Coaching the Shift from Engaging Teaching to Engaged Learners: From Invitation to Investment

A student can feel known, valued, and safe—and still not be intellectually engaged in learning.

In my previous blog, I explored knowing students and building belonging as starting points for engagement. When students experience that they belong, they are more likely to ask questions, reveal uncertainty, take risks, and persist through difficulty. Those conditions matter, but they do not guarantee engagement.

Students may feel comfortable in a classroom while remaining intellectually passive. They may comply with directions, complete assigned work, and appear attentive without investing deeply in thinking. Conversely, a student who is quiet, questioning, or temporarily frustrated may be substantially engaged in making sense of something challenging.

That makes engagement difficult to judge from a general impression that "the lesson went well" or "the students were on task." If engaging teaching creates an invitation, we need to examine how students respond to that invitation. Where do they invest attention and effort? When do they ask questions, contribute ideas, make connections, test possibilities, and persist? Who enters the learning readily, and who remains on the edges?

Coaching can help teachers study the relationship between the invitations they design and the investment students make. That inquiry might focus on three areas: identifying evidence of engagement, designing and testing invitations to learning, and

helping students take increasing ownership of their engagement.

Identifying Evidence of Engagement

In *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work*, Phillip Schlechty cautioned that on-task behavior can easily be confused with engagement. Observation alone cannot reveal how committed a student is, whether the student has persisted through difficulty, or why the student is investing attention and effort. To uncover those dimensions of engagement, we need to talk with students.

A coach can help a teacher gather observable evidence. Who initiates questions or ideas? Who makes connections, tests possibilities, or revises their thinking? Who persists when the path forward becomes uncertain? Who appears busy but remains dependent on examples, procedures, or teacher direction?

Those observations provide useful clues, but they should lead to conversations rather than conclusions. A teacher or coach might ask students:

What were you trying to accomplish?

What part of the work captured your attention?

Where did the work become difficult, and what did you do?

What made the learning worth your effort?

If you could change the task, what would you change and why?

What did you learn that you consider valuable?

The most important question may be, “Why are you investing in this work?” The answer helps distinguish authentic engagement from strategic compliance.

Engagement is not something we can determine solely by looking

at students. We can observe their actions, but we also need to hear how they are experiencing the learning. Coaching can help teachers combine observation with student voice to develop a fuller picture of where engagement is occurring, what is contributing to it, and where a different invitation may be needed.

Designing and Testing Invitations to Learning

Games, technology, collaboration, choice, projects, and hands-on activities are often described as engaging strategies. Yet no strategy is inherently engaging. A group activity may generate substantial thinking for some students while allowing others to withdraw. A game may produce excitement without much cognitive investment.

The important question is not, “Did the teacher use an engaging strategy?” It is, “What invitation did the strategy create, and how did students respond?” Did it invite students to ask questions, make choices, solve a meaningful problem, explain their reasoning, or revise their thinking? Did students understand the purpose and find the challenge worthwhile? Who entered the learning readily, and who remained on the edges? When did students’ investment increase or decline?

The coach and teacher can study which learning behaviors emerged and from which students. The evidence may show that choice increased initial interest but not sustained thinking, or that an authentic audience increased students' attention to quality. Each response provides information that can shape the next invitation.

Designing for engagement is an ongoing process of creating invitations, studying students' responses, and revising accordingly.

Developing Student Ownership of Engagement

As teachers design invitations to learning and support students' engagement, students can learn to recognize their own level of investment, identify what supports or interferes with it, and take action to strengthen it. In my 2024 blog, "Exploring Student Engagement," I referenced Amy Berry's continuum of engagement as a tool for helping students assess their current level of engagement and plan any needed changes in their actions. That process shifts students from being the recipients of a teacher's engagement efforts to becoming active participants in understanding and strengthening their own engagement.

A coach might explore with a teacher:

How do students currently recognize and describe their engagement?

What opportunities do they have to reflect on their attention, effort, curiosity, and persistence?

What do students do when they become confused, distracted, or stuck?

How does the teacher respond when student engagement declines?

Which teacher responses support students in taking greater responsibility, and which may increase their dependence on the

teacher?

The teacher might invite students to reflect:

When was I most invested in today's learning?

What contributed to that investment?

When did my attention or effort decline?

What did I do when I became confused or stuck?

What action could I take to increase my engagement next time?

What change in the learning experience might support me?

A coach can gather evidence that the teacher may find difficult to collect while teaching by observing what students do when they encounter difficulty, listening for how they describe their investment, or interviewing students about the conditions that support their learning. As thinking partners, the teacher and coach can consider how different practices might increase student ownership.

Student ownership does not release teachers from responsibility for creating meaningful invitations to learning. It establishes engagement as a shared responsibility. Teachers design, observe, listen, and adjust. Students respond, reflect, communicate, and increasingly make decisions that support their learning.

The goal is not for teachers to become increasingly skilled at holding students' attention. It is for students to become increasingly skilled at investing their attention, thinking, curiosity, and persistence in learning.

Across these two blogs, the coaching journey moves from knowing students and understanding their experiences to studying their learning behaviors, testing invitations, and building ownership. The coach does not arrive with a ready-

made strategy. The coach and teacher learn together from students.

Engaging teaching creates invitations. Engaged learners invest in those invitations. Coaching helps teachers and students learn from what happens in between.