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Education 350

Professor Mason

<center>Ethnography: Key Factors to Student Engagement</center>

When you think back to when you were in Middle School sitting at a desk facing the teacher, you might think about how much time you spent actually listening to what the teacher had to say. Many middle school students are preoccupied with their own dramatic lives, struggling to search for an identity. In conversation many of my friends bring up the few things they remember from their younger years in school. Some memories that come to mind are songs to remember the Spanish irregular verbs, a project they created, or a reenactment of the Civil War. Teachers might say these are not the "traditional" way to teach information to students and maybe not even the most productive. However, my friends learned this information almost ten years ago and these are the examples stuck in their mind.

All teachers have their opinions on how to keep students engaged in the classroom; however, in most classrooms around the country students seem disengaged and not enthralled with school. After observing in a classroom for a few months I became interested in the concept of student engagement. More specifically, I wondered what the key factors that lead to student engagement were. After spending many hours in an 8th grade Math classroom I focused my observations on the question: Is the use of instructional variety and the use of active participation factors in what lead to enhanced student engaged learning time?

As I stated previously my observations took place in an 8th grade Math classroom, which was taught by a female teacher whom I will refer to as MK. I did all my observations in the

same classroom, which was MK's only room. Her desk was situated in the front of the room off to the left facing the neatly aligned 30 student desks that pointed towards the whiteboards placed in the front of the classroom. The light yellow walls were scattered with a few posters with inspirational words such as "Responsibility, Effort, Respect, and Honesty" (Winters, Journal 1). There were also posters that had different math shapes with perimeter and area formulas. The technology in the classroom consisted of a SmartBoard that was hooked up to a projector that hung from the ceiling. The SmartBoard was placed on top of the two whiteboards so that only half of each whiteboard was showing. On these halves is where the homework was posted for Algebra and Pre-Algebra. The students placed their homework in folders that were labeled by letter that sat on the ledge of the chalkboard on the right side of the room. Windows with closed shades covered the left wall of the classroom. Behind the students' desks were textbooks, filing cabinets, and other miscellaneous objects. I sat in the back right of the classroom facing the teacher as if I were one of the students. My desk was the home to the hand sanitizer, pencil sharpener, and tissues, which students came up often to grab. For a visual representation of the classroom see Figure 1.

I observed in the mornings when MK taught two periods of Pre-Algebra, had one prep period, and then taught a period of Algebra all before 10:45am. All classes were 39 minutes long and before their first period the students have home room. MK's home room was also her first period Pre-Algebra class. There were about 13 students in the class, 3 of the students needed resource room help. In the second period Pre-Algebra class there were about 30 students and every desk was filled. Lastly, in the Algebra course there were around 18 students, who were considered the "honors" students. The learning climate in the classroom was relaxed and by the in the year I started observing it seemed as though the students were comfortable and knew the

routine. MK explained to me that on Day 1 she gives the students a "'Welcome Letter' that explains how we will operate," but the discipline is kept to a minimum, which she claims is due to her "reputation at this point in [her] career" (Winters, Questionnaire)

The students had a daily routine that was not as much reinforced but more known. Students would walk in, grab a piece of paper with the Problem of the Day (POD) on it, turn in their homework to the folders on the side of the classroom and then sit down and finish the POD. The students in the first period did this relatively quietly since they were there already in the classroom for home room. The second group of students in period two took a bit longer to settle down and focus. Many days MK would have to remind the students about the POD or to be quiet until they have finished. The third class was also relatively quiet and when they completed their POD's dropped it into the inbox in the front.

Not only was there a daily starting routine but a consistent instructional plan for every class. MK would first start the class by lecturing on a new topic. This was done using the SmartBoard, which would replicate the typed up notes students had in front of them. Then students would do the "You Try" problems, which MK would usually walk them through. Then this followed, if time allowed, with time for the students to start their homework. This ordering of instruction was the same in every period and every day I observed. There were a couple exceptions, which were testing or quiz days and also when half of the 8th grade class was out due to participation in a school play.

Borich defines, in his book Observation Skills for Effective Teaching, instructional variety as "a teacher's variability and flexibility in delivering instructional content" (Borich, 114). This definition encompasses the many elements of instructional variety. Some key parts to instructional variety are the uses of attention-gaining devices, varying instructional activities and

media, and lastly varying types of questions and probes (Borich, 114). In a study done by Lisa M. Raphael, Michael Pressley, and Lindsey Mohan, using 9 sixth-grade classrooms in two different middle schools, found that "highly engaging teachers used many instructional practices that had the potential to encourage academic engagement and did nothing that might undermine engagement" (Raphael, 1). They observed that these high performing teachers also created welcoming environments that encouraged students to learn. However, a main difference between high engaging teachers and the moderately/low engaging teachers was the fact that they used "a large number of practices to encourage students to engage academic content" (Raphael, 73).

