Chapter 1

What Does Student Engagement Mean?

Most of us chose our field of scholarly endeavor because somewhere along the line we developed a passion for it. Part of the attraction of a career in academia is the opportunity to share our enthusiasm with others and possibly even recruit new disciples to the discipline. It is therefore very disheartening to look out into a classroom and see disengaged students who make little effort to hide their apathy. They stare at us vacantly or perhaps even hostilely when we attempt to pull them into class discussion, and then bolt for the door like freed prisoners the moment it seems safe to do so. Equally distressing are students who are obsessively focused on their grade but seem to care little about the learning the grades are supposed to represent. Why do some students bother to register for the course if they are not interested in learning what we are teaching? Why do some students go to such great efforts to cheat when they’d learn so much if they invested even half the effort in studying? Why is it sometimes so hard to get students to think . . . to care . . . to engage? These and similarly troubling questions are part of a national—even international—dialogue on student engagement.

The elements of the dialogue vary, largely because higher education today is astonishingly diverse. Although attention on student engagement at the moment seems to be focused on classes with hundreds of students, engagement can also be a challenge in courses with an average class size of twelve. While some teachers are looking for ways to challenge their students’ higher-order thinking, others struggle to get students to show up—and then to take the earbuds out of their ears so that they can focus sufficiently to develop basic academic success skills. Today, teachers must find ways to engage students not only in traditional face-to-face courses but also in courses taught partially or wholly online.
The unifying thread is “engagement,” but what is “student engagement”? Well, the answer is that it means different things to different people. Bowen, in an article appropriately titled “Engaged Learning: Are We All on the Same Page?” (2005), observes that—despite the number of recent vision statements, strategic plans, learning outcomes, and agendas of national reform movements that strive to create engaged learning and engaged learners—“an explicit consensus about what we actually mean by engagement or why it is important is lacking” (p. 3). My purpose in Part One is to construct a conceptual framework for understanding student engagement by first exploring the background of the phrase and then proposing a teaching-based model for what it means within the context of a college classroom.

Background

One of the earliest pairings of the term engagement with learning occurs in Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) treatise on the impact of college on students: “Perhaps the strongest conclusion that can be made is the least surprising. Simply put, the greater the student’s involvement or engagement in academic work or in the academic experience of college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive development.” A decade later, Russ Edgerton, in his influential Higher Education White Paper (1997, p. 32), pointed to the need for students to “engage in the tasks” that discipline specialists perform in order to really understand the concepts of the discipline. In this same paper, Edgerton coined the phrase pedagogies of engagement: “Learning ‘about things’ does not enable students to acquire the abilities and understanding they will need for the twenty-first century. We need new pedagogies of engagement that will turn out the kinds of resourceful, engaged workers and citizens that America now requires” (p. 38). Building on Edgerton’s and others’ work, Shulman (2002) placed engagement at the foundation of his learning taxonomy: “Learning begins with student engagement” (p. 37).

The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and associated efforts such as the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) aim to measure student engagement. They define engagement as the frequency with which students participate in activities that represent effective educational practices, and conceive of it as a pattern of involvement in a variety of activities and interactions both in and out of the classroom and throughout a student’s college career. “Student engagement has two key components,” explains NSSE’s associate director, Jillian Kinzie (personal
communication, 2008). “[T]he first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities.”

All of these usages of the term engagement work well when one is looking at general trends at the national and institutional level, but they aren’t very helpful to college teachers who are trying to engage students on a daily basis “in the trenches.” Many books and articles have been written on student engagement, and the discussions are rich and complex. Our understanding of student engagement continues to evolve and deepen as the dialogue continues. My purpose here is to contribute to this conversation by offering a closer look at what constitutes student engagement within the context of a single college class.

**Toward a Classroom-Based Model for Understanding Student Engagement**

College teachers tend to describe student engagement in one of two ways. The first is with statements like “Engaged students really care about what they’re learning; they want to learn” or “When students are engaged, they exceed expectations and go beyond what is required” or “The words that describe student engagement to me are passion and excitement” (Barkley, 2009). These phrases reflect a view of engagement rooted in motivation. The etymological roots of the word engagement offer clues to this perspective. “Engage” comes from Middle English and its multiple meanings include pledging one’s life and honor and charming or fascinating someone so that he or she becomes an ally. Both meanings resonate with teachers’ motivation-based view of student engagement: we want students to share our enthusiasm for our academic discipline and find our courses so compelling that they willingly, in fact enthusiastically, devote their hearts and minds to the learning process.

