

M1-S4: Rethinking Student Engagement

CLH	Hi Gina! It is time for another episode of Teaching Across Learning Environments!
GK	So what are we up to? This is module 1,
CLH	Module 1, Session 4, rethinking student engagement.
GK	Such an important topic. You know, when NYSED surveyed teachers about what they felt they needed support with during the remote and hybrid teaching phase of our lives, the number one topic was student engagement. Specifically, teachers were focused on and super stressed out about motivation and active participation.
CLH	Yeah, here are some specific requests for help in the words of New York State teachers: "How to encourage engagement, participation, responsibility and independence", "How to engage the students who are avoiding/ghosting", "The greatest challenge is getting students to engage with the work with integrity and intention", "Professional development on how to motivate students who are at home and easily distractible", and "I would like clear steps that have worked for other schools to engage students and motivate them to do well in a hybrid online environment".
GK	Well that seems pretty clear. So, engagement, Christina, do you have a working definition of student engagement?
CLH	I can come up with some words. So, I think of engagement as attention, curiosity, interest and passion. So all of those things that students show when they're learning and how that relates to their overall motivation to learn.
GK	That sounds about right, and when you dig into the research on student engagement, all of those things you mentioned get boiled down to basically three dimensions of student engagement. The three dimensions of student engagement are: The behavioral dimension, the affective dimension and cognitive dimension. This gets a little dense so just bear with me. Behavioral engagement looks like student compliance basically, listening carefully, completing assignments, the things we kind of need them to do and also when they're actively participating in class, working with their peers, actively engaging in class discussion, that's the behavior we can be looking for that signals engagement. It's not the only dimension, though. Cognitive engagement looks like students putting forth effort to master content. It's when they seek challenges and self regulate things like planning, setting goals, solving problems. And here's the one you were really into, and me too, actually, affective engagement, looks like students demonstrating interest, engaging in relationships, and exhibiting a

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	<p>sense of belonging, like engaging in discussions, posing questions, seeking help, exhibiting curiosity. Those are the three things, behavioral, cognitive and affective.</p>
CLH	<p>Got it. OK, so that sounds like an ideal student to me, if only those things came that easily. This description is making me wonder about two biggies, Trauma and Equity.</p> <p>I mean, we know that traumatized students may be withdrawn or have a hard time completing work on a standard schedule, and be reluctant to seek out help from teachers or peers. If we were looking for signs of engagement related to the three domains, these students would look like they aren't engaged. And maybe that is the case, and our job as teachers is to engage them until they appear in class to read as engaged in an observable way. But we might consider that these students aren't necessarily dis-engaged. Rather, because of trauma responses, they cannot display "engagement" in the traditional ways described above.</p>
GK	<p>100%, and this even goes beyond students dealing with trauma. Demonstrating engagement in standard ways doesn't always align with the abilities of English language learners and students with disabilities. And, depending on a student's cultural and social background, demonstrating engagement in these traditional ways may run counter to their own values and experiences. For example, a student who has learned at home a culture of respect that asserts that 'Children should speak when spoken to'. Expecting that student to raise their hand, speak up in class discussions, or approach the teacher to ask questions, that may be an unrealistic expectation or way to measure engagement.</p>
CLH	<p>Yeah, well that's a really interesting way to look at it. The traditional ways of understanding and measuring student engagement are all based on students displaying, demonstrating, exhibiting, or generally appearing to be "engaged". This focus on activity or outcome results in this one size fits all kind of mentality that doesn't really account for differences in cognitive, behavioral, academic, or cultural backgrounds or different experiences or capacities. To authentically engage all students, we need to turn to culturally responsive and sustaining educational (CRSE) practices.</p>
GK	<p>And fortunately, that's entirely what module two of this course is about. But for now, let's get back to the remote and hybrid environment, and we can just start with the classic web-cam issue that most of us were dealing with during emergency remote teaching.</p> <p>I'm sending you a quote from Carolyn Tyner, who teaches at Sunset Park Prep in Brooklyn NY. She shared her thoughts on the topic of webcam use in a February 2021 piece for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) blog "Teacher to Teacher". What does she say?</p>
CLH	<p>Got it. She says: "Some teachers will argue that keeping cameras off allows students to be complacent. Yet, many schools — including mine — have opted not to require students to turn their cameras on. We are attempting to be trauma-informed and respect their privacy, especially in low-income districts where students may be self-conscious about their living situations. At my own school, the heated debate continues among teachers as we struggle with attendance and engagement. Perhaps the bigger question is: How do we really measure engagement? Attendance and</p>