In my observations I found that MK used much of the same instruction in her day to day lessons. Using Borich's Table 8.1 on page 115 (found at right), I found that MK had a few indicators in both the effective and less effective instructional variety. My results show that MK fell into the less effective

TABLE 8.1 Indicators for Instructional Variety	
More Effective Instructional Variety	**Less Effective Instructional Variety**
1. Uses attention-gaining devices (e.g., begins with a challenging question, visual, or example)	Begins lessons without full attention of most learners
2. Shows enthusiasm and animation through variation in eye contact, voice, and gestures (e.g., changes pitch and volume, moves about during transitions to new activity)	Speaks in monotone, devoid of external signs of emotion; stays fixed in place for entire period or rarely moves body
3. Varies mode of presentation (e.g., presents, asks questions, and then provides for independent practice)	Rarely alters modality through which instructional stimuli are received (e.g., seeing, listening, doing)
4. Uses mix of rewards and reinforcers (extra credit, verbal praise, independent study)	Rarely reinforces student behavior; tends to use same rewards every time
5. Varies types of questions (divergent, convergent) and probes (to clarify, to solicit, or to redirect)	Always asks the same type of question (for example, What do you think about …?) or overuses one type of question
6. Incorporates student ideas or participation in some aspects of the instruction (for example, uses indirect instruction or divergent questioning)	Assumes the role of sole authority and provider of information; ignores student contributions

instructional variety category for "begins lesson without full attention of most learners" and "rarely reinforces student behavior; tends to use same rewards ever time." Many times MK would start the lesson with half the class chatting to each other. In a journal entry on October 16th I noted that the students came in loudly and MK told them what to do but no one heard because they were talking so loudly and continued to talk over her (Winters, Journal 5). Also, she did not use many rewards but one reward she used a few times was asking the students draw a picture on the back of a piece of paper on the assignment they were working on. For example, after students answered a problem on their whiteboards MK told them they could draw a pumpkin or a

witch (both Halloween themed since this observation was close to the holiday) (Winters, Journal 2).

However, MK was in the more effective instructional variety categories on a couple items. Such as she "shows enthusiasm and animation through variation in eye contact, voice and gestures" and "varies mode of presentation" (Borich, 115). MK was a very welcoming person and the students felt comfortable in her class. She was enthusiastic and outgoing in each class I observed. Also, she varied her mode of presentation by lecturing, asking questions, and she would put some independent practice into her lesson plan, which was followed by time to start homework.

There are many other factors that go into having a wide variety of instructional practices. Varying instructional activities and media, like Borich explains on page 119, is not only about what the teacher is doing but what the students are able and required to do. Having differentiated instruction creates an environment where students are able to choose a path to show what they have learned. When teachers require students to do more than just homework students can then prove academic success using differentiated activity (Borich 119). I used a table that Borich shows in his book to describe what varying instructional activities and media look like. I then bolded the modalities used by MK throughout my observations (See below). MK hit on a few of the modalities used to create variety in a classroom; however, there were no tactile modalities covered in any of her lessons.

Oral	Verbal	Visual	Tactile
Teacher explaining	**Teacher writing on board**	**Teacher using charts, graphs, illustrations**	Students examining specimen
Teacher/students asking questions	Teacher writing on transparency	**Students looking at diagrams, pictures in text or on board**	Students using equipment
Teacher playing audiotape or record	Students reading text	Students watching film/video	Students building/constructing
Students reciting	Students working in small groups with text	Students seeing lifelike or scale models	Students arranging/ordering material
Students discussing in small groups	Students writing about what is discussed	Students seeing pictures of what is discussed	Students examining objects of what is discussed

As Borich explains, "instructional variety within a classroom is increased when instructional tasks include all of these modalities or combinations of them" (Borich, 120). He goes on to describe findings of researchers and experienced teachers that believe "effective teaching involves many different classroom activities. A teacher, who does nothing but talk for an entire period, engages students only in prolonged seatwork (Borich, 121). However, it is ok to have a few lessons not be filled with the modalities stated above but a majority of lessons should require this differentiated instruction so that students are continually challenged (Borich 121).

