

## The Code for Student Engagement - ASCD

14-17 minutes

Eric showed up every day, but that was it. He wanted to be left alone. Unfortunately, that wasn't my jam as his teacher. I believed in kids enough to push them. Pushing Eric, though—however private and polite—sometimes proved nudgey enough to inspire his use of "special" words to let me know what he thought of me. Eric was not subtle.

I didn't know him well, this sophomore in my history class. Honestly, I hadn't tried to know him. I just knew he wasn't complying. I worried more about securing Eric's compliance than about understanding the heavy burdens he might be carrying. I knew my content. I knew my capacity and the urgency of the work. I needed Eric to bend, and he didn't. I resented that, and so resented him.

I resented him for walking into my Malcolm X lesson and marrying his head to the desk. The school bell didn't move him. Neither did my enthusiastic welcome, nor my effort to create curiosity ("Here's one of the most misunderstood voices of American history"). Eric's head stayed down.

My jumpstart was on the projector screen. *Prior Knowledge Check: List up to five facts or ideas you already know about Malcolm X and write three questions you want answered about the man.* Eric didn't stir. Worse, almost nobody did. Some students collapsed on their desks. Others jumped onto phones or resumed their hallway talks. We were only minutes in, but the lesson was already dead.

In hindsight, I understand why Eric and others dismissed my jumpstart.

### The Engagement Equation

Lesson activities have a shot to generate real engagement if two conditions exist: (1) Success is reachable, and (2) the incentive attached to engagement is worthwhile. Here's the equation:

***Successability x Worthwhileability = High Engagement***

So where did I fall short? First, *successability* was low for my prompt. It did not require prior knowledge, but it favored students who had some. It gave the impression that *some* awareness of Malcolm X should be there, enough to generate questions. Surely there were kids who thought, *Another thing I don't know.* So even on this task for which there were no correct answers, the *feeling* of success might only be realized by those with existing knowledge or curiosities. If students knew and wondered nothing of the man, then what was the point?

“

**True essential questions are personally worthwhile and broadly applicable. They captivate and carry students into content.**





### **Chad Prather**

Second, *worthwhileability* was low. Many of my students, like Eric, were present-oriented kids. By contrast, I was future-oriented. "This will help you later" was a justification I could always vibe with. As a kid, I routinely envisioned my life years down the road. I thought about college and career options at a young age. Some of my students were just like me, but many were not. They focused on the now. Their motivations drew energy from more immediate incentives.

I imagine there are different reasons for present-mindedness. Surely trauma might be a factor. I recall a sophomore once recounting all his murdered friends. He told me with perfect seriousness, "I won't make it to 18, Prather." (He did, thankfully.) Super smart kid: a quick study, thoughtful, strategic, and reflective. But essays and projects took time, which he didn't think he had, so he declined the work he was ready for. Many present-oriented kids, fortunately, are not touched by such traumas. They just happen to be wired around the currentness of life. Either way, as incentives go, "This will help later" doesn't cut it.

So my jumpstart didn't cut it, not for present-oriented kids like Eric. Against Instagram, gossip, and sleep, all of which met very current needs, my prior-knowledge check felt inconsequential. It didn't pull kids in, so most turned aside. With no spark, I couldn't ignite the rest of the lesson.

There weren't many wins that day. I went home, crashed into comfort food, and began watching reruns of the crime drama *The Wire*. I listened to Detective Bunk Moreland accuse a well-known "Robin Hood" named Omar Little of murdering a state's witness. Omar, who robbed drug dealers for a living and dispersed their treasure through the community, denied involvement. He insisted he never perpetrated anything against law-abiding citizens, and he lectured that Detective Bunk seemed willing to pin a crime on Omar not because the charge

was justified but because it was convenient. "A man's got to have a code," Omar said.

The statement struck me. *What would students think of this idea, that people live by codes, that they must live by codes? Would they agree? Would they want to talk about their codes? Would there be interest? Could codes carry us into a new study ... of, say, Malcolm X?*

## Cracking the Code

At the next class meeting I pressed PLAY as soon as the bell rang. The scene projected onto my whiteboard. Students settled quickly, hearing Omar and sensing this was not a normal history video. "A man's got to have a code."

I gave my new jumpstart instructions:

*I don't know that I've ever seen tighter engagement than I observed during that jumpstart. Pens blazing, phones away, heads bowed. "What's your code?" was winning against Instagram, gossip, and sleep. After seven minutes, the room spoke: "More time, Prather!"*

One student was finished: Eric. He handed me two single-spaced pages of writing. *Two full pages in seven minutes!* "Read this after class," he said. So I did. It was two deeply personal pages about the lack of loyalty in Eric's life and the danger of counting on people. His code was clear: *Trust no one.*

There were so many compelling pieces. Some students kept their work to themselves, some invited me to read later, and some volunteered to share. I listened and tried to learn as students spoke. So much courage. So much power.

Before too long I transitioned to Malcolm X. I outlined our purpose: *Malcolm X was both loved and feared. Why? What was his code? You've identified yours. Can you identify his? Do you connect with his? What would he say about yours?* I explained that his final speech would be our main source of information, so we were looking to construct the Malcolm X Code of February 1965. We started with a short biographical video before diving into text.

My previous invitation to explore a leader through speech analysis had not held attention, but this code approach did. Students seemed to find the concept interesting. There was *worthwhileability*. Perhaps the exploration of someone else's life rules, and the implicit opportunity to reflect more on their own, led students to feel this lesson was worthwhile.

I also think the lesson felt doable to students, that its challenges were surmountable. For one thing, in "What's his code?", students understood what I was asking. They had already made personal sense of the question through the jumpstart, so they knew how to think about it. Second, a biographical video clip functioned as an anticipatory scaffold. Seeing snippets of Malcolm X's life triggered some gut-hunches about his perspective and opinions. By the time they dove into the speech, students had already framed some first thoughts—confidence seeds—about Malcolm X's code.