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	<p>turning in assignments is one thing, but in regular years, these two factors do not prove a student is truly, actively engaging during class time... I wonder: Are students really less engaged during remote learning? Or has remote learning just revealed a lack of engagement that was always there, masked by physical attendance?"</p>
GK	<p>And there you go: As with so many other aspects of teaching and learning, the emergency remote teaching put a spotlight on pre-existing challenges that require us, as teachers, to rethink how we teach. When it comes to student engagement, one way to rethink our work is to focus less on what student engagement looks like and more on what teaching practices are most effective at generating a student's sense of engagement. So how do we cut through the obstacles to really identifying student engagement?</p>
CLH	<p>Some really good help comes from educator Phil Schlechty . He developed an alternative framework for thinking about and fostering student engagement. Phil says that students who are engaged do these three things. Period.:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are attracted to their work. 2. Persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles. 3. Take delight in accomplishing their work.
GK	<p>Delight! A word that is not used often enough in education! But I like the simplicity of this framework. Attracted to their work, persisting in their work, taking delight in accomplishing work. It really gets away from observables like cameras are on or hands are raised.</p>
CLH	<p>Yeah! What any of these three components looks like from the perspective of the teacher might be entirely different. For example, an English language learner may be deeply interested in a topic but be focused on taking notes rather than making eye contact or participating in a class discussion. A student with motor skills issues may struggle to complete an art assignment during a class period but persist with a few modifications. Then a shy student may not demonstrate visible joy when they get an "A" on a class project but might eagerly race home to share the news with their family and friends.</p>
GK	<p>When I looked into Phil Schlechty, I saw that while the basic premise is very simple, he actually really does drill down into some instructional design principles that elaborate more.</p>
CLH	<p>A whole lot more. Schlechty is an elaborator, he describes 10 design elements that teachers can focus on in order to foster student-centered engagement. It's a lot! But we've adapted those elements into teacher action statements. The first one is SELECT. We're going to be using verbs here. - Select appropriate content for your learners (e.g. standards-aligned and differentiated).</p> <p>Okay, so far so good. We've also got:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organize teaching and learning with a clear approach (e.g. problem-solving, discovery, etc.).

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Clarify and Build Consensus around expectations for student performance, covering the who, what, when, where, why and how of process and products of learning. - Protect students from adverse consequences for initial failures (e.g. allowing for revisions). - Focus on Product - Structuring tasks and activities so that what students learn is linked to a product, performance, or an exhibition to which the student attaches their own personal value.
GK	<p>So all of these seem like things people are only halfway done, but so far they seem like things that people do, like teachers do this. Put it into a framework and now we're calling it a design framework for engagement. So this is the lovable part of Phil Schlechty. It's like I already do this, there's a couple of little tweaks like focusing on product when sometimes we focus on process, he's saying 'No, focus on the product' and protect students from harsh deadlines that make them afraid of failure, allow them to revise.</p> <p>So I'm going to do the last five.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Affirm Performance - He's encouraging us to design tasks and activities so that the performance of students is made visible to persons who are significant in their lives. (So it's more about product and performance, things the students might care more about than the little private test takings that happen between a teacher and a student). -Foster Affiliation - Design tasks so that students are provided the opportunity to work with peers as well as parents, outside experts, and other adults, including but not limited to the teacher. -Encourage Novelty & Variety - Provide students the opportunity to employ a wide range of media and approaches when engaged in learning activities. -Offer Choice - Design tasks and activities so that students can exercise choice in terms of what and/or how they learn. -Make Learning Authentic - Link the learning tasks to things that are of real interest or importance to the student.
CLH	<p>So these ten design elements make a lot of sense, and many of us already put some or all of this into practice. But what happens when the modality for the learning experience shifts? What happens when we go remote or hybrid?</p>
GK	<p>Well, if we go back to one of those teachers in the NYS survey, they said their biggest remote teaching concern was "How to motivate students to do their work, ask questions, be proactive, and seek help when they are not in school."</p> <p>I think we can break that down.</p>
CLH	<p>We can totally break that down, first, let's annotate this. First, the teacher is concerned about students "doing their work." Nobody wants (or has the time!) to conduct surveillance on our students. One option would be to pair students to</p>