During my observation period in MK's classroom she wanted to get me in front of the classroom and teach a lesson. At my visit a couple days before the lesson I had to teach, MK showed me the Word Document with the notes for the class. She then guided me to SmartBoard and told me to transfer the notes onto the SmartBoard program. I did just that making everything a little more interactive by hiding answers and using the SmartBoard capabilities. I arrived the day I was going to teach with positivity and excitement. After the students finished their PODs I was given the go ahead by MK to start my lesson. I started the lesson and immediately received a question,

Student K: "Do we have notes?"

Me: "No, but if you could take out a piece of paper and write notes on there, that would be great."

The students were puzzled by this response and slowly took out a piece of paper from the back of their binders. I then continued with the lesson as MK then said from the back of the room, "I am going to go run off the notes." When she returned with the notes the students seemed relieved. But then they realized that the SmartBoard notes were not exactly replicated on the notes they had printed in front of them. The students were not thrilled by this finding and when I told them to do the extra examples I had put in, on their notes or on a separate piece of paper I continued to get puzzling stares. (Winters, Journal 7)

In the next class I felt a little more confident since I had already taught the same lesson. The lesson went much smoother since the students had the notes they were used to directly in front of them. These students are comfortable with the way that MK teaches and were puzzled when I gave them something different. When they walk into MK's class it is predictable and comfortable for the students and they immediately became uncomfortable when a different task was presented to them.

Furthermore, instructional variety goes hand in hand with active participation and collaborative learning in the classroom. Some types of active participation, as clearly stated by Debra Berlin in her PowerPoint "Increasing Active Student Participation in Elementary Classrooms, Albany, New York, July 2009," are whole group responses, individual work, partner work, as well as cooperative group work. Moreover, she explains the best practices on how to go about these factors of active participation. For example, Berlin points out a few ideas for teachers to think about, "not calling on students with their hands raised, asking a question and then calling

on a student, calling on low performers more often, [and] using whole group response" (Berlin). Throughout all her examples of ways to get students to actively participate in the classroom she refers back to the word "engagement." Each of these active participation factors can increase student engagement in the classroom, which is what every teachers goal should potentially be.

Another online source describes two different strategies to effectively use active participation. These two strategies are covert and overt active engagement strategies. During covert activities students are held accountable for their own learning because these activities are done by the student and not seen by the teacher (Allen). This type of learning includes, "thinking, picturing, remembering, visualizing, reflecting…" (Allen). The other strategy, overt active engagement strategies are both "observable and measureable" by the teacher (Allen). These overt strategies are similar to the examples Berlin talks about with active participation.

When I taught my lesson in MK's classroom I specifically did not give the students the Word Document of notes for a reason. I covered up many answers and steps of problems to give room for the students to actively participate in the lesson. As I commented in Journal 8, "I tried to promote active participation by asking them as many questions as I could, even if the answers were right in front of them" (Winters, Journal 8). However, I saw that many students would jump ahead and do the examples before I had even taught the complete topic. The students who answered the questions I asked and did stay with me during the lesson, read directly off their notes in front of them. But I did not discourage them from reading off of their notes because I wanted to encourage the students participating in the lesson.

Many might think that active participation is the sole responsibility of the student; however, active participation relies more on the teacher to implement the prompting of students. Thus, instructional variety can lead to the implementation of active participation. Moreover, both

of these tasks of the teacher can lead to enhanced student engagement. Engagement has been defined in a variety of ways. In an article by Adena M. Klem and James P. Connell, they quoted a source who defined engagement as "'a psychological process, specifically the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning'" (Klem, 262). Studies have shown that as students' progress from elementary to middle to high school they become more disengaged in the classroom (Klem, 262). This is why my focus emphasized the factors in keeping students engaged in the classroom because it is a difficult task to achieve.

Much of my research and observations led me to specifically focus on the factors of instructional variety and active participation within the classroom to enhance student engaged learning time. As Helen Marks claims in her piece on "Student Engagement in Instructional Activity", "instruction as the transmission of information has led to an emphasis on the active involvement of students in more challenging and interesting work, accenting the construction of knowledge" (Marks, 159). Professional development in most areas of teaching emphasizes the use of differentiated instruction. This emphasis comes with reasoning behind it and that reasoning is that instructional variety and active participation have been shown to boost student achievement. Borich states at the beginning of his chapter on instructional variety in the classroom, that "wise teachers understand the value of instructional variety for enhancing student engagement and learning" (Borich, 114).

Even though teachers may see and comprehend the research that is written about student academic engagement boosting achievement in the classroom, they still do not always use differentiated instruction. For example, when I asked MK about her reasoning on the way she teaches she explained to me that she has "tried most of the 'new and better' methods that have come around…[but] I have so much to cover and my time is too short to allow them time to

derive or discover processes or rules themselves" (Winters). She goes on to explain how this "spoon-fed" technique leads them to an inability to adjust to new material and instruction, which supports my anecdote of me teaching the class that I stated earlier.