Malcolm X's final speech was long. Chunking it into short, spaced-out segments made it more manageable. Even still, handing it off and saying "Annotate!" would have been too much. The students needed a model of expert thinking. They needed to hear each other's thoughts bounce around. They needed access to their teacher for additional support. I planned my instruction to respond to these needs. In annotating, we gradually shifted from teacher-modelled thinking to whole-class thinking and then to solo- or partnered-thinking. I made myself available for additional guided practice after students began annotating by themselves. A handful joined me, including Eric. With just a bit of facilitation, he was all in. Nearly all the students were—they drew inferences, questioned, and made personal connections. They arrived at some common takes of Malcolm X's code: *Think for yourself; don't believe everything you hear. Speak so others take you seriously. Stand up and defend yourself; don't get pushed around.*

## Lesson Planning Tip

For lesson activities to generate real engagement, two conditions for students must exist: (1) Success must be attainable and (2) the incentive attached to engagement has to be worthwhile.

I think the success of the jumpstart propelled students into higher domains of critical thinking and greater depth of knowledge. By the end of the week, they were transferring the code concept from *individual* to *institution*, evaluating a piece of our school's code from the perspective of 1965 Malcolm X. Students were asked to write a persuasive essay, differentiated according to student readiness, about how Malcolm X would've viewed the school's motto. I wanted them to express their ideas clearly without worrying about essay structure or transitions. Some students had no such anxieties. Their writing skills were well developed, and they were ready to exhibit clear thinking without the aid of organizational scaffolds. Others, like Eric, were emerging writers not yet ready to build an essay from start to finish. For them a guided-essay diagram provided sentence stems that cleared a space for the thinking they needed to share.

Many of my students wrote wonderful essays explaining how Malcolm X might have evaluated our instructional focus, and they concluded with personal assessments of that evaluation, implicitly tying back into their personal life codes. But others chose not to engage in the essay assessment. They were *academically ready* for this task, but they chose to let it be. I don't know all the reasons *why*: a lot of life can happen between class meetings, on buses, after school, and over weekends. A student may be ready to tackle a hard thing one day but lack the emotional space to receive or engage in it the next. And I myself made mistakes in my teaching—misses that sit with me still today, four years later.

But I also sit with this: Eric passed that essay assessment. *He had not attempted a single one all year.* This one, though, he passed. Barely, perhaps; but sometimes we go miles and miles just for that barely.

## "Decoding" the Truths

What truths jump out as I reflect on this lesson?

First, not every student comes with prior knowledge of the content, but every student does come with knowledge *prior to* the content. Teachers must create opportunities for students to share their existing knowledge. This is part of the curricular flexibility of differentiated instruction. DI-focused teachers understand the pressures of jam-packed courses, but they also understand student engagement. They know students will invest more deeply when they feel *present* in the content or components of the lesson.

Second, teachers can leverage student perspectives to improve teaching practices. When we listen to kids, we come to know them better. Knowing them changes our pedagogy, sometimes in small but mighty ways. Reading about the lack of loyalty in Eric's life, I realized he saw the world through distrustful eyes: *No one has my back.* For the remainder of our short time together, I looked for ways to communicate, "I've got you," and then back it up.

Third, we need to think about *worthwhileability* and *successability* all the time. Are my essential questions worthwhile? Are they relevant to my students' lives? Are they even essential, or are they merely content-specific unit questions? "How do you multiply two fractions," for instance, is *not* an essential question. One that is: "Which matters more, the process or result?" Students can tackle this essential question in every academic discipline, but they can also explore it in the hallways of their own lives. I witnessed an amazing discussion once about the unwritten rules of fighting. The students sounded like they had just read Machiavelli, arguing over who had more honor: the "winning" fighter who disregarded the socially accepted rules of combat, or the "loser" who respected those rules. Process or result? True essential questions are personally worthwhile and broadly applicable. They captivate and carry students into content. They form a bridge between the familiar (how is this process/result question relevant to me?) and the strange (what does it have to do with multiplying fractions?).

If *worthwhileability* gets students to run the lesson race ("Alright, you've got my attention"), then *successability* equips them to leap the hurdles ("I made it over the first one, I can make it over the next"). In planning we should ask, "What are my students ready for as they approach the next challenge in the lesson?", recognizing that different students may need different supports. If the hurdles are way too high (or way too low, for that matter) then the race becomes disrespectful. We have to think about our materials, modeling, and methods as instruments of student progression. *Can I manipulate this text, this essay prompt, this test item, this discussion protocol? Can I scaffold it down for students who need support? Can I intensify it up for those ready to stretch? And how do I know when they're ready?* This kind of reflection drives differentiation. If we just press forward from task to task, unreflective about the impact of our instruction, or inconsiderate of student needs and readiness, then we risk turning our lessons into breeding grounds for struggle (the bad kind) and demoralization.

## Lessons That Matter

At the end of the day, great teaching is loving. We love students well when we embrace them—when we strive to know them, hear their stories, accept their experiences, and begin to understand their eyes on the world.

I learned hard truths about Eric through his eyes. Understanding how he saw people made me a better teacher for him. Did Eric completely transform? Not at all. The weight of his life got in the way. *A lot*. But Eric and I related differently for the rest of that year. I was able to engage him more. I knew better how to protect his dignity in the classroom. I knew the importance of having his back in a world where no one was loyal.

Students get to decide when and how to invite us in. We need to accept the invitations. *Embracing* kids—understanding and accepting them—makes possible a more compassionate pedagogy, one that *nourishes* and *guards* more authentically.

Embrace. Nourish. Guard.

That's *my* code.