

## CHAPTER 1

### WHY ENGAGE? WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK AND WHY YOU SHOULD READ IT

A family friend finished her first semester of college teaching. Since she wasn't used to having a winter break, she told me that she was actually feeling a bit guilty. I suggested that she take the time to “jazz up” her lessons and make them more engaging. Her response became the impetus for this book.

“I did fifty-nine PowerPoints last semester and I am not going to retire them.”

Fifty-nine PowerPoint presentations: I can't judge her. Can any of us judge her, really?

My first semester of university teaching included many more PowerPoint slides than my students would have liked. But eighteen years of working to more effectively engage millennials and adult students have shifted the paradigm for me. I have learned that for my classes to be engaging – and therefore more successful – they need to be more about my students and less about me. And definitely less about PowerPoint slides. We've all been there: the classroom where the professor stands at a lectern and drones, the conference where the keynote speaker reads slides, or the staff meeting where we are handed an agenda and fake pay attention.

To be clear, there will always be a place in higher education for a well-delivered, interesting and passionate lecture, but faculty who want to better and more comprehensively engage their students need to stop viewing the lecture-with-slides model as the norm. Research shows that humans learn better when we are fully engaged, and that lectures aren't a foolproof engagement technique. This book will serve as guide for you.

## Why Engage?



**“Boredom is rage spread thin.”**

**– Paul Tillich, Philosopher**

### **Student Engagement Cannot Wait**

There’s more to engagement than just having students participate actively in class. Engagement is a mindset, whereby you as the educator become less of a “sage on the stage” and more of a facilitator of student learning. Physiology professor Macknight (2016) writes, “To provide quality education what we deliver must be engaging and authentic. By engaging, we mean that students are involved in the learning process and not simply passive receptacles for the material.”

If you ask someone to describe a typical college classroom, he or she will most likely describe a room with the professor in front and students sitting quietly in rows. Indiana Jones taught archeology in that same setting. The crew from “Animal House” slept through classes in rooms designed the same way. Despite the fact that this is the image that conjured up in popular culture, there isn’t any evidence that this is actually the most effective way to teach. “Evidence is lacking that (lecturing) should be the only instructional approach used, especially when too many college students passively sit in classrooms while pretending to pay attention” (Lumpkin, Achen and Dodd, 2015).

Doyle writes that “Creating learner-centered environments is the most important thing that faculty can do to optimize student learning” (2008). Learner-centered environments are just what they sound like: a space where the students are the center of the activity, not the instructor. Yet think of the university classroom: the desk/lectern/professor is at the front of the room with furniture or desks that are anchored to the floor facing the professor. The set-up of most college classrooms makes student-centered learning a compelling challenge for the faculty member.

Tackling the challenge is worth it, however. After all, what is the point of education?

## Wake ‘Em Up—Super-Charging Student Engagement

“We want students to remember the concepts and skills that we teach them (retention) but we also want students to take what they have learned and apply it to new, unrelated contexts” (Cook and Klipfel, 2015).

Our jobs as instructors are more important than ever – which is why we need to meet our 21st Century students where they are, rather than where we might be. Choy, Goh and Sedhu point out in their article “How and Why Students Learn: Development and Validation of the Learner Awareness Levels Questionnaire for Higher Education Students,” “The activities carried out in the classroom and reasons why students learn will determine the type of learning that takes place” (2016).

Hardman (2016) agrees: “Research with university students shows significant levels of retention and understanding being achieved through active approaches to learning...compared to lecturing.” In other words, when we stop viewing the lecture as our default delivery method of information and explore other more student-centered instructional methods, our students will be more successful. When you learn to utilize classroom engagement techniques, you will do more than simply delivering course content. Teaching scholar Jean Mandernach writes that student engagement is essential: “Student engagement is an integral component of a successful learning experience” (2015).



High levels of engagement positively impact student retention. Think of it this way: which kinds of instructional techniques are more likely to make a student feel more involved, and therefore more a part of the class and larger university culture? Research by Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009) asserts that: “What goes on in the teaching and learning programme is significant in student retention.” (Jankowski, 2016) says, “Students who are actively engaged are more satisfied, more likely to complete, and more likely to learn.”

Even if student retention issues are not on your radar, retention is on the radar of every university administrator. “In the current competitive and globalized higher education market, the reputational

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fall-out of low student retention and high student attrition figures can be damaging for institutions” (Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009). Student retention rates have enormous financial implications for all colleges and universities.

One of the universities where I teach has launched a program for first year students called “Learning Communities.” The freshmen live and take several classes together. Even an uncomplicated program like this can have an impact on retention. “Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities during the first year of college had a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence, even after controlling for background characteristics, other college experiences during the first college year, academic achievement, and financial aid” (Kuh et. al 2008).

Student backgrounds, majors or socio-economic levels have less bearing than you may think on how well engagement strategies can improve the educational experience. In addition, when students enjoy college and do well, they stay in school.

The research shows us quite clearly that student engagement is a significant aspect of enriching the classroom experience. So why aren’t more universities requiring their faculty to scale back the lecture model and adopt more student-centered learning strategies? For starters, faculty simply might not know how to identify and integrate student-centered learning strategies into their courses. After all, while faculty members have advanced degrees in their subject areas, the majority have never taken a course in education techniques. To complicate matters, non-tenured faculty may have no access to their college’s instructional development resources. Yet, as higher education research has demonstrated, this professional development is crucial to both the student and the faculty member.

“Because faculty are often untrained in the art and science of teaching, they typically are not familiar with how to proceed or fulfill their instructional goals” (Dunneback and Therrell, 2015). Jankowski places the responsibility of this training on the shoulders of administrators: “Higher education needs to provide the support for faculty to undertake such tasks” (Jankowski, 2016). However,

## ***Wake ‘Em Up—Super-Charging Student Engagement***

professional development training for faculty can fall between the cracks or, for non-tenured faculty in particular, be viewed by administrators as superfluous. This means all faculty—including non-tenured faculty—must be pro-active in the pursuit of their own development books, materials and opportunities.

Before we get into the specifics of how you can improve student engagement, let’s reflect on how students learn and what makes a classroom experience memorable for them. Why do certain engagement strategies work on so many levels to improve learning?

### **Simple Brain Science Behind Engagement**

Don’t wait “until next semester” to engage your 21st Century Learners and don’t worry! You won’t need a degree in neuroscience or physiology to understand how your students absorb and remember the course materials you present in your classes. On the other hand, knowing how the brain works when students are engaged in their learning will help you choose and implement your instructional strategies much more effectively. Thus, understanding the importance and function of engagement must start with an understanding of how students learn and what makes information memorable. This knowledge will help you create and integrate course materials, lessons and experiences in the classroom that will improve your students’ comprehension and learning.

The good news for instructors is that cognitive psychology has found that almost all human brains share important similarities in terms of how they absorb and process information (Cook and Klipfel, 2015). That doesn’t mean, however, that the process of memory-making is not complex.

Forming new memories is not as simple as inserting a memory chip into a computer or putting a memory into a particular mental “filing cabinet.” In fact, memories are actually chemical changes that take place in between the neurons, or synapses, of the brain. Neuroscientists estimate that there are over 100 trillion of these synapses in a typical human brain.

One of the mysteries of memory is how we can forget phone numbers or state capitals, but always remember how to drive or brush