Beyond Content: How Teachers Manage Classrooms to Facilitate Intellectual Engagement for Disengaged Students

This article explores how teachers manage classrooms to facilitate the intellectual engagement of disengaged students. The author proposes that teachers create an environment conducive to intellectual engagement when students perceive: (a) that there are opportunities for them to succeed, (b) that flexible avenues exist through which learning can occur, and (c) that they are respected as learners because teachers convey the belief that students are capable of learning. When teachers purposefully manage classrooms so that these elements intersect optimally, students perceive that they are known and valued. Furthermore, opportunities for success, flexibility, and respect generally are present when teachers challenge their students at appropriate levels, provide academic support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant. To illuminate how teachers succeed in managing classrooms for intellectual engagement, the author provides numerous quotes from students attending an alternative high school designed for disengaged students who possess academic potential.

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[Here] I’m more, I guess, a free thinker or something.... [The teachers] don’t rush us, they don’t force us. But they don’t make it easy and they don’t give us forever.... At my other school I just kind of felt like they’re giving all this stuff to me because I had to do it, and they didn’t care.... Here it’s just different. I care about what I’m doing. (Peter, 10th grade)
PETER WAS ONCE AT RISK of dropping out of school. Despite attending a middle-class, suburban, comprehensive high school where the average SAT score was 1126 and the percent of students on free or reduced lunch was 8%, Peter almost decided to quit. Although most of his grades were passing, Peter had disengaged from school on all levels—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Osterman (1998) summarized Peter’s situation quite well: “Even for those students who succeed in school on standard achievement criteria, lack of engagement with learning is a serious problem” (p. 41). Fortunately, Peter had the option to attend a small, alternative school that followed the Middle College concept. Middle Colleges are public high schools collaborating with local colleges. They seek to prevent capable students from dropping out of school by creating academically enriched environments that also support students’ social and personal development. For Peter, who is not unlike many high school students, the issue was not whether he was capable of challenging intellectual work; he was capable. The issue involved whether Peter was in an environment conducive to his engagement in learning.

What was it about the alternative school that kept Peter, and others like him, from dropping out? Even more importantly, what was it that captured his interest and helped him care about what he was doing academically? The brief quote from Peter provides powerful clues into ways teachers can engage disengaged students in intellectual work. Contrary to the beliefs of legislators myopically focused on accountability, it has little to do with helping students meet proficiency requirements on standardized tests, though accountability and proficiency are important. Contrary to the beliefs of those preoccupied with particular instructional strategies, it extends beyond the actual content of what teachers teach (Ritchhart, 2002) and the mere elimination of student misbehavior (McCaslin & Good, 1992). Teachers can create an environment conducive to intellectual engagement when students perceive three pervasive elements are a part of all classroom discourse:

1. There are opportunities for students to succeed.
2. Flexible avenues exist through which learning can occur.
3. Students are respected as learners because teachers convey the belief that students are capable of achieving academic success.

It seems so basic. Yet disengaged students perceive opportunities for success, flexibility, and respect as pervasively lacking in schools (Altenbaugh, 1998; Liaupsin, Umbreit, Ferro, Urso, & Upreti, 2006; Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006). In this article, I explain how teachers can manage classrooms to facilitate these three pervasive elements that are crucial to engaging students intellectually. To augment the explanations, I provide quotes from students—primarily Peter’s classmates at a Middle College in a suburban district in the southeastern United States. I use these students’ voices for two reasons. First, students are frequently ignored in conversations of educational policy and practice (Cook-Sather, 2002; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006), yet students decide their engagement or disengagement in school. Second, Middle College students provide a unique glimpse into aspects of engagement. These 126 students possessed academic potential, but for any number of reasons—from academic to social—disengaged from their previous schools only to re-engage at Middle College. Their insights suggest that effective classroom management and pedagogy that supports intellectual engagement are inextricably linked, as they involve knowing the students well and finding where opportunities for success, flexibility, and respect intersect optimally.

Before proceeding, I should explain what I mean by intellectual engagement. Although some define engagement in learning as the tangible behaviors that students exhibit in the classroom (Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002) or outside the classroom related to homework and study habits (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006), I take a more comprehensive view. Engagement in learning involves formulating a deeper connection between the student and the material whereby a student develops an interest in the topic or retains the
learning beyond the short term. There are no precise formulas for managing a classroom for intellectual engagement. However, opportunities for success, flexibility, and respect generally are present when teachers challenge their students at appropriate levels, provide academic support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant. I describe these in greater detail in the next sections.

