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4 C's for Better Student Engagement

15–19 minutes

CHALLENGE: Students are less focused and engaged in the classroom.

Teachers, leaders, families, and policymakers have noted with alarm that student engagement has plummeted since schools returned to in-person learning. Many educators perceive that students' attention is constantly diverted by digital distractions, making sustained focus nearly impossible. In fact, a recent poll of 1,400 teachers across grades 4–12 found that 80 percent expressed concerns about students' engagement with classroom learning (Gradient Learning, 2023).

But we know schooling wasn't perfect in 2019; the pandemic and its consequences have highlighted problems that were hiding in plain sight. As practicing K–12 educators who've long written about various aspects of engagement, we believe a significant problem in discussing student engagement lies in how it's measured. Too often, measuring *behavioral* engagement, like physical signals of attentiveness, compliance in task completion, and the number of clicks on a digital learning platform, takes precedence. Cognitive engagement is routinely overlooked.

Real engagement isn't just engagement *of* students (signs of attentiveness and fulfilling requirements); it's also engagement *by* students, evidence that they are interacting with what they learn. Measuring "engagement by" means asking things like, How often do students pose questions about the content (not just task clarification)? Or make connections between ideas and concepts during discussions? Or act upon teacher feedback? Drawing on our experiences as educators and a book two of us coauthored on student engagement (Reeves, Fisher, & Frey, 2023), we offer four C's behind teaching practice that fosters engagement *by* students, and ways to put these four C's into practice.

1. Connections: Build the Foundation

Students thrive in classrooms filled with positive human connections. Healthy teacher-student relationships have strong potential to accelerate student learning (Hattie, 2023). But it's the *student* who gauges the quality of the relationship, so their perception matters. Students also feel connected to the learning itself when they perceive it as meaningful. Again, *perception* is key. We know why the content we're teaching is important, but do students? Two strategies can aid each kind of connection.

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First, "campaign" for relationships. Fostering real teacher-student relationships, like most worthwhile efforts, requires frequency, duration, and intensity. So, identify a hard-to-reach student in your class and seek to establish (or rebuild) a relationship with them. Every day, for 10 days in a row, engage in a two-minute conversation with that student—in the hallway, during lunch, or in the bus line. Follow one rule: don't talk about school (Wlodkowski, 1983). Find out about their interests and let them learn a bit about you. Then identify the next student in need of connection and repeat the cycle. Doing this strategically throughout the year helps you continually reinvest in relationships.

The second strategy is *baking in relevance*. Relevance in learning can play a key role in student engagement— but relevance is mediated by the *student's* perception of the curriculum's value. At the lowest end of the scale of relevance posited by Stacy Priniski and her colleagues (2018) is *personal association*. For instance, a science teacher providing instruction about oceans may ask who has been to a beach before. While well-intentioned, the effect is short-lived. *Personal usefulness* is more sustained; the student sees how they can use what is being taught. That same science teacher might demonstrate how concepts about ocean temperature and wind speed will be used as variables in an upcoming lab experiment on hurricanes. At the highest level of Priniski's continuum is *personal identification*, in which learners link content to building their present and future identities. Sharing information on the high demand for data scientists and meteorologists could help students connect this content to possible future career identities.

Make relevance an intentional part of your daily practice by telling students why their learning is important. Why are we learning about word spacing in writing? *Spaces help our readers read what we've written.* Why are we learning about the product property of exponents? *Mathematicians use this as a tool to make very large calculations simpler.* When possible, link relevance to students' personal interests. *Taylor, you're a skateboarder. Check out how lift and thrust make it possible for you to do those big ollies.*

2. Conditions: Cultivate a High-Expectations Atmosphere

Students are incredibly sensitive to the expectations of their teacher. In one study, two groups of students in grades 2–7 who had similar levels of reading achievement at the beginning of the year showed markedly different achievement at the year's end (Rubie-Davies et al., 2020). The variable was the teacher's expectations: Students with teachers who overestimated their ability outperformed those whose teachers underestimated their ability.

High-expectations teachers set challenging learning intentions and success criteria, develop academic goals with their students, and rely on heterogeneous grouping. In contrast, low-expectations teachers ask more close-ended, low-level questions, group by ability, spend more time repeating directions, and reserve praise for correct answers (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). To support high expectations, it's key to pair challenging learning goals with regular feedback so students can monitor their learning. Especially at the beginning of teaching content, assess formatively, using the learning intentions and success criteria in each lesson. Provide students with frequent opportunities to gauge their progress.

Research on teacher expectations reveals that even when low-expectations teachers try to differentiate lessons according to students' learning profiles, they ignore a central principle of differentiation: that the learning students ultimately achieve should remain constant while the paths to get there vary (Tomlinson, 2017). We telegraph low expectations when we accept a lower standard of work from a student in a misguided attempt to be kind. Instead, if a student struggles with the learning intention, scaffold and support their learning. Using heterogeneous groups—with academic diversity in each group—is one way to provide support, especially if a teacher designs group tasks such that collaboration is essential for success success. For instance, a math teacher we work with hosts a 15-minute Mastery Monday each week. Each learning group selects one math problem from last week's challenge set that gave at least some kids in that group difficulty, and the group makes another attempt to solve it together.

