Chapter 10
Reflections on Engaging Students as Learners

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Abstract A central concern of teaching is creating situations which will engage students, motivating them to learn. My own teaching background has largely been in adult and higher education, where this tends to have the fewest problems, since at least the students have made their own choices to undertake their studies, but this does not mean that their teachers should not help them find good reasons to happily engage in these studies. The five student chapters in this section focus on the more difficult task of engaging students in compulsory schooling, looking at the relative advantages of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the importance of positive teacher–student relationships, the pros and cons of allowing music in classes, and ways of promoting student engagement in language learning.

The old saw says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Similarly, you may be able to force kids to attend school, but there's no way you can really force them to imbibe the intended learnings there. (I don't think that even thumbscrews would work.) The best you can do is to create situations that encourage them to want to learn. Arguably this is what teaching is all about, since even the way content is presented to students can encourage or discourage learning.

There is thus a vast literature on getting and keeping students engaged, focused, motivated, or on task, various expressions used to talk about much the same thing. Since this is such a key aspect of teaching, it is actually dealt with in a number of chapters in the present volume, whether more obviously or indirectly. Some of the more obvious contributions in other sections include Linda Hamilton's paper in the preceding section (Chap. 5) and Laura Checkley's paper in the following one (Chap. 21). The present section includes five student contributions on this issue, but before introducing them perhaps I should make my own background and views on the matter clear.

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Where I Am Coming From

My lifetime experiences have led me to believe that the extent to which engaging or motivating learners is likely to become an issue depends firstly on just why the learners are undertaking their study. The pre-service teachers that have contributed to this volume have a particularly difficult task because their students did not themselves choose to undertake their schooling, but rather they are there because it is required by law and often also their own parents.

Even before I ever taught anything myself, thanks to a teacher wife I became familiar with early books by Holt (1964, 1967), who took the position that children have a natural curiosity that drives them to learn, but that compulsory education tends to destroy this as it dictates just what things are supposed to be learned in just what ways. The work of Holt and others fostered a movement toward "deschooling society," which took the position that "Universal education through schooling is [simply] not feasible" (Illich 1971, p. xix).

While I'm not sure I would take the same position, certainly I remain convinced that compulsory education is problematic because children will vary in the extent to which they can be induced to be interested in what adult authorities believe they should be learning. As a specialist in language education, I've seen the same problem with the notion of "scaffolding," which has been justified in terms of how caregivers help children accomplish things they want to do, and yet in educational settings has been more concerned with getting the kids to accomplish things that their teachers want them to do (Searle 1984).

What to do instead? The extreme option on the other end was pointed out to me some years later by a friend who was a specialist in adult education, Kevin Diflo (personal communication). Citing Knowles (e.g., 1984), Kevin noted that when adults wanted to learn about something, or learn to do something, ideally they would be able to undertake study on it just to the point where they felt they had learned what they wanted to, with no need of any sort of award or certification, since the knowledge itself was what they desired.

This reminds me of an educational movement I was aware of while living in New Haven, in the eastern USA, in about 1970. Across the street from Yale University was a storefront in which people advertised free courses that they would like to take or teach: It was just a matter of putting those interested in the learning in touch with those who were happy to teach them. I'm not sure how well that particular venture actually worked, but in more recent years my current wife and I have written about the advantages of nonaward programs, that learners can use to whatever extent they see fit (Chen and Black 2014).

In view of what my friend Kevin told me, it could perhaps seem that teachers in such nonaward programs need not worry about engaging their students at all; their students will take what they want from the teaching. In practice, however, the latter might only apply to disciples who cling to some particular guru because he or she has something so special to offer them that they would pursue him or her to a mountain top to take in any droplets of knowledge, regardless of how the guru might treat them.

Otherwise, even in situations where learners are seeking instruction for its own sake, they will naturally be attracted to those teachers that are best prepared to help them learn, especially in enjoyable and insightful ways, and thus to that extent, those teachers had still best know something about how to engage students in learning.

In my own teaching career, I have largely been fortunate in being able to avoid compulsory education. The closest I came to it was in 1972–73, when I taught English to secondary school students in the private Commercial School in Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia. The parents of these students chose to place the students in this school, but that may not have meant that the students themselves were actually happy to be there.

