

REAL ENGAGEMENT

*How do I help my students
become motivated, confident, and
self-directed learners?*

Allison
ZMUDA

Robyn R.
JACKSON

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Real Engagement (Instead of Compliance)

No teacher wants a classroom full of bored and lethargic students who put their heads on their desks the moment the lesson starts, shrug and stare blankly when called on, and blithely scribble the convenient answer when completing their work—assuming that they complete their work at all. If you're like us or the teachers we serve in our workshops, you came to teaching for something more. You came to teaching to inspire your students to learn, and to create a classroom space where you and your students work together to achieve insight and understanding.

So when it comes to student engagement, you're active and committed. You keep an eye out for new strategies and the latest tricks that will help you gain and maintain your students' attention. You look to jazz up your lessons, seek hooks that will startle and delight your students, and find new ways of presenting the material that will get them excited about the task ahead. And, if you're honest, sometimes it feels like you're killing yourself to line up this dog and pony show each day.

You're not alone. We see this all the time—dedicated teachers who are working incredibly hard to be “inspiring” and chasing just the right combination of lesson elements that will get their students interested, involved, and actively

learning. What they generally wind up with, aside from a case of acute exhaustion, are classrooms composed of compliant, dutiful learners who willingly follow directions, complete assignments, meet requirements, and stay on task. But the real engagement these teachers are pursuing—with students asking intriguing questions, enthusiastically immersing themselves in projects and assignments, seeking feedback on their performance, and taking pride in their progress—remains elusive.

If you're reading this book, chances are you've asked this question: "Why is it so hard to get all of my students to be fully engaged and deeply involved in their own learning?" The answer may surprise you. You see, it's not that you aren't trying hard enough; it's that you are probably using the wrong set of strategies. Real engagement doesn't come from tricks and gimmicks; it's something you enable, not something you achieve. It happens when you use a few simple keys to help your students own, manage, and pursue their own learning.

What's So Bad About Compliance?

"OK, take out your math textbooks and turn to page 72," Mrs. Levenson says as she walks briskly to the front of the room and begins writing a sentence on the board.

The students pull their math texts from their desks or backpacks, turn to the designated page, and wait quietly for her next instructions.

"Today, we are going to learn the order of operations," Mrs. Levenson begins. Pointing the sentence she's written,

she continues, “I want you to repeat after me. *Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally.*”

“Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally,” the students repeat.

“Again, please,” Mrs. Levenson instructs, pointing.

“Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally.”

“Very good,” she smiles at the class. “Now, this sentence is actually an acrostic. Who here remembers what an acrostic is?”

A few hands begin to go up. Mrs. Levenson waits until she sees at least five, then calls on Jeremy.

“It’s a sentence where the first letter of each word really stands for something else,” Jeremy explains.

Mrs. Levenson nods. “Thank you, Jeremy,” she says. “Next time, I’d like to see more hands up. Now, eyes on me, please.” She pauses a moment until all students are facing her. “The *P* stands for *parentheses*,” she continues, writing the word on the board. “What does the *P* stand for?” she prompts the class.

“Parentheses,” they repeat in unison.

“Good. The *E* stands for *exponents*.” She writes *exponents* on the board. “What does the *E* stand for?”

“Exponents,” the students repeat.

“I didn’t hear everyone,” Mrs. Levenson says. “Taylor, eyes on me. I don’t want anyone to lose participation points today.” She waits quietly while Taylor turns and faces her. “Thank you. Now, Taylor, what does the *E* stand for?”

“Exponents,” Taylor reads from the board.

“Yes.” Mrs. Levenson turns back to the board. “Moving on,” she continues, “the *M* stands for *multiply*, and the *D*