Effective Instructional Practice:

Maximizing Student Engagement in Your Classroom

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Student engagement is most easily defined as "quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities" (Kuh, 2009a, p. 6). Among other behaviors, time on task, quality of effort, participation, and consideration of material outside of class are typically cited as representative of an engaged student (Kuh, 2009a; Mazer, 2012). The National Survey of Student Engagement uses similar measures to determine student engagement, but also acknowledges participation in co-curricular activities (e.g., community based projects) as indicative of engagement (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Overall, engaged students are those who expend more quality effort-- either affectively, behaviorally, or cognitively--on their academic life (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kuh, 2009b; Mazer).

Within the Communication Studies discipline, perhaps the most common operationalization of engagement centers on the work conducted by Mazer (2012), who argued that engagement can be observed through four types of student behaviors: silent in-class behaviors (e.g., attentive listening), oral in-class behaviors (e.g., participation), thinking about course content (e.g., whether and how course content is related to personal and professional needs, interest, and goals), and out-of-class behaviors (e.g., studying). Engagement, then, is easily identifiable by student in-class and out-of-class communication behaviors.

Maximizing student engagement in your classroom is important for three reasons. First, engaged students are more motivated (Mazer, 2013c), report higher

levels of affective and cognitive learning (Frymier & Houser, 2016; Mazer, 2013c), and are more interested in course material (Mazer, 2013b) than unengaged students. Students who are engaged in their academic experience also report high satisfaction with their learning experience (Kuh, 2009b). Second, engaged students persist from one year to the next. Kuh et al. (2008) noted that a student's experience in college, including their level of engagement, is more predictive of their success and persistence than other pre-college characteristics; they suggest that student engagement is a crucial component to student success and persistence toward degree completion and encourage educators to "channel student energy toward educationally effective activities" (p. 555).

Third, student engagement helps to address achievement gap issues (Kuh et al., 2008). Though an engagement-outcome gap has been acknowledged--meaning that students of color and other at-risk populations often study more and earn less impressive grades than their Caucasian or low-risk counterparts--Kuh et al. stated that the effects of engagement must not be overlooked. Indeed, they found that the effects of engagement on first-year grades and persistence are stronger among students of color and students with lower ability as compared to Caucasian and high ability students. In short, engagement and the educational practices that foster engagement play a meaningful part in the experience of students who are traditionally recognized as "at-risk."

Five Tips for Maximizing Student Engagement

1. Involve students in the creation of your course. Students may be more engaged in the course from its very onset through collaborative course creation (e.g.,

course syllabus creation; Hudd, 2003) or involving students in decisions made on how their learning will be assessed (Suskie, 2009). By implementing such practices, you can immediately involve students in your courses, which will give them ownership of the course and ideally will set a standard for their engagement regarding content.

2. Active learning can contribute to your students' level of engagement. Barkley (2010) suggested that engaging students through active learning strategies leads to more successful and meaningful experiences for students. Active learning typically is centered on meaningful in-class activities that encourage students to think about the course material. Notably, traditional instruction methods such as discussion also improve student engagement (Finn & Schrodt, 2016); however, it is important to remember that students be actively involved in the discussion.

3. Implement several behaviors into your own teaching practice that are positively associated with student engagement. Be immediate, clear, and utilize relevant self-disclosure, as all of these behaviors are positively associated with student engagement (Borzea & Goodboy, 2016; Mazer, 2013a). Furthermore, displaying positive emotions such as enthusiasm, confidence, and self-assurance also will help promote student engagement (Zhang & Zhang, 2013)

4. Avoid instructor misbehaviors. Indeed, behaviors such as antagonism and poorly delivered lectures (Goodboy & Myers, 2015) have been well-documented as detrimental to student learning. Unsurprisingly, these instructor misbehaviors also have a detrimental effect on student engagement (Borzea & Goodboy, 2016; Broeckelman-Post, Tacconelli, Guzman, Rios, Calero, & Latif, 2016).

5. Work to create a positive classroom climate where students feel welcome,

supported, and valued. By doing so, you will create a space in which students are more apt to exhibit effort and involvement (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). There are a variety of ways to create such an environment. You can utilize confirming behaviors such as positive responses to student questions and interest in student learning as both of these behaviors have been linked to a positive classroom climate (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield). You can also employ verbal approach messages such as humor, personal recognition, and care to develop relationships with students (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004). By creating a positive communication climate, you may implicitly encourage students to build relationships with one another (Sollitto, Johnson, & Myers, 2013).

Assessing Student Engagement

To assess the level of student engagement in your classroom, utilize the 13-item Student Engagement Scale (Mazer, 2012). Notably, while the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE; Kuh, 2009a) is the most common measurement instrument within the majority of higher education (i.e., non-communication) research, it is meant primarily for institutional research and thus largely unsuitable for classroom use.

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