color and they cannot get the clothes white again and that their bathtubs have a reddish orange stain that they can't get rid of. People feel uncomfortable drinking the water, so they feel forced to buy bottled water, which is an added expense and is bad for the environment. The town's water commissioner has asked your team for help to solve this problem."

This imaginary simulation tries to mimic authenticity. You might provide background information packets or links on water quality for students to use. The students will need to make many decisions and work together in teams to come up with a solution. Students must decide whether to organize a town hall meeting. Will they need to interview parents or survey opinions? How might the team find out if this water problem is affecting everyone in town or only some people? Students usually take on roles, such as the water commissioner,

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the person who laid the town water lines, the town manager, the town budget person, the water chemical engineer, and so on, when they work on simulations. Student teams then present their solutions to the class. In a simulation, students learn specific content skills tied to standards as well as extended skills such as communication, teamwork, and consensus-building. To make this practice more engaging—even empowering—have your students set up their own simulation and create their own scenario for another team of students to solve.

### TIERED QUESTIONS

You can use the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy to help you created tiered questions. The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, as noted previously, refers to levels of thinking and types of knowledge. Using this taxonomy, create sets of easy, medium, and hard tiered questions. For example, an easy question about a story for a first grader is to retell the story. *Retell* focuses on a low level of thinking. A medium question is to compare and contrast the characters in the story. *Compare* and *contrast* are more challenging than *retell* and direct student thinking to a higher level. A hard question is to find examples in the story that illustrate a specific principle. This question is harder because the content, a specific principle, is a difficult concept. Students work in pairs to answer the questions.

### VISUALIZATION

Let's look at a solitary visualization activity with an engaging application. In a fourth-grade unit on water, the teacher asks the students to close their eyes and imagine they are in a giant city square. Old buildings surround them. People are busily coming and going. Some people are shopping, and some people are tourists wandering around looking at the unfamiliar environment. You notice some people are strolling on walkways over the water, which is shin-high in the city square. The people realize they are very close to the ocean. In fact, all this water *is* the ocean, flooding the low parts of the city. Where in the world is this? When students open their eyes, the teacher asks them to brainstorm locations and listens to hear if anyone comes up with the correct answer: Venice, Italy. Then the teacher asks the students to watch a video (youtube.com/watch?v=Zj2aTj1bXrs) and see whether what they visualized resembles the real thing. The students and teacher talk about the effects of flooding on daily life, costs to the city, erosion, and the future of Venice.

Some engagement practices are more engaging than others. Do some informal action research to assess your instructional practices and determine whether you need to make any changes to increase engagement. Try to predict the effectiveness of your strategies. Be intentional about the strategies you use and the results you expect. The interaction among the strategy, the content, the learners, and how you set up a lesson determines the degree of engagement.

## Degree of Engagement

In the old school paradigm, the teacher gave the students goals and objectives and activities to help students learn the required content. It did not really matter if students were interested in learning the material, because they just did what they were told. They needed to know what they were learning and how to learn it, but educators did not question whether the learning was relevant to students' lives or had personal meaning for them.

At some point in time, the paradigm shifted. Students started to question what they were doing and why they were doing it. Educators became concerned as to whether their students were interested and if students saw relevance in the material. As more and more research showed how students learn best, educators started paying attention to the various ways in which they could reach and teach students.

When John Hattie's work on effect size was released in his 2009 book *Visible Learning*, and research-based strategies became more widely known and consulted, districts started paying attention to degrees of effectiveness. Hattie's work describes the synthesis of fifteen years of research that he spent analyzing eight hundred meta-analysis studies on what influences student achievement. I heard Hattie speak at the 2009 ASCD National conference, where he explained that if we want to know what strategies work—they all do. It's just a matter of how much they work.

For example, Hattie says that providing students with timely, specific feedback yields a greater effect than enrichment does. This does not indicate that enrichment is a waste of time. On the contrary, enrichment is an effective strategy. However, if teachers decide to place more emphasis on providing students with feedback and less time on planning enrichment activities, Hattie's analysis indicates that students will make greater academic gains.

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