The second way many college teachers describe student engagement is with statements like “Engaged students are trying to make meaning of what they are learning” or “Engaged students are involved in the academic task at hand and are using higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing information or solving problems” (Barkley, 2009). These teachers are relating engagement to active learning. They recognize that learning is a dynamic process that consists of making sense and meaning out of new information by connecting it to what is already known. Bonwell and Eison (1991) neatly
define active learning as “doing what we think and thinking about what we are doing.” Edgerton (1997) observes that “to really understand an idea . . . a student must be able to carry out a variety of performances involving the idea. . . . Students know about chemistry by reading and listening to lectures, but to really understand chemistry, students need to engage in the tasks that chemists perform.” He adds that some teaching approaches (such as problem-based learning, collaborative learning, and undergraduate research) are “pedagogies of engagement” because they require students to be actively learning as they “do” the tasks of the discipline (p. 32). Bowen (2005) points out that the NSSE, “which assesses the extent to which these pedagogies are used, has become one de facto operational definition of engagement” (p. 4).

Whether teachers think primarily of the motivational or active learning elements of student engagement, they are quick to point out that both are required. A classroom filled with enthusiastic, motivated students is great, but it is educationally meaningless if the enthusiasm does not result in learning. Conversely, students who are actively learning but doing so reluctantly and resentfully are not engaged. Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing. It does not result from one or the other alone, but rather is generated in the space that resides in the overlap of motivation and active learning, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

While combined motivation and active learning promote basic student engagement, some teachers are pushing for more: they want students to be truly transformed by their educational experiences. Although any learning, by definition, results in some level of change, transformative learning is deep

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**FIGURE 1.1.**

**Venn Diagram Model of Student Engagement**

![Venn Diagram](image-url)
and thorough change. Cranton (2006) defines \textit{transformative learning} as “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified” (p. vi). It requires learners “to examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and able to change,” and it can be “provoked by a single event . . . or it can take place gradually and cumulatively over time” (p. 36).

Transformative learning occurs when students are challenged intensely, creating the kind of growth described by Perry’s upper levels of intellectual and ethical development (“Perry model,” n.d.). In Perry’s observations, most freshmen enter college as dualists, believing that there are clear, objective, right-or-wrong answers. One of the goals of a college education is to help students move beyond dualistic thinking to more complex stages as they learn to deal with uncertainty and relativism. As experiences challenge their thinking, students begin to see that truth is contextual and relative, and since there is not a single correct answer, everyone has a right to his or her own opinion. Eventually students recognize that there may be multiple answers to a question but not all answers are equal, and specific criteria such as empirical evidence and logical consistency can help them evaluate the usefulness and validity of knowledge claims.

In Perry’s fourth and final stage, students come to recognize that they must make individual choices that require both objective analysis \textit{and} personal values (Perry, 1998). As students’ thinking matures to this level of sophistication, it is truly transformative. Interestingly, Bowen (2005) observes that students often resist teachers’ attempts to promote transformative learning precisely because it “necessarily threatens the student’s current identity and world view” and cites a study by Trosset at an elite liberal arts college that revealed that the majority of students did not want to participate in a discussion until they felt well prepared to defend their already firmly held views (Bowen, 2005). Some teachers consider transformative learning to be an element of engaged learning, but it may not be so much a required element as much as the result of sustained engagement or engagement that has achieved a higher level of personal intensity.

Motivation and active learning work together synergistically, and as they interact, they contribute incrementally to increase engagement. Rather than a Venn diagram where engagement is the overlap of active learning and motivation, thereby limiting the influence of each, engagement may be better described as a double helix in which active learning and motivation are spirals working together synergistically, building in intensity, and creating a fluid and dynamic phenomenon that is greater than the sum of their individual effects. (See Figure 1.2.)
Thus engagement occurs on a continuum: it starts at the intersection of motivation and active learning, but these two work synergistically and build in intensity. At the far end of the continuum are the transformative, peak experiences that constitute the treasured milestones of an education. As attractive and appealing as these experiences are, they are not sustainable on a constant basis—they’d be too exhausting. As college teachers, we can strive to increase experiences of deep engagement, reduce the incidence of indifference and apathy that characterize lack of engagement, and attend to the many ways we can adapt our teaching methods to enhance engaged learning throughout the range in between.

Within the context of a college classroom, I propose this definition: Student engagement is a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning. Understanding basic principles drawn from the research and theory on motivation and active learning can offer insights into how to promote student engagement. Let us therefore begin by exploring the first element in our double helix model: student motivation.