However, not all student engagement is focused in the two factors of instructional variety and active participation alone. Student engagement encompasses the need for the use of high expectations and support from teachers and parents, along with a whole other range of different things. But if it seems as though students are not engaging and actively participating in a lesson then it is time to rethink the way the classroom is run. In many studies they have found that engagement and academic achievement are highly positively correlated (Wang, 638). Also, Klem claims that "research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance. Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school, regardless of socioeconomic status" (Klem, 262). As we can see there is a domino effect that starts with the amount of effort teachers put into their lesson plans to include instructional variety and promote active participation that end up leading to academic and behavioral success.

But then we must look further into each teacher's definition of achievement and success and what they consider a high achieving classroom. As I have shown throughout this ethnography, MK has a very concrete and consistent style of teaching. I asked her how many students are below a 70 she told me that 4 out of 96 students were below the 70 mark. She believes that the lack of success for those four students is due to parental involvement and the "apathy on the part of the student as to whether or not they are successful" (Winters, Questionnaire). Thus, even though MK did not use every type of active participation or vary her instruction she believes that she does reach academic success in her classroom.

Although it is not conclusive to state that a couple factors that lead to student engagement are the use of instructional variety and active participation in the classroom, research does support that fact that there is a correlation between these factors and engagement. While MK might have found a teaching style that works for her in the classroom, her style is not promoted through the research I have done. The lack of engagement when I was in the classroom was something to look at and what I thought of as not conducive to an active learning environment. Challenging students through differentiated instruction helps students grow academically. As Richard Miller states, "student engagement can be defined as a students' willingness to actively participate in the learning process and to persist despite obstacles and challenges" (Miller, 2).
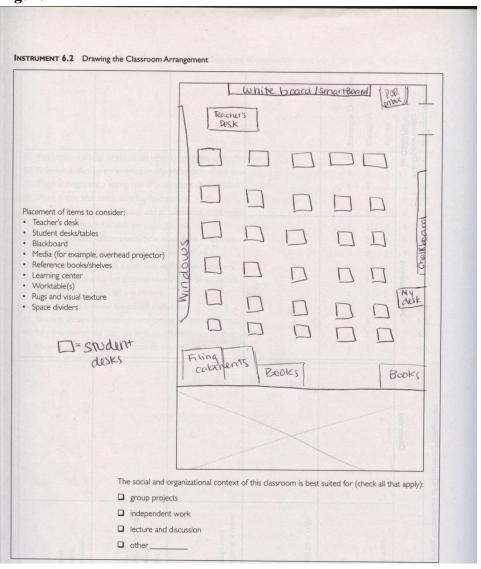
I feel that future research can be looked at into teacher training at the school I looked at and there emphasis on trying new techniques in the classroom. While MK's instruction might be sufficient for this school, other methodologies and scholarships suggest otherwise. I would also be interested in teaching a few of MK's classes that promotes differentiated instruction and variety while using active participation and see the reaction and level of engagement that comes from the students.

As an aspiring teacher, I am always seeking ways to improve my instruction. Throughout many different professional development seminars I was taught that they key focus as a teacher is to have students constantly actively participating in each lesson. This is why I made it my focus to figure out the biggest factors that lead to engagement in a public school setting. What I came up with supported my beliefs but I realized that not every classroom is going to look and feel the way I believe a "perfect" classroom should. Many times the teacher has to make decisions on what will be the most efficient way to teach the students he or she has in front of them with the allotted time given. I also observed that the first thing to get thrown out the

window is usually activities and variety of instruction. Thus I wonder: is this a vicious circle that will only keep widening the achievement gap? Or can this problem be fixed with extending school days and improving teacher training? These questions I hope to conquer next semester as I delve further into the topic of the key factors in achieving student engagement.

Appendix

Figure 1

INSTRUMENT 6.2   Drawing the Classroom Arrangement

Placement of items to consider:
- Teacher's desk
- Student desks/tables
- Blackboard
- Media (for example, overhead projector)
- Reference books/shelves
- Learning center
- Worktable(s)
- Rugs and visual texture
- Space dividers

□ = student desks

(Hand-drawn classroom diagram labels: White board/SmartBoard, P.O.D. inbox, Teacher's Desk, Windows, Chalkboard, My desk, Filing cabinets, Books, Books)

The social and organizational context of this classroom is best suited for (check all that apply):

❑ group projects

❑ independent work

❑ lecture and discussion

❑ other _____

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All writing by Winters, Kayla is attached.