**Academic Challenge**

They’ll make you seep in as much as you can right up to the point that you’d turn it off . . . and then it’s pulled back a little bit. (James, 11th grade)

Lack of academic challenge has often been attributed to the “bargains” (Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986) or “compromises” (Sizer, 1984) teachers establish with students, whereby students tacitly agree to maintain order and teachers tacitly agree to hold expectations to a minimum. However, substantial evidence exists that students across school contexts want teachers to challenge them academically (Sizer & Sizer, 1999; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). The desire for a challenge is especially true when classroom discourse mirrors authentic conversations, as opposed to typical classroom talk, and includes issues students perceive as relevant (Alpert, 1991; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). Furthermore, it is imperative that teachers couple academic challenge with academic support.

It becomes more obvious why academic challenge must operate in tandem with academic support when one considers how the three pervasive elements intersect to portray a sweet spot for achieving engagement. Students feel appropriately challenged when teachers combine flexibility with opportunities to succeed, which results in the students feeling respected as students and having a positive attitude toward their academics (Turner & Meyer, 2004). When students perceive academic work as too difficult or too easy, which usually means there is either no flexibility or too much flexibility in how students achieve academic success, they feel a lack of respect. Lack of respect generally manifests in a negative attitude toward their academics. Compare James’s words to those of a student in Pittsburgh who eventually decided to drop out of school, a decision he attributed to his reaction toward the “cynical and calloused teachers” who did little more than pass students along: “‘they sort of had an ‘I don’t care’ attitude. Get you in and get you out. Just so long as you get that D’” (Altenbaugh, 1998, p. 60). This student perceived a lack of respect because teachers did not care enough to challenge him. In contrast, James described the sweet spot of where the optimal academic challenge exists. Students have to feel pushed. When they do not feel pushed, students disengage. When they are asked to “seep in” more than they can handle, students disengage.

The challenge for teachers, then, is to determine how much to push students. Where is the sweet spot? As the Pittsburgh student’s quote indicates, it stems from teachers’ attitudes. A combination of care and high expectations is essential for students to reach their highest capacity as evidenced in academic achievement and motivation (Gay, 2000; Turner & Meyer, 2004; Wentzel, 1997), positive social outcomes (Wentzel, 1997), and increased ownership (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). This is true for students across school contexts. Teachers create a synergy of care and high expectations when they provide opportunities for students to succeed, both for the present-oriented purpose of achieving good grades and for the future-oriented purpose of living a good life. Kathleen, a 10th grader, highlighted how care and high expectations operated synergistically for present and future purposes when she said, “They care about your grades and they want you to succeed and it just made me feel like there’s somebody that wants me to graduate; there’s somebody that wants me to do something with my life.”

Teachers foster opportunities to succeed and provide flexibility through a curriculum that is student-driven, rather than curriculum-driven. Curricular flexibility means demonstrating both
acute awareness of ways students understand the material and responsiveness to student needs. The idea of responsiveness is prevalent in research on at-risk students (Catterall, 1998), culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000), and special education (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Across these bodies of literature, the most compelling commonality that applies to all teachers, regardless of context, is the importance of knowing and responding to students’ needs, as individuals. This means meeting students where they are, which seems obvious, but for a variety of reasons often does not occur in high schools. When describing her teachers at Middle College, Stephanie, an 11th grader, said, “They’ll actually help you with what you don’t know.… When I came here I didn’t have like really any study skills … because I had been moving around so much.… In Geometry she’s taught different ways that you can study for tests and how to prepare for certain things.” When James says teachers “make you seep in as much as you can right up to the point that you’d turn it off,” this implies that teachers know how much each student can seep in and also know the point where each student would turn it off. In other words, for each individual student, teachers provide just the right amount of challenge, along with just the right amount of support.

