STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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There is nothing like the feeling of accomplishment! Whether it is mastering an instrument, following a recipe to completion or even 'levelling up' in a video game, the feeling of triumph over a difficult task is a daily strive for most of us as human beings. As an educator, there is no concept that cannot be taught, and it is my job to unravel how to engage my students in these concepts. Once they are engaged in a concept, the learning develops and they are able to achieve that feeling of accomplishment. It is important for us to instil that passion for accomplishment in them, so that they will go on to be lifelong learners, beyond the educational setting. Therefore, it is crucial that the approach taken by all is to engage the student and that these approaches are adopted within the classroom by all teachers, and in the wider school community to ensure a consistent approach to student engagement.

Understanding perspectives on engagement

It is helpful when discussing student engagement to remember that we are always learners. This assists me in my teaching practice to relate to how my students think and feel, and how this impacts on their engagement and learning. At some stage in our lives, we have probably all sat in a meeting, attended professional development or listened to a speech that we were just not engaged in. So why weren't we engaged? There could be any number of reasons. It could be that on an individual level, we were distracted by our everyday lives. I didn't sleep well last night. I have to do so much work later on tonight. Did I defrost the chicken for dinner? Alternatively, perhaps we did not feel interested in the chosen topic. I've heard all this before. Why is he speaking in the same monotone for every word? If we apply this to our students, it keeps in perspective that engagement can be within our control and sometimes, outside of it. It can make or break a classroom environment and there are some days that some students will need a little more assistance to feel engaged in curriculum. I am going to share an approach that I try to consistently apply and, for the most part, works for me. We can easily blame

ourselves when lessons go astray, but it is important to create the mindset that if lessons don't go the way we thought we are ready to change tactic and try a different approach to reconnect the learner.

How my school strives to improve engagement

In order for the student to adopt a growth mindset around their engagement in learning, it is important that the entire school prioritises student engagement towards learning. Within my school, our school wide belief is to value the voice of the student and to afford them agency within their educational setting. Through the use of data collection, such as the Department's Attitudes to schools survey we create specific targeted goals around the feedback received from the students themselves about engagement and implement these goals school wide. From this survey, our school made the decision to abandon our outdated student leadership model and create a model that gives the agency to the student by setting expectations and promoting inclusion.

Student Voice council

Our Student Voice council is a team of dedicated students, across year levels, who nominate to be voted onto the council. They give speeches to their peers and the staff, and are interviewed by a panel of staff members, where they outline their individual aspirations for the council. The Student Voice council have their own designated office within the grounds of the school. This is important as it gives the students a sense of ownership and places emphasis on the value that the school holds in their opinions and decisions as a council. These students represent their peers at staff meetings, school council meetings, meetings with local MP's and trips to Parliament for Young Leaders seminars. They communicate with the staff, parents and wider community to work collaboratively on all facets of their education. Wherever possible, students are encouraged to be actively involved in the decision-making process in the development of classroom and whole school expectations and values. When the student feels respected and understood, they will build respectful and effective relationships and will engage completely with their teachers and peers. As outlined in Amplify, evidence that to engage students in learning, we must create opportunities for student to constribute meaningfully to their communities, exercise agency over decisions and that this will create significant purpose and engagement. The significance of which is that effective relationships creates an influential amount of student engagement.

Positive Education

We have all heard of the power of positivity and it is a concept that resonates with my approach to teaching practice. For my students to engage, I must carry a positive mindset and construct a learning environment that assists them to come to one too. It is important for me to lead them utilising emotional intelligence, to create a positive educational environment, in which they feel safe to learn and grow. In 2018, I participated in a 3-day conference on Positive Education run by the Institute of Positive Education that was established at Geelong Grammar School. Our school, as well as many other schools, are starting to introduce the Positive Education program and I was lucky enough to be one of the first to begin trialling it in my school.

Positive Education is a program that brings together teaching practice with the science of positive psychology to encourage and support individuals, schools and communities to flourish. It focuses on the idea that by strengthening relationships, building resilience, mindfulness, and harnessing positive emotions, individuals build on their wellbeing and allow themselves to intrinsically challenge themselves. The students and educators identify what their individual character strengths are and utilise this as a form of emotional intelligence to assist them in recognising and applying these strengths in everyday life.