A warm classroom climate also supports high-expectations teaching by giving students an emotionally safe space to learn. Pair student feedback with high expectations and warmth: *I'm giving you this feedback because I have high expectations for you and I know you can reach them.* Use digital voice feedback extensions like Mote so students can hear your supportive tone of voice, not just read your words. And deliberately foster an emotionally supportive peer climate. Students must understand that help-seeking is an essential dimension of learning at high levels. Teachers can create posters with sentence frames for offering and accepting help or create a "help wanted" area in the classroom in which students can post requests. Peers can be taught phrases to say to each other as emotional scaffolds (such as "We can do hard things. Let's keep going") and students can be encouraged to ask themselves: *Have I offered help today—and accepted help? Have I asked for help today? Have I politely declined help because I wanted to keep trying?*

3. Challenge: Choose Policies that Encourage Persistence

The failure in how educators talk about failure is that while we claim it's essential for learning, grading policies tell students otherwise (Reeves et al., 2023). Teachers tell students a growth mindset is important, but then grade them on every attempt to learn. Students sometimes find themselves so far behind that within a matter of weeks, they realize they can't overcome the point deficit no matter what. Engagement plummets: the hoodie goes up and the head goes down.

Grades are often perceived as a mechanism for motivating disengaged students—but they rarely are. The field knows a lot about what does motivate kids to challenge themselves, including:

- Feeling competent at what one is doing.

- Understanding the significance of what one is learning.

- Receiving actionable feedback about next steps in learning.

- Having opportunities to make decisions (Reeves et al., 2023).

Two overall practices help educators revise their grading policies to maximize these research-proven motivators. First, separate product and process. Grades should be used to report academic progress compared to the standards being taught. But in many cases, a single number or letter is used to also convey a stew of non achievement factors, including behavior, attendance, and effort. This practice demotivates many learners.

The solution: Separately grade product criteria (which capture students' academic performance toward goals and reflect how they demonstrated learning) and process criteria (which reflect non achievement data that impact learning, like citizenship, peer relationships, and persistence). A more nuanced grading system makes it possible to report, for instance, that a skilled learner has problematic habits when it comes to collaborating with others—or to acknowledge a student who is not yet achieving at expected levels for his resilience (Guskey, 2020).

Another way to make grading serve motivation is to reconsider what goes in the gradebook. Practice work throughout the unit, such as in-class assignments and homework, should be collected and returned with feedback. However, this is practice, not the game; performance on it shouldn't contribute to the overall points earned. Reserve points for end-of-unit assessments of learning. We've successfully used such competency-based grading practices for 15 years at the school where we work. We also allow students who don't initially earn a passing score to retake another version of the exam after they've completed the unit's homework and attended tutorials (which cultivates persistence, resilience, and help-seeking). Students' motivation is reset because they've received actionable feedback, made a choice about whether to get help, and (hopefully) feel competent.

4. Control: Give It to Students!

Where does control of learning truly reside? Here's the news: it's not with us. Educators can create conditions and use evidence-based teaching practices, but it's the student who's in the driver's seat when it comes to learning. This doesn't mean we should fall back to the "I taught them, but they didn't learn" excuse; it means we should intentionally change instructional practices so that students drive their own learning.

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Sharing control involves teaching self-regulation. When students have habituated to an external locus of control, they look to us for what to do next; this reduces the teacher to a supervisor of tasks. Strengthening students' internal locus of control requires boosting their self-regulation skills, especially their ability to do six things:

- Know their current level of understanding.

- Know where they need to go next in learning.

- Select tools to guide their learning.

- Seek feedback and recognize errors as opportunities to learn.

- Monitor their progress and adjust their learning.

- Recognize their understanding and teach others (Fisher et al., 2023).

These learning skills accelerate achievement because they cultivate active learning—and give students confidence to take on challenges.

Talk with students individually about their results from initial assessments and learning intentions you've set, to help them understand where they are in their learning and where they are headed. Create more opportunities for students to exercise choice and decision making, and regularly schedule events through which students actively seek feedback. For instance, at a designated time each week, have students leave a piece of work on their desks for their peers to provide feedback. All members of the class rotate from one desk to the next, leaving signed sticky notes offering tips and advice.

A second strategy that helps students control their learning is empowering them to set their own goals. As students develop self-regulatory dispositions, they'll be better equipped to set goals and monitor progress toward them. In conferences, help students, especially disengaged students, formulate self-referenced, "personal best" goals. For example, reluctant readers aren't necessarily going to be motivated by a grade-level Lexile goal that seems too distant. Better to set incremental goals that let them gauge progress, not just mastery (*Your reading gains this last month went from a 240 Lexile to a 280! That's your personal best. What's next?*) Equip learners with the means to monitor their own progress, such as tracking how many pages they have read or how many math problems they have completed.

Tuning Them in to Learning

Getting students tuned in to learning requires more than getting them to pay attention and fulfill schoolwork requirements. It means seeing to it that students are enthusiastically engaging with content and fellow learners. Let's set up conditions to encourage such active participation. By thinking beyond the "grades-as-rewards" box in terms of motivation and focusing on the four C's discussed here, we'll increase the odds that students will focus on their learning, no matter the distractions.