Academic Support

Teachers should teach so everybody can understand, not just so a few elite kids can know what’s going on. (Peter, 10th grade)

Students who disengage academically from school often feel as though success is meant only for certain elite students, or those who have experienced success in the past, or those who are just lucky (Altenbaugh, 1998). To complicate matters, intellectual disengagement frequently occurs as a result of students’ emotional and behavioral disengagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). In other words, students who do not feel that they belong on the football field or in the student council also feel that they do not belong in the classroom. To engage students, teachers must make them feel like they not only belong in the classroom, but also that they are capable of doing challenging intellectual work. This means not just pushing them to achieve, but also providing the support through which achievement is possible.

Academic support is possible when teachers convey an attitude that students can succeed. This attitude should mirror those of high-reliability organizations, such as air traffic control towers; those working in such organizations view success as the expectation, not a chance occurrence, and they do everything possible to create conditions that facilitate success (Irmscher, 1997). At her alternative school, Leah describes her teachers as having exactly this attitude toward student success: “They’ll do anything they can because they know we can do it.… They all know us, and they’re going to keep pushing us to do it.” Leah’s perception that her teachers possessed a steadfast belief in her ability to achieve led her to adopt this same belief.

As Leah also indicates, teachers must know students individually in order to translate their beliefs into actions. Because each student varies in terms of learning style, interests, background knowledge, culture, and cognitive scaffolding, teachers must make efforts to know students within these various dimensions and to respond accordingly. Only through such knowing can teachers provide the appropriate type and amount of academic support.

My teacher actually sat there and watched me do some math problems. I didn’t know she was watching me and she was like, “You’re a very verbal learner”… I’d never thought about it.… She had observed how I learned and she had noticed that when I was doing really well on a problem, I was talking my way through it. (James, 11th grade)

Not only did his teacher become aware of James’s learning style, the teacher also helped James become aware of his own learning style. This was accomplished through a very simple
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technique: observation. James’s teacher simply observed him as he engaged in the learning process. Obviously, this takes time. However, when the goal is curriculum coverage, a likely end result is teachers covering more and students engaging less (Ritchhart, 2002).

The three pervasive elements—opportunities to succeed, flexibility, and respect—are readily apparent in the specific ways teachers provide academic support to facilitate students’ engagement. These include conducting diagnostic assessments as a way of knowing students’ strengths and needs. These assessments may include formal instruments, like a learning styles inventory, but most are the result of simply observing students. The informal assessment James’s teacher conducted provided valuable information to both James and the teacher about how he worked through math problems. To help James engage, and therefore succeed, the teacher can be flexible in allowing James to talk his way through his work. James will feel respected because not only will he know a strategy he needs to function successfully in math class, but he will also be encouraged to use it.

Formative assessment and differentiated instruction are other specific ways teachers provide academic support to facilitate students’ engagement. Bob, an 11th grader in a challenging math class, highlighted the importance of formative assessment when he noted, “She makes sure that we know how to do it before we take a test, before we leave that classroom.” When teachers frequently check on students’ understanding, through low-risk assessments, students know that teachers want them to succeed academically. When teachers use differentiated instruction, modifying the content, process, or products of learning, students know there is flexibility in how they can develop and demonstrate their understanding (King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003). A classroom that accommodates this level of academic support must be very organized. Teachers must be purposeful about determining students’ strengths and needs and about ensuring the availability of appropriate resources, described next.

Instruction

High school isn’t all about necessarily learning facts…. [Teachers] are so concerned with “Am I going to meet my deadline? Are my standardized tests going to be up to par?” that they don’t have time to stop and think about it. (James, 11th grade)

When monotony and task completion characterize a majority of classroom instruction, students are less likely to engage intellectually. In contrast, when students perceive they have opportunities to succeed on authentic tasks through the flexible instruction of their teachers, they are more likely to engage. Teachers manage classrooms to facilitate student engagement when they demonstrate enthusiasm for authentic content and purposefully use instructional strategies to capture students’ interest.

As James and Peter noted, students equate learning disparate facts from the book with rigidity and lack of instructional creativity on the part of the teacher. In the mind of the students, when a teacher teaches straight from the book, it is the teacher being lazy; students then have little motivation to complete academic work, much less become excited about it. They may demonstrate overt misbehavior or quietly subversive resistance through nonparticipation in classroom discourse (Alpert, 1991). In contrast, a number of students at Middle College mentioned the infectious enthusiasm of the ecology teacher who had worked in the private sector before teaching at the college level then teaching at Middle College. Caesar, a 12th grader, said, “The teachers here cover more, like the ecology teacher. She gets really into it because she’s a big environmentalist…. She just talks from personal experience and incorporates things. She’s a very good teacher.” Caesar wanted to engage in the content because the teacher combined knowledge with a desire to share her passions with her students.

