Springing into Active Learning

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Students need to understand that learning isn't neat: It can be messy, unpredictable, and full of exhilarating challenges.

One of the most significant and persistent barriers to student achievement resides in the collective mind-set of the very students we teach. Too many students have become compliant workers who simply follow directions and finish the necessary paperwork on time. They function like low-level bureaucrats—they complete each allocated task to make space for an endless litany of new tasks until the day they quit or get promoted.

Educators must reevaluate the degree to which compliance has affected every aspect of the learning environment, including the use of established classroom assessments and grading systems to identify success. Many A students have earned high marks primarily because of their meticulousness in following directions, their knack for repeating procedures on cue, and their ability to expertly summarize other people's ideas.

Compliant Versus Engaged

The difference between compliant and engaged learners surfaces in a range of school activities. In classroom discussions, compliant learners typically restrict themselves to answering the question the teacher asked, whereas engaged learners tend to raise additional questions, delve more deeply into thinking, or offer another point of view When researching an issue, compliant learners often look for simple answers to complex questions, whereas engaged learners not only search for additional context about the topic to determine an appropriate focus for the research but also continually evaluate the validity of the sources they consult.

When revising written work, compliant learners typically fix identified errors, whereas engaged learners tend to evaluate feedback about their paper's strengths and weaknesses before making a decision about what to revise. In reading assignments, compliant learners tend to read what the teacher expects them to read during the given time frame and complete the accompanying task; engaged readers tend to read the text for both content knowledge and connections, not only to complete the specified task, but also to make sense of what they've read.

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Beyond Bad Karaoke

For students to move beyond lip-syncing someone else's words, ideas, and solutions, they need the opportunity to struggle with a task that inspires their performance, that motivates them to do more than just go through the motions of learning and truly understand what the discipline requires. Just because students write a thousand paragraphs in middle school does not mean they are becoming writers or can even articulate what a paragraph is. Just because they conduct dozens of investigations in biology and chemistry does not mean they are thinking and working like scientists. Just because they are locating information online and in print does not mean they are researching and evaluating information.

In fact, the more educators focus instructional time on a prioritized set of discrete skills and tasks in isolation, the more compliant students become. Their only challenge is to remember the procedure, strategy, formula, or facts until the classroom assessment, state assessment, or advanced placement test.

The more schools require students to merely remember, the more bored students become. This boredom depresses their performance, which typically causes teachers to further sanitize classroom assignments with more structures, scaffolds, and cues—which, unsurprisingly, creates more boredom. The cycle continues as high school English teachers question why students don't know how to write a decent paragraph and as math teachers wonder why students still don't understand fractions.

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Problematic Beliefs

We can break the cycle of compliance by rooting out common misunderstandings that many students have about learning and about whether or not they are good at it. These beliefs, which intensify throughout the school years, can be highly detrimental to student achievement.

Belief 1: The rules of a classroom and a content area are based on what the teacher wants.
Students who hold this belief see classroom rules, protocols, scoring tools, and performance expectations as driven by the teacher's personal choice about how to structure the learning environment. This is profoundly different from seeing them as expectations driven by a specific discipline—what professionals in the field do to

create, develop, and analyze ideas and information; produce quality work; and communicate effectively with others.

Belief 2: What the teacher wants me to say is more important than what I want to say.
Students who adopt this way of thinking become more blunt about it as they move through school. They might ask the teacher, What do you think a good color choice would be? What do you see when you look at the data? What do you think is important to remember here? Students come to believe that if they can figure out what the teacher wants, likes, and thinks, they will succeed in the class. They have given up on their own points of view, ideas, creative impulses, and problem-solving approaches as unworthy of pursuit.

Belief 3: The point of an assignment is to get it done.
Students who believe this typically feel as though they are drowning in work—there are always more problems, more readings, and more tasks to complete. They become stressed out, not only because they feel overwhelmed by time pressures, but also because they are insecure about the quality of their work.

Belief 4: Once an assignment is finished, it's off the to-do list.
Students who adopt this way of thinking do not welcome the opportunity to revise their work. They often become unhappy when a teacher asks them to reexamine what they have produced. Typically, they only work to fix identified weaknesses or errors, especially those that are straightforward or easy to repair.

Belief 5: If I make a mistake, my job is to replace it with the right answer.
Students who think this way routinely erase incorrect answers during class work or homework reviews, replacing them with the correct answers. Students don't attempt to learn what went wrong in the original attempt or to confirm whether, in fact, the response was even incorrect in the first place.

Belief 6: I feel proud of my work only if I receive a good grade.
Students who hold this belief always go right to the grade as the only valid source for feedback. Students are reluctant to perform tasks that the teacher isn't grading. "Why should I," they think, "if it doesn't really count?" Often, they just glance at the comments that accompany the grade or score—if they read them at all—even though this explicit feedback is not only the most time-consuming for teachers to communicate but also the most powerful in improving student performance on similar tasks.

Belief 7: Speed is synonymous with intelligence.
Students who hold this assumption watch other students finish first and become envious. "Why can't I be finished already, too?" they wonder. Often these students

either try to work at a pace that is unnatural for them—too quickly to focus on the details, nuances, development, and mechanics of the task—or they work at their own pace but berate themselves for being slow and stupid.

Belief 8: Once I get too far behind, I can never catch up.
Students who believe this assume that teachers and other students label them: He's one of the slow ones; she tries hard but doesn't really get it; he's just not that smart. They also believe that teachers sort, group, and schedule them differently. They think that teachers are giving them easier work, which only widens the gap between them and their peers. Pretty soon they expect to be in classes with different students altogether—the other ones who dropped back from the pack.

