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Subject: Keeping students cognitively engaged

The Difference Between Compliant and Engaged Students

(Originally titled "4 (Secret) Keys to Student Engagement")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, author/consultants Robyn Jackson and Allison Zmuda draw a distinction between compliant and engaged students. "The compliant, dutiful learner is easy to manage, does what's expected, and participates when there's little risk of being wrong," say Jackson and Zmuda. They follow directions, complete assignments, and get good grades, but their hearts aren't in it.

Engaged students, on the other hand, follow their own train of thought, focus on the learning, and share their thoughts without being prompted, sometimes without consideration of their classmates. "Straightforward questions bore them, but questions that are personally relevant or that require teasing out ambiguity fascinate them," say Jackson and Zmuda. "These learners take risks; they're not afraid to try something new. Engaged learners can be needy. They're often annoyed by interruptions, they question everything, and they'll follow an idea even if it takes them outside the parameters of the assignment."

"Compliance may make for a smoothly run classroom," they continue, "but it doesn't help students expend the effort they need to meet the demands of challenging standards or take what they've learned and apply it to their lives." But how do we get real classroom engagement? Jackson and Zmuda suggest four strategies:

• *Provide clarity*. "When you're in the weeds of daily instruction," they say, "you may lose sight of the larger purpose. It's vital you make sure that every assignment, question, and conversation is connected to a clear learning goal." Ask yourself, what am I asking students to do? How do all these pieces fit together? What's the point of learning this? How can students track their progress over time? Students should ponder big-picture essential questions about the unit. Rather than just having students memorize various energy sources – nuclear, coal, oil, solar, and wind – get them thinking about a bigger question such as, How can the United States become more energy independent? Then give students clear structures to answer the questions you pose.

• *Offer a relevant context*. Jackson and Zmuda describe a teacher's frustration when she introduces a new unit on perimeter and area and students ask, *Why do we need to know this? Why is it so important to be able to do this?* and *Why will we ever need to know this in life?* "Our students need to know that the work they're being asked to do is relevant and important to them – right now," say Jackson and Zmuda, and quote a workshop participant saying, "*Someday* is not a day of the week."

The challenge is to make curriculum relevant, meaningful, and designed for an audience beyond the teacher. "Once they understand area and perimeter," they say, "students have a much greater understanding of space, and they can use what they learn to make all kinds of decisions about space – from installing carpet or a pool, to figuring out how

many books they can reasonably stuff in their lockers, to determining how many props can comfortably fit on the stage for the spring play."

• *Create a supportive classroom culture*. Students get discouraged and disengaged when their work is criticized and given low grades. Can students access the material, understand the discussion, and meet the challenges you're giving them? Have likely misconceptions been anticipated, have students been introduced to difficult vocabulary, is there a scaffold for handling new concepts, and is individual support available to help them revise their work when it isn't up to par?

• *Provide an appropriate level of challenge*. Students may be able to complete assignments that can be easily Googled or "Khanified", but they don't respect them and there's little value-added. "We have to train them for the world they'll inherit," say Jackson and Zmuda, "and in that world it's unlikely that employers will pay them to solve a non-problem." Teachers need to give assignments that ask students to frame ideas, questions, or predictions; to figure out a real problem; and to risk failure to get to the final product. "Offer experiences that enable them to play with ideas; solve complex, real-world problems; and dig deeper" – for example, interviewing a personal hero, figuring out a way to cover themselves so they won't get poison ivy next summer, and designing headphones that won't cause long-term hearing problems.

"4 (Secret) Keys to Student Engagement" by Robyn Jackson and Allison Zmuda in *Educational Leadership*, September 2014 (Vol. 72, #1, p. 18-24), http://bit.ly/YMbriS; the authors can be reached at rjackson@mindstepsinc.com and zmuda@competentclassroom.com.

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