No single instructional technique operates as a panacea for increasing student interest in course content. In fact, when Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) investigated the educational processes of
Catholic high schools, they were surprised to find “students’ positive reactions to rather ordinary teaching” (p. 99). Despite ubiquitous traditional pedagogy, the researchers observed “high levels of engagement with classroom activities” (p. 99). They found that the “quality of human relations” (p. 99) was more important than specific instructional techniques. My own work exploring care in educational contexts supports the conclusion that how students perceive teachers’ attitudes is one of the most important factors in determining the extent of their intellectual engagement (Schussler, 2006). When teachers structure instruction in ways that demonstrate their desire to interest students in the content, students notice. It is not that the instructional techniques are unimportant; rather, it is that the attitude with which the teacher employs the techniques is more important. Knowing how to structure instruction entails knowing the students, specifically, knowing how to challenge and support students, as well as how to tap into their interests and demonstrate the relevance of the content.

Relevance

I can tell that I’m learning in his class because outside of his class I’ll be flipping through the channels and something on history will come on and I’ll be like, “Let’s watch this.” It’s an interest. (Trixie, 11th grade)

In a study of over 80,000 students at 110 high schools, researchers found that when asked why they were bored in class, 75% of students said because the material was not interesting and 39% said the material was not relevant to them (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). Teachers help increase students’ interest in academic content, and their engagement, by giving students authentic tasks. Authentic tasks include opportunities to problem solve situations that mirror the kind of ambiguity students face in real life (Alpert, 1991; Ritchhart, 2002). In describing how to help students put intelligence into action, Ritchhart advocated “conditional instruction” (p. 140). In conditional instruction, teachers present facts open-endedly. For example, students are told, “This may be the cause of the evolution of city neighborhoods,” instead of “The cause of [the] evolution of city neighborhoods is . . . .” (p. 140). Studies on conditional instruction found that students in both conditions retained the information equally well, but students who received the information via conditional language demonstrated more creativity and flexibility in being able to solve problems. They also shifted from being passive to being more active learners, developing “a sense of their own agency,” (p. 141) as they attempted to make sense of ambiguous situations.

Thinking about the curriculum outside of traditional, academic content is also crucial to helping students see the relevance in what they are learning. Noddings (2006) emphasized the importance of being purposeful about teaching personal and social skills that students will use throughout their lives. “Possibly no goal of education is more important—or more neglected—than self-understanding” (p. 10). These goals should not exist as separate from, but rather as integrated with, the academic curriculum. Notice that David, a 12th grader, does not view the academic and personal curricula as mutually exclusive, but rather as infinitely relevant: “I’m learning about me and who I want to be…. Basically with what I’m concentrating on—writing or trying to figure out some economic equation—I’m trying to figure out what I want to do, where I want to be five, ten years down the road.” Similarly, Kathleen, a 10th grader, notes how the social skills were important for her life-long learning: “I’m not only learning the actual curriculum stuff, but here you’re also learning . . . . adult skills…. You learn how to communicate with people…. They’re preparing you for life here.”

Clearly, academic content is not unimportant. However, it becomes more relevant when it is purposefully integrated with the development of social and personal skills. As adults, we do not choose to engage in tasks in which we see no relevance. We should not expect students to be any different.
Concluding Comments

Middle College does not represent the traditional high school, yet all schools can learn something about classroom management and intellectual engagement from a school that succeeds in engaging previously disengaged students. Opportunities to succeed, flexibility, and respect undergird students’ experiences at Middle College. More specifically, teachers purposefully balance offering an academic challenge with support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant. Managing a classroom within these pedagogical parameters means moving beyond thinking primarily about content and into thinking about knowing students as individuals. Certainly, many teachers pursue this goal. Small alternative schools do not hold sole proprietorship on holding the students central. It may be that alternative schools are more purposeful about creating an environment that enables teachers to know students well. Maybe this is where future reform efforts should focus.

Notes
1. All proper names have been changed.
2. For more information about the Middle College concept, see Weschler (2001).
3. All students are from Middle College unless otherwise noted.

References


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