The Sweet Spot of Engagement Boosts Student Learning

SREB/High Schools That Work recently published an article based on a presentation that I provided at their last conference. **Instructional Strategies Motivate and Engage Students in Deeper Learning** is an 18 page downloadable resource where you'll find the following article and many others.

It is important for teachers to find the "sweet spot" for engaging all students in learning, according to Steve Barkley, executive vice president of PLS 3rd Learning. At the same time, he acknowledges that competition for student engagement has changed over the years. "Many students today enter the classroom from the real world where they engage with electronic gadgetry, sports activities and other events. "Barkley suggests placing emotion and engagement on a continuum that begins with "fear" and ends with "bored." Learning is minimized at both ends of the scale, he said.

"We need to eliminate school and classroom cultures based on fear, where students experience threats, embarrassment and/or violence and where learning is secondary to safety," Barkley said. "However, when students exhibit characteristics of boredom, teachers need to raise the anxiety level by increasing requirements through additional rigor or depth of learning. If students begin to show anxiety, the teacher must reduce that feeling. One way is for students to complete challenging assignments by working together in pairs or groups."

Barkley said the ideal emotional learning spot – the sweet spot – lies between "fear" and "attention." Tutoring pays off because effective tutors hold students in that position. "If tutors see students getting comfortable with learning, they continue," Barkley said. "If they see students getting anxious, they give more practice. "Master teachers monitor constantly to sense when students are moving from the sweet spot of attention to the comfort spot; then they take action to bring students back to the high side of attention. Barkley said teachers must know their students and be skilled at adjusting the pace, assignments and strategies to maximize learning.

Barkley shared five types of engagement as described by author Phil Schlechty:

Engagement – Students are attentive and focused on the task with commitment and persistence; they volunteer personal resources of time, effort and attention.

Strategic Engagement – Students are willing to do the work as long as extrinsic rewards are present. Remove the reward (grades) and students withdraw their effort. Students in this case ask, "Will this be graded?" "How many points?" "Does this count?"

Ritual Compliance – Students want assurance that what they do will pay off in grades and improved chances for college. This scenario generally requires supervision. Producing the work with minimal effort could mean copying work or cheating on an exam.

"Retreatism" – This action manifests lack of compliance in passive ways, such as withdrawing from a task. If challenged, students may move to compliance or rebellion. Teachers often overlook retreatism.

Rebellion – This action focuses attention on something else and often is seen as disruptive.

The five types of engagement can be related on the emotional continuum with engaged learning occurring at the sweet spot.

“Behavioral engagement is when students exhibit on-task behaviors, including persistence with challenging tasks, asking questions and requesting help,” Barkley said. “Intellectual engagement is deep involvement and effort by students to understand a concept or master a skill. Emotional engagement is when students exhibit high interest, a positive attitude, curiosity and task involvement.”

Barkley emphasized that people desire or volunteer to do things because they matter and are interesting. He said the goal of education is to create self-direction in students. “It is essential to design instruction that helps students connect with learning while developing autonomy, mastery and purpose (Daniel Pink),” Barkley said.

In a survey conducted by Vito Perrone, former professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, students reported that they were most engaged intellectually when involved in defining learning content, when they had time to wonder and find a particular direction that interested them and when topics had a “strange” quality – something common viewed in a new way, evoking a question.

How can a teacher who is required to teach standards maintain control and autonomy in the classroom? Barkley suggested teachers need to connect real life to the content being taught to get the emotional engagement that draws students to

learning. He encouraged teachers to find the sweet spot of student engagement to be successful in preparing students for further education and careers.