At this time, by the way, I certainly could not claim to be a reflective teacher. I was then a linguist with no qualifications in education at all, and while I hoped the students were learning, I basically followed a set curriculum and textbooks as best I could. Where I learned to reflect on my teaching, and what I might mean by that, was under rather unusual circumstances, which makes me believe that there must be a variety of paths to becoming sensitive to the things one does as a teacher and how they affect one's students. As a linguist, I was employed from 1981 to 1989 in an innovative program designed to educate Indigenous literacy workers and translators and interpreters (see Black and Breen 2001). This involved helping Indigenous adults who had rarely gone beyond primary schooling to learn to write and compose in their first languages and master basic linguistic understandings relevant to their work.

This was not a program that normal teacher education programs can prepare anyone to teach, and in fact staff tended to feel that having a teaching qualification could be more of a hindrance than a help. Instead, I needed to pay close attention to what I was doing to make sure I was making literacy and linguistic principles accessible to these students and that they were actually learning. My colleagues and I had to develop approaches for such things as teaching students how to write well in languages that we ourselves did not control, which led us naturally into student-centered approaches with peer support. I also had to reflect on the many surprises I encountered, such as when I told my students that a suffix came at the end of a word, and they asked me, "Which end?" They were used to thinking of things like sticks as having two ends, unlike mainstream students who had come to think of words as having beginnings and ends.

In this program, all of my students had at least made their own decision to undertake their studies, but of course this did not mean that they would automatically find their classes motivating: I still had to concern myself with issues of how best to engage students. I also developed the notion that my job was to ensure that all my students would master the learnings required to pass their courses as long as they cared to. I tried to keep assessment formative as long as I could, rather than using it to simply divide students into those who passed and those who failed.

However effectively I could apply these beliefs, I carried them with me when I subsequently moved on to university teaching, for which in 1997 I finally obtained something of a teaching qualification, namely a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. In general, my solution for engaging students was to attempt to make the desired learnings as accessible and enjoyable as I could, hopefully tapping their

natural curiosity. At the same time, I gained an appreciation of how difficult this can be; indeed, one of my research students later found that exactly the same activity can be motivating in one set of circumstances and less so in another (Kawano 2008, pp. 95–96).

I thus had little experience in trying to teach students who had no interest at all in the study they were subjected to, as one may often find in primary and secondary schools, and I wonder how I would be able to proceed under such a circumstance. In the present section, McNeilly's and Ifould's chapters suggest that building positive personal relationships could be helpful, and this reminds me of how building such relationships helped Kohl (1967) transform a difficult Year 6 class in a depressed area of New York City. However, I can't say I myself am particularly good with developing personal relationships in a classroom context.

Student Contributions on Engaging Students in Learning

In the present section, **Brodie Curtis** is concerned with the issue of whether intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is more effective for promoting learning. I think he takes a nicely balanced approach, which does not exclude a role for extrinsic motivation even though he himself recalls "being most motivated when the learning was on a topic of interest to me." This is certainly also how I feel from my own personal experiences, and I also especially appreciate his belief that "the ultimate goal is for students to be self-motivated to become life-long, autonomous learners who are intrinsically motivated to achieve."

Thinking about this further, I'm sure I've achieved that goal myself, and yet I can still see an occasional role for extrinsic motivation in my own learning. Sometimes that may involve a tiresome and repetitive task that is not particularly interesting in itself, but which is needed to make progress, such as working through dozens of Web sites to locate useful information and references. In such a case, I may want to sustain myself by taking a break for coffee or whatever as a reward for reaching particular stages in the process.

At the same time, while both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may play a role in learning, according to Ramsden (1992, p. 66) they promote different types of learning. He stressed the importance of extrinsic motivation for "deep" learning, a thorough understanding of key concepts, while a failure to perceive relevance may at best result in "surface" (or superficial) learning.

Leah McNeilly's chapter on "The Role of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships" is in part based on her own experience. Having been encouraged to start with by taking a "tough teacher" stance with her classes, she found this didn't work very well in her placement with a Year 11 business studies class. She did much better as she allowed herself to show her friendly side by chatting with students and treating them in ways that showed care and respect for them as people. Their challenging behaviors then lessened and they became more engaged in the lessons.

Leah also tells how another beginning teacher was having difficulty with one particularly troublesome student, but began to do much better after he made a conscious effort to improve his interactions with him. This ranged from simply saying hello to him in the school yard and asking him how his weekend was to getting to know about the activities he liked and disliked, which this teacher then used to better tailor tasks to suit this student's needs.

This paper drove me into looking into the literature on teacher–student relationships. One thing I found was a widely quoted axiom that "Students [or people or clients etc.] don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," a quote that in slightly different wording is often attributed US President Theodore Roosevelt and subsequently the American author John C. Maxwell (e.g., Andrew 2015). While Ford (2017) goes so far as to maintain that "Student–teacher relationships are everything," I myself wouldn't go so far as to say "everything"—I think that a teacher must also have the ability to expose their students to useful learnings in useful ways.