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	<p>complete a product that they start in the classroom and then complete together during the remote days). Obviously, this won't work for our younger students, so another option may be to use gamification apps that reward students when they complete a learning task .</p>
GK	<p>OK, the next piece is “asking questions” (again, while in the remote environment). One way to help motivate students to ask questions is, obviously, to design prompts that lead them into inquiry. But let’s assume the teacher is thinking about more basic questions like the time-tested and enduring student question:</p> <p>“I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do next.” Which is the question we really want them to ask.</p> <p>This is where routines and structures really come into play . For remote students, teachers can schedule live “check ins” by video conferencing but this can be time consuming and difficult if you are teaching solo. Instead, you might use apps such as Along or the private message functionality in Zoom to allow/encourage students to pose questions directly to you .</p> <p>Provide structured phrasing for questions to help guide them to get to the root (e.g. I can’t find _____; I’m finding _____ difficult to understand; Where can I find _____, etc.). You can also set up these prompts as threads within a discussion board on your LMS and allow group-level access for peers to respond as well (Foster Affiliation) and then you take time at the end of the day to thank those students who helped answer their peer’s question . If you aren’t on an LMS, you can use apps like Padlet to foster threaded discussions as well. You can also move away from text-based discussions and encourage students to post video questions/responses within the thread.</p>
CLH	<p>That’s great and again, for our younger students, these kinds of written activities won’t work. Instead, your remote students (and in-person, for that matter) can use “hand raise” apps such as Classroomq. The teacher would also be able to recognize in real time that a student needs help but respond when the flow of the in-person class allows. If you set up norms for asking questions in this way, you can establish student expectations in terms of the usual time it takes for them to get a response and then you can encourage them to continue working on other activities until you can respond to them. So if you are able to provide more than one way for students to ask questions, then we’re providing them with a safe and supportive learning environment no matter whether they are, in-person or remote.</p>
GK	<p>Nice, so onto the really tough one: How can we get them to “be proactive”? Since we don’t know exactly what our example teacher has in mind when they express concern about their remote students being proactive, we will narrow this down to focus on student progress. The “I’m bored” scenario fits in well here. What do we do with students who move through the remote learning activities quickly?</p> <p>One option is redundancy with variation, or having students complete learning activities in multiple formats (e.g. write a response, create a cartoon with Pixton or a similar app, and/or record a TikTok). Students who complete a task quickly can be encouraged to repeat the task in the other formats. This also builds in choice for all</p>

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	students.
CLH	Yeah and alternatively, if by “proactive” the teacher means something more like “self-directed,” then shaping activities so that students make authentic learning choices at the opening of the assignment (like connecting with their interests) will motivate them to be self-directed . For the hybrid scenario we are working with (students are remote 3 days and in-person 3 days in rotations), it might be useful if students make those initial choices during in-person instruction so that the teacher can help guide them and then have the students complete the activity during remote. You can also build in a component in which the student has to engage the expertise of another adult to further foster affiliation beyond relationships with the teacher .
GK	This teacher's question about how a student can seek help when not in the physical classroom or school reminds us that while we are focusing on teacher strategies and practices in TALE Academy modules and sessions, some questions require systemic answers. While things like ‘Virtual Schools’ are opening across New York State to provide sustainable, long-term approaches to remote and hybrid teaching and learning, all levels of the education system need to rethink structures, resources, policies and practices. A different module of the TALE Academy will focus on strategies that school leaders can take to support their teachers in this important work as well. Sometimes things are just out of your control so rethinking schedules/blocks, team-teaching, teacher rotation, work-based learning, and performance-based learning and assessment are just a few among the many practices that school leaders can work with their faculty on to consider and integrate as we all rethink and reimagine education in New York State.
CLH	Whew, that is a lot! But it’s fun to problem-solve and get the creative juices flowing.
GK	It’s true, next, we’re turning it over to our listeners. How would you respond to the question, “How to motivate students to do their work, ask questions, be proactive, and seek help when they are not in school”?
CLH	Yep so listeners you’ll get a chance to take on a part of that question in the workbook for this session.
GK	And you’ll find a lot more in the resources section and the choice board.
CLH	Alright, that’s it for today Gina. Bye.