One of the initial activities from the conference was to complete the character strengths survey and identify my own character strengths. This was in no way confronting, as it was incredibly helpful at establishing the basis of how I teach and assisting with strategies on how to strengthen my teaching practise. By identifying these areas, I was also able to constructively critique my approaches and work towards constantly improving my teaching style. The research that surrounds Positive Education is of great interest to me, as it encapsulates how I have always felt as an educator, in a way that I could never put into words. It is incredibly important to me that my classroom is a place of positive learning, because when students feel happy they learn the best way they can. Sometimes those factors are outside of our control, especially if they are just having a bad day in general but if we establish a positive learning environment and continuously work to create one, even on those bad days we are equipping them with the necessary skills to problem solve. This is such a powerful way to engage them in a positive manner so that when they come across a concept that challenges them, they will not check out but find the way to opt in.

A *positive and inclusive learning environment*

When we build a positive learning environment, we empower students and include their opinions. This in turn builds pride in themselves, in their learning environment and assists their wellbeing in a positive approach. This is consistent with the Department of Education's High Impact Teaching Strategies, specifically strategy 5 (Collaborative Learning), strategy 8 (Feedback) and strategy 9 (Metacognitive Strategies). A positive and inclusive learning environment provides students with the opportunity to feel secure in working together to foster peer learning and voice their thoughts and opinions in a protected way, whilst also being respectful of others. When this environment has been established, students should feel that they can provide respectful feedback to peers and staff unreservedly and give and receive constructive feedback to move learning forward. It also assists students to strategically think about their thinking and become aware of their individual learning processes to gain control of their learning. Ultimately, we want to equip them with the ability to work through challenges and develop their critical thinking skills, which assists their wellbeing by enabling them to have agency over their environment. This makes them feel acknowledged, and creates a positive mindset about how they can influence change within their environment. In this manner, they will thrive because when we create an environment for the student to be heard and acknowledged, we engage them to want to contribute meaningfully and positively to the learning process.

Key takeaways for graduates

Get to know your students as learners and individuals

It is important to know whether students require additional learning assistance such as an individualised learning program or direct from an educational support staff member. Where possible, any prior knowledge can affect the approach I will take with a class from the onset. This is not just from a curriculum point of view, but also about the interests of the students, so that I can strike up conversation with them that is outside and get to know them. It is important for us to get to know our students and their families and communities as well, to really understand what challenges they face outside of the learning environment, as well as within it. Practice Principle 2 helps us to understand the actions taken by teachers to achieve a supportive and productive learning environment, including ensuring all students' cultural backgrounds, needs and abilities are recognised and addressed in the learning program.

Establish Strong Communication

It is also important to establish strong communication with students from the beginning and when we come back to the notion that students want to feel heard, getting them to talk about something they are passionate about could assist with establishing a solid relationship that leads to a positive classroom. Communication, both verbally and through technology is a must. We are educating a generation that is surrounded by technology so we need to embrace it as much as we can. Within the classroom we give verbal instructions, but by also utilising Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, students are able to stay on task and know what the expectations of the lesson are. By utilising email to students and parents, the sense of community around the learning inside the classroom will extend outside of it. Be mindful that you set realistic expectations around this in order to protect your privacy around contactable hours outside of the classroom. Communication can break down if it is not received in a timely manner, but by setting these expectations everyone is on the same page.

Inclusive teaching practices

I utilise as many inclusive teaching practices as possible. It is of course dependent on the subject being taught but wherever possible, opportunities for students to take ownership over their learning are important. Every lesson, I write up the Learning Intentions and Success Criteria for my students on the board. These make clear the purpose of the learning as well as what it would look like if they were making successful progress in their learning. It also gives them clear expectations and is a guided way for them to ensure they stay on task, when the classroom distractions start to sink in. Project based learning or integrated curriculum is a way that students differentiate their learning, whilst meeting the necessary

curriculum criteria. It is also important to encourage feedback to each other as well as to allow them to critique the teaching practice. How do we do that without feeling personally attacked?

Feedback and reflections

I utilise an Exit Ticket system, where my students must note down something new that they have learnt, and something that they felt was not made clear to them. This keeps me on track with knowing where I am meeting the success criteria and when I need to come up with new strategies and revisit a topic. The important thing that I try to remember is that no class is the same, and it is important for me to keep that in mind when I plan my curriculum. This is a form of formative feedback and is vital in assisting me to set specific targets for individual students and the class as a whole, by identifying strengths and weaknesses within how I deliver my curriculum.

The importance of Student engagement

Students always remember the positive learning experiences, and the people who facilitate them long after they leave school. For you, the graduate teacher, please keep in mind that even the teachers with years of experience still start fresh at the start of the year, and we are all still striving to be the teacher who engages their students. Do not give up. Even on the hard days. Do not allow a setback to deviate you from your ultimate goal which is to engage them, enrich their learning experience and empower them to succeed.

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