This also reminds me of the stress that authorities like Harris (1980) and Christie (1985) placed on the importance of student–teacher relationships in Indigenous education. I was bothered by this at the time, not because I thought it was untrue, but rather because I believed it was important for non-Indigenous students as well. Perhaps it's a matter of degree?

Kirsten Ifould's chapter is similarly concerned with the importance of meaningful relationships in connection with music education, if with some differences. She moved from believing that it was generally beneficial to include music programs in schools to a realization that it depended heavily on the teachers. While her son had suffered two highly negative music teachers, who "spent a lot of time yelling," expecting "students of all ages to perform like veteran musicians," she found herself awestruck by a music program at a particular primary school that managed to happily meld about fifty students into a quality band with minimal direction. Kirsten attributed this to how the teacher worked closely with the students as fellow musicians, rather than as mere students over whom he has authority.

The chapter by **Caitlin Taylor** also relates to music, but in a different way, by exploring the question of whether students listening to music in class interfere with their ability to be mindful learners. While Caitlin doesn't actually explain what she means by that, I suppose she is thinking of such work as that of Langer, who defined mindfulness as "a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context," rather than acting "like automatons … according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present" (Langer 2000, p. 220; see also Langer 2016).

In any case, Caitlin initially had no reservations about students listening to personal music devices during her classes, but she had second thoughts when she found this interfering with their creativity, efficiency, and especially their ability to communicate with peers and teachers. While appreciating how listening to music can help students block out "white noise" and thus concentrate better, she ends up suggesting that schools should have guidelines for when this is and is not appropriate.

To me this seems a healthy and useful reaction against a tendency for classrooms to having rigid "all or nothing" rules, rather than ones that can vary with the situation. Certainly, there are places for music in the classroom. As a child I grew up in the early days of television, and I found that leaving the television on while I was studying helped me focus, even though I paid no attention to it. As an adult educator, I also learned how music can play useful roles in the classroom, such as the use of baroque music (and yoga breathing) for both relaxation and to support language learning in Suggestopedia approach of Georgi Lozanov; I especially appreciated Stevick's (1980) account of this approach. At the same time, certain music and other sounds can detract from people hearing what each other are saying, and that can also be important in the classroom.

Zerina Hadziabdic's chapter on language learning is close to my heart, since the learning and teaching of languages has always been of great interest to me. Like her I too am often "disheartened to learn that the traditional language learning instruction is still implemented in the twenty first century," and I'm not surprised if students find this off putting. I heartily agree with her suggestion that "language learners are social beings who acquire language in social contexts."

One of the things that Zerina is particularly concerned with is helping students see reasons for studying languages. I myself think this is vital for any sort of study: If students can't see a reason for it, why would they want to pursue it? This is also in accord with how Ramsden (1992, p. 66) maintained that a failure to perceive relevance at best results in "surface" learning. However, I don't think that means the reasons for study must be instrumental: I think many students are like me in being fascinated by the odd workings of other languages, which ultimately add up to alternative universes of reality. In such cases, the trick is not to kill such interest with lessons that are pure drudgery.

Zerina's other concern is with the use of technology in language learning. Because of my age (74 this year) this may have struck me differently from how younger people might see it. Perhaps more than in other subjects, technology has long played a major role in at least some language learning classes, with the use of language laboratories (for taped language lessons) being common even in the 1960s. Accordingly I don't see the mere use of technology as any sort of panacea; instead, its value depends on how appropriately and effectively it is used, a matter on which I've expressed some views (Black and Goebel 2001). My wife is quite a capable teacher of Chinese, I believe, and yet for her, technology is just one element that helps her create effective programs.

Conclusion

For me, reading these student chapters has been an interesting and rewarding experience. On the one hand, I find it interesting to see the students coming to grips with some of the same issues I faced at times in my own career. On the other, the papers by McNeilly and Ifould especially make me wonder if I might have done better in

building personal relationships with students in my classes. I seem to manage this reasonably well in one-to-one relationships, as when I supervise research students, but how to do this with students in an entire class, or at least those students who seem to be having the most difficulty in a class?

In recent years, my university classes were often online, and from periodic assessments I became aware of various students who were not doing well, and sometimes not keeping up with their work at all. Sometimes I did try to contact such students to find out what difficulties they were having, but I seldom seemed to be able to help them. I wonder if I could have done better. In any case, I hope you also find these student chapters as interesting and rewarding as I did.

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