Belief 9: What I'm learning in school doesn't have much to do with my life—but it isn't supposed to—it's school.
Students who think this way have resigned themselves to the fact that school is boring. School is what happens in between more meaningful learning experiences, such as communicating with friends, researching topics of personal interest, and learning how to solve authentic problems.

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Embracing the Struggle

If students believe that school is boring, that they are stupid, that it shouldn't feel this hard, and that it has no connection to the real world, then they will regard every assignment, no matter how standards-based or authentic the task, as little more than busywork. Educators need to help students realize that these detrimental beliefs are not facts—they are simply thoughts that have become reinforced over time.

Students can adopt more nourishing thinking that will inspire their work. Instead of focusing on the grade or score, they can focus on their progress. Instead of focusing on getting the assignment over with, they can find satisfaction during the creation and production of work. Instead of trying to eliminate or cover up mistakes, they can evaluate the source of the error and search for a potential insight about their understanding—or their misunderstanding—of the content, the discipline, or themselves.

Students need to learn to embrace struggle as a necessary part of growth. This lesson is crucial, not only for developing resiliency, but also for honing creativity, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship. One of the best ways to model high

engagement during times of significant struggle—when students agonize to improve, to understand the problem, to break through existing barriers—is to share the insights of famous people from different time periods and fields who struggled with learning within their respective domains.

The amount of failure is staggering. Thomas Edison, for example, invented the light bulb on the 2001st try. And to think that so many of our students give up after the first or second time! Edison was a great promoter of the value of effort. "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration," he said. "As a result, a genius is often a talented person who has simply done all of his homework."

Students would also find solace in hearing what basketball great Michael Jordan had to say about failure and success:

> I've missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot—and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

Becoming stronger, smarter, more sophisticated, more efficient, and more expressive all require taking on challenges that do not follow predictable paths to a predetermined right answer. Share with students Isaac Asimov's thoughts on the lack of predictability in learning: "The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not Eureka, but That's funny…."

Or introduce students to the encouraging words of Linus Pauling, who wrote, "The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas."

Our discomfort with failure will never go away entirely. But as Vinod Kosla, the cofounder of Sun Microsystems, pointed out about the stresses of problem solving in the business world, "No one will pay you to solve a non-problem." By accepting the inevitability of failure—and the role it plays in ultimate success—students can move from simply going through the motions of a task to becoming fully engaged learners.

The Compliance-Free Curriculum

To assess how compliance has influenced your classroom practice, consider the following questions:

- ***To what extent do the classroom rules encourage the "neatness" of compliant behavior instead of the inherent messiness of engagement?*** When classroom rules allow for the messiness of engagement, discussions are no longer exclusively focused on what the teacher thinks.

  Students become more interested in what their classmates think. The discussions may become louder and students may grow more frustrated, but the quality of the information and ideas the students are trying to convey and their use of technical vocabulary, evidence, and supporting details will likely improve.

- ***To what extent do scoring tools overreward students for packaging their work and underreward the quality of thinking?*** It is crucial to scrutinize all scoring tools to ensure the appropriate balance among quality of thought or approach, quality of process, and quality of presentation. The design of scoring tools can overcompensate students for the presentation phase of the work—the mechanics, neatness, and organization—and minimize the importance of the thinking that motivated the work.

- ***To what extent do school staff members "save" students from having to struggle?*** Every student, regardless of past performance, must struggle to learn. Students construct knowledge and create meaning as they actively work to make sense of the discrete parts of a problem. This struggle to "connect the dots" creates true fluency within a discipline as students learn to handle increasingly complex tasks. In an effort to make the work more doable, teachers should not strip the task of the hard parts, leaving students only with the follow-through—for example, teaching them to write a letter that has become a pat formula, teaching them to solve a word problem by identifying all the important information for them, or teaching them to use a database by telling them how to enter the search terms.

The frenetic attempts to cover the curriculum have prevented teachers from giving students ample time to figure things out for themselves.

- ***To what extent do students revise work?*** Revision doesn't happen as often as it should because of mutual reluctance: Students often are unwilling to dig below the surface of their original work without significant guidance from the teacher about what is wrong, and teachers are hesitant about putting substantial amounts of time into scoring the work again because they are not convinced that students will actually use the feedback to improve. The revision process will be more successful if you clarify what quality looks like, as established by the scoring tool and models of student work, and discuss the work with students before they revise it. This will ensure that their efforts will address key weaknesses as opposed to cosmetic changes only.

- ***To what extent has the pace of the curriculum compromised the opportunity to go more deeply into the discipline?*** The frenetic attempts to cover the curriculum have prevented teachers from giving students ample time to figure things out for themselves. Students will ask tangential questions, wonder about things that have no space in the curriculum, pursue avenues that are dead

ends, and spin their wheels with no apparent breakthrough in sight. Although it may seem difficult to slow down the increasingly aggressive pace of instruction, giving students time to learn in this way will pay off in the end. When students have meaningful opportunities to understand, they are more likely to wisely use that knowledge in future tasks and situations.

The Authentic Learning Environment

Educators need to reflect on questions like these with one another and with students. When these conversations happen frequently enough, the definition of what learning looks like, sounds like, and feels like will begin to shift. Students will grow more accepting of not getting it right the first time, of feeling frustrated, of being on a roller-coaster, of wanting to give up. But they will also learn that a breakthrough can be right around the corner, that the right words are on the tip of their tongue, that the connections they are hunting for are right before their eyes. Such faith in one's capacity creates the joy, tolerance, and fascination that forge engaged learning environments that embrace the unexpected.

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