

What to Look for in an Authentically Engaged Classroom?

School District of Elmbrook

Dana Monogue

As the movement to create authentically engaged classrooms continues to grow, we are hearing with increasing frequency the question, “What should we look for in classrooms within which students are truly, authentically engaged in their learning?” Knowing what to look for can make the difference between seeing what seems to be a positive engaging learning environment and understanding the factors present that contribute to making the learning environment exceptional.

When visiting classrooms many people focus on the behaviors of the teacher to judge whether the class is being conducted in a quality manner. In fact, many of the most popular teaching frameworks employ this frame. Certainly, teacher behavior is important, but what really matters is the learning conditions that students experience. *In short, what really matters is learning.*

The good news is that there are a number of specific conditions and factors we are likely to see and hear in a learning environment within which students are truly, authentically engaged in learning. While not every factor or condition may be present in every environment, the more factors in play, the more engaging the learning environment is likely to be.

- **Purposeful learning.** When visitors speak with students in an authentically engaged learning environment, they are likely to hear students describe not just *what* they are learning, but how it addresses key competencies or standards, how the learning serves a purpose and how they can use it beyond the classroom.
- **Learner efficacy.** Authentically engaged learning environments are designed to help learners make the connection that good choices, effective strategies, persistence, and good use of resources determine their learning success.
- **Ownership for learning.** Students in an authentically engaged learning environment typically see their learning as something that has value to them. They also see the work they do as for themselves rather than to comply with the demands of adults.
- **Flexible pace.** Learning environments with high levels of authentic student engagement break the “iron clad” connection between time and learning. Students are able to learn at the pace that works best for them. The focus is on quality learning, not the calendar.
- **Learner voice infused.** The perspectives, opinions and preferences of students are invited, respected and considered in an authentically engaged learning environment. While student preferences may not always prevail, they are seriously considered and implemented where practical.
- **Learner choice presented.** Whenever practical, learners are given options regarding the ways in which they will engage in learning. It may be the approach to completing a task, how learning will be displayed or with whom learners will work, but choices are a part of the environment. The focus remains on clear, vigorous standards, but the paths learners will take to meeting these standards include learners as co-designers.
- **Learners serve as resources for learning.** Counter to the traditional view of teaching and learning where learners are seen as receptacles for knowledge to be filled, in an authentically engaged learning environment learners are seen as key resources to build their learning and support the learning of other students. Learners are encouraged to make connections with prior learning, employ effective learning strategies, investigate and

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inquire, and bring new ideas and insights to their learning in addition to the instructional strategies and skills offered by educators.

- **Space for learning flexibility.** Environments that support authentically engaged learning typically are not organized into rows of desks and assigned seats. Learners may be clustered around the room, learning in a variety of positions from sitting at tables, on the floor with other learners or comfortably on a cushion or beanbag chair. Learners are encouraged to find the position and location where they learn best without distracting others from learning. For more mature students learning likely is expanded beyond the classroom. They may be engaged in digital learning, a blended learning experience or even out in the community learning first-hand in areas of interest and an authentic manner.
- **Commitment focus.** While legacy learning environments typically depend on student compliance to assure order and completion of assigned work, learning environments that foster high levels of authentic student engagement focus on stimulating and nurturing commitment to learning as the key driver for learning engagement and growth. Rather than how many problems to solve or how long an assignment should be, learner questions in an engaged learning environment are more likely to focus on understanding and mastery as drivers for learning effort.
- **Collaboration.** Contrary to the perceptions of some, authentically engaged learning is not isolated learning. While some learning tasks and student work are best accomplished as learners are working alone, collaborative learning also plays a key role in an engaged environment. The question is not “either/or,” but what is the best fit for the learner and the learning task. Visitors to these learning environments are likely to see a variety of learning approaches: students working alone, in pairs, small groups and even in large gatherings in response to the learning challenges at hand.
- **Technology supported.** Also contrary to the assumptions of many, creating high levels of authentic student engagement is not driven by technology. Rather technology is employed thoughtfully and strategically to support learning in the most effective and appropriate ways possible from the perspective of the learner. Authentically engaged learning environments can be enhanced and made more efficient and learning options can be expanded with technology, but at the core, it is the shift in the roles of learners and educators and the employment of key learning and teaching processes that make the difference.
- **Growing learning independence.** Students who experience learning environments with high levels of authentic engagement learn that these environments are organized on the premise that learners are and will be their own best teachers. The work of educators is to build with learners their skills, knowledge and learning capacity to prepare them to succeed without external structures and direction to support their learning. In an authentically engaged learning environment, the organization of learning tasks and the construction of paths to meet challenging standards actively involve the learner. Increasingly, learners are given driving choices and crucial voice in and responsibility for their learning.