

How Do We Know When Students Are Engaged?

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Educational author and former teacher, Dr. Michael Schmoker shares in his book, *Results Now*, a study that found of 1,500 classrooms visited, 85 percent of them had engaged less than 50 percent of the students. In other words, only 15 percent of the classrooms had more than half of the class at least paying attention to the lesson.

So, how do they know if a student is engaged? What do "engaged" students look like? In my many observations, here's some evidence to look for:

Teacher-Directed Learning

You will see students...

- Paying attention (alert, tracking with their eyes)
- Taking notes (particularly Cornell)
- Listening (as opposed to chatting, or sleeping)
- Asking questions (content related, or in a game, like 21 questions or I-Spy)
- Responding to questions (whole group, small group, four corners, [Socratic Seminar](#))
- Following requests (participating, [Total Physical Response](#) (TPR), storytelling, Simon Says)
- Reacting (laughing, crying, shouting, etc.)

Student-Directed Learning

You see students individually or in small groups...

- Reading critically (with pen in hand)
- Writing to learn, creating, planning, problem solving, discussing, debating, and asking questions)
- Performing/presenting, inquiring, exploring, explaining, evaluating, and experimenting)
- Interacting with other students, gesturing and moving

To boil the descriptions above down and get at the essence of student engagement, whether for teacher-directed learning or student-directed learning, engaged

means students are active. Is that surprising? I shouldn't think so. If true learning is to occur, then students have to be at the very least participants in the process, and not merely products.

Activity and Ownership

I believe that the majority of teachers pick up on the audience cues as they direct-teach and can tell if a student is not interested or not engaged. Most teachers act on what they see and adjust their instruction to try to engage all of their students. However, no matter how hard teachers work at making it interesting, a lecture is still a lecture, and having students simply listen is still a passive action. The solution is simple: If a teacher wants to increase student engagement, then the teacher needs to increase student activity -- ask the students to do something with the knowledge and skills they have learned. Break up the lecture with learning activities. Let them practice. Get them moving. Get them talking. Make it so engaging that it will be difficult for students *not* to participate.

The ultimate engagement is to put the learner in charge of learning. Create a rich learning environment and a motivation to learn, and the students do all the hard work of learning, while the teacher merely facilitates. It sounds so easy.

I do not minimize the hard work involved in creating those rich learning scenarios, custom-made motivators and engaging learning content. And it is a bit risky. Sometimes it works like a charm, and other times it would have been better to assign seat work. But we keep trying, improving, and enhancing until we get it right.

How have you found success in engaging your students?

[Ben Johnson's Profile](#)

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Best Practices to Engage Students

Original URL:

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-engagement-definition-ben-johnson>