Reflect & Discuss

➤ Have you found your students were more easily distracted the last year or so than they were before most schools went all-remote? Why do you think that is?

➤ What steps could you take to help students see greater relevance in their learning? Or to create a "warm" classroom or school climate of high expectations?

Better Learning Through Structured Teaching

An instructional framework any teacher can use to help students to be more successful and self-directed learners.
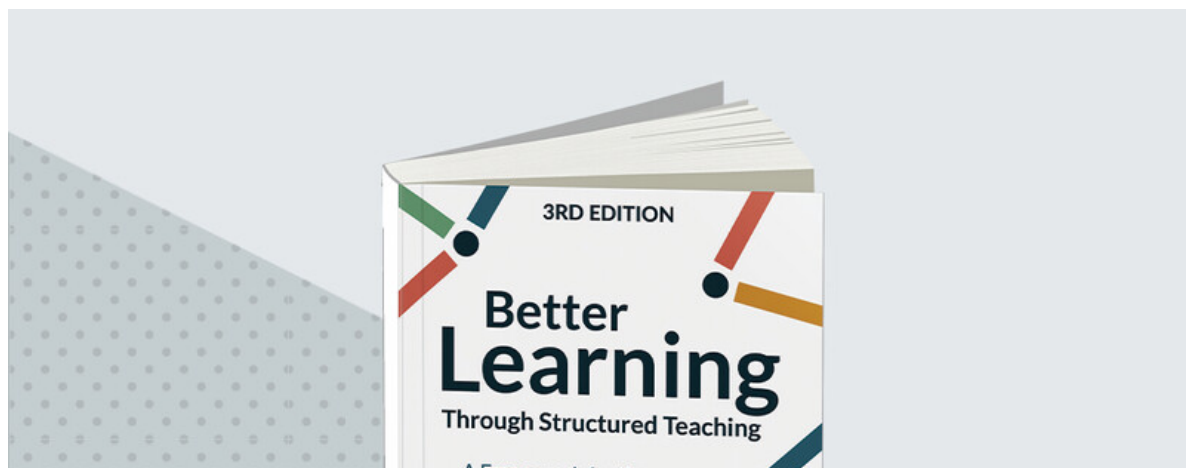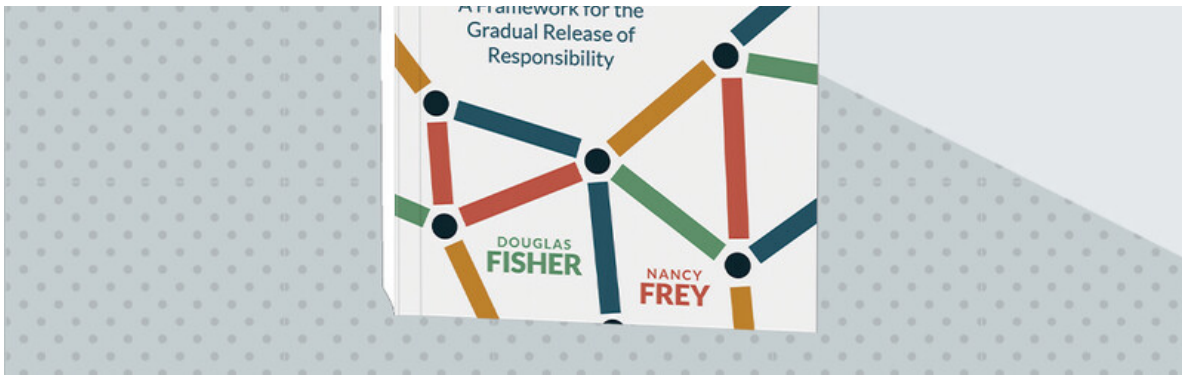
What to Try When Students Can't Focus

You've created a station-rotation lesson. Ten minutes in, you see students' attention drifting; they're surfing the web or checking their phones, seemingly unable to focus. Don't blame the devices, says James M. Lang, author of *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* (Basic Books, 2020).

His book acknowledges that getting students to focus can seem like the Holy Grail. Lang shares approaches—from research and his observations of many classrooms—for garnering that attention. Chapters explore five key aspects of learning that compel students' attention: Community (the "least distracted class" Lang observed was one where the teacher regularly drew out all voices and connected students); curiosity; assessment; structure; and novelty (artists of all kind use these last two). Including assessment may seem odd, but many kids do focus when tested. Lang explains how to "take advantage of the attitude-focusing power of graded assessment without the collateral damage grades can cause."

Just as teachers hope to do for students, Lang (director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University in Massachusetts) hopes to draw educators' focus away from "distractions" toward engaging kids:

> We've been sidetracked in recent years by assertive voices who lay the entire blame for our distractible natures at the feet of our laptops and phones … [but] teachers have always wrestled with capturing and sustaining students' attention. We need to turn our heads away from distraction and toward attention. Our challenge is not to wall off distractions, [but] to cultivate attention and help students use it in service of meaningful learning.

—*Naomi Thiers*