

3c: Engaging Students in Learning

Level 4

Virtually all students are intellectually engaged in challenging content through well-designed learning tasks and activities that require complex thinking by students. The teacher provides suitable scaffolding and challenges students to explain their thinking. There is evidence of some student initiation of inquiry and student contributions to the exploration of important content; students may serve as resources for one another. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed not only to intellectually engage with and reflect upon their learning but also to consolidate their understanding.

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Virtually all students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Lesson activities require high-level student thinking and explanations of their thinking.
- Students take initiative to adapt the lesson by (1) modifying a learning task to make it more meaningful or relevant to their needs, (2) suggesting modifications to the grouping patterns used, and/or (3) suggesting modifications or additions to the materials being used.
- Students have an opportunity for reflection and closure on the lesson to consolidate their understanding.

Level 3

The learning tasks and activities are designed to challenge student thinking, inviting students to make their thinking visible. This technique results in active intellectual engagement by most students with important and challenging content and with teacher scaffolding to support that engagement. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson is appropriate, providing most students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Most students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Most learning tasks have multiple correct responses or approaches and/or encourage higher-order thinking.
- Students are invited to explain their thinking as part of completing tasks.
- Materials and resources require intellectual engagement, as appropriate.
- The pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.

Level 2

The learning tasks and activities require only minimal thinking by students and little opportunity for them to explain their thinking, allowing most students to be passive or merely compliant. The lesson has a recognizable structure; however, the pacing of the lesson may not provide students the time needed to be intellectually engaged or may be so slow that many students have a considerable amount of “downtime.”

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Some students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks are a mix of those requiring thinking and those requiring recall.
- Student engagement with the content is largely passive; the learning consists primarily of facts or procedures.
- Few of the materials and resources require student thinking or ask students to explain their thinking.
- The pacing of the lesson is uneven—suitable in parts but rushed or dragging in others.

Level 1

The learning tasks/activities, materials, and resources require only rote responses, with only one approach possible. The lesson has no clearly defined structure, or the pace of the lesson is too slow or rushed.

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Few students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks/activities and materials require only recall or have a single correct response or method.
- Instructional materials used are unsuitable to the lesson and/or the students.
- The lesson drags or is rushed.

Level 4

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Level 3

The learning tasks and activities are designed to challenge student thinking, inviting students to make their thinking visible. This technique results in active intellectual engagement by most students with important and challenging content, and with teacher scaffolding to support that engagement. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson is appropriate, providing most students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.

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POSSIBLE EXAMPLES

- Students are asked to write an essay in the style of Hemingway and to describe which aspects of his style they have incorporated.
- Students determine which of several tools—e.g., a protractor, spreadsheet, or graphing calculator—would be most suitable to solve a math problem.
- A student asks whether they might remain in their small groups to complete another section of the activity, rather than work independently.
- Students identify or create their own learning materials.
- Students summarize their learning from the lesson.
- And others...

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POSSIBLE EXAMPLES

- Five students (out of 27) have finished an assignment early and begin taking among themselves; the teacher assigns a follow-up activity.
- Students are asked to formulate a hypothesis about what might happen if the American voting system allowed for the direct election of presidents and to explain their reasoning.
- Students are given a task to do independently, then to discuss with a table group, followed by a reporting from each table.
- Students are asked to create different representations of a large number using a variety of manipulative materials.
- The lesson is neither rushed nor does it drag.
- And others...

Level 2

The learning tasks and activities require only minimal thinking by students and little opportunity for them to explain their thinking, allowing most students to be passive or merely compliant. The lesson has a recognizable structure; however, the pacing of the lesson may not provide students the time needed to be intellectually engaged or may be so slow that many students have a considerable amount of “downtime.”

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Some students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks are a mix of those requiring thinking and those requiring recall.
- Student engagement with the content is largely passive; the learning consists primarily of facts or procedures.
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POSSIBLE EXAMPLES

- Students in only three of the five small groups are figuring out an answer to the assigned problem; the others seem to be unsure how they should proceed.
- Students are asked to fill in a worksheet, following an established procedure.
- There is a recognizable beginning, middle, and end to the lesson.
- The teacher lectures for 20 minutes and provides 15 minutes for the students to write an essay; not all students are able to complete it.
- And others...

Level 1

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CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- Few students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks/activities and materials require only recall or have a single correct response or method.
- Instructional materials used are unsuitable to the lesson and/or the students.
- The lesson drags or is rushed.

POSSIBLE EXAMPLES

- Most students disregard the assignment given by the teacher; it appears to be much too difficult for them.
- Students fill out the lesson worksheet by copying words from the board.
- Students are using math manipulative materials in a rote activity.
- The teacher lectures for 45 minutes.
- Most students don't have time to complete the assignment; the teacher moves on in the lesson.
- And others...

3c ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING

Student engagement in learning is the centerpiece of the Framework for Teaching: all other components contribute to it. When students are engaged in learning, they are not merely “busy,” nor are they only “on task.” Rather, they are intellectually active in learning important and challenging content. The critical distinction between a classroom in which students are compliant and busy and one in which they are engaged is that in the latter, students are developing their understanding through what they do. That is, they are engaged in discussion, debate, answering “what if?” questions, discovering patterns, and the like. They may be selecting their work from a range of (teacher-arranged) choices, and making important contributions to the intellectual life of the class. Such activities don’t typically consume an entire lesson, but they are essential components of engagement.

A lesson in which students are engaged usually has a discernible structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end, with scaffolding provided by the teacher or by the activities themselves. Student tasks are organized to provide cognitive challenge, and then students are encouraged to reflect on what they have done and what they have learned. That is, the lesson has closure, in which teachers encourage students to derive the important learning from the learning tasks, from the discussion, or from what they have read. Critical questions for an observer in determining the degree of student engagement are “What are the students being asked to do? Does the learning task involve thinking? Are students challenged to discern patterns or make predictions?” If the answer to these questions is that students are, for example, filling in blanks on a worksheet or performing a rote procedure, they are unlikely to be cognitively engaged.

In observing a lesson, it is essential not only to watch the teacher but also to pay close attention to the students and what they are doing. The best evidence for student engagement is what students are saying and doing as a consequence of what the teacher does, or has done, or has planned. And while students may be physically active (e.g., using manipulative materials in mathematics or making a map in social studies), it is not essential that they be involved in a hands-on manner; it is, however, essential that they are challenged to be “minds-on.”

The elements of component 3c are:

- **Activities and assignments**
- **Grouping of students**

The activities and assignments are the centerpiece of student engagement, since they determine what it is that students are asked to do. Activities and assignments that promote learning require student thinking that emphasizes depth over breadth and encourages students to explain their thinking.

- **Grouping of students**

How students are grouped for instruction (whole class, small groups, pairs, individuals) is one of the many decisions teachers make every day. There are many options; students of similar background and skill may be clustered together, or the more advanced students may be spread around into the different groups. Alternatively, a teacher might permit students to select their own groups, or they could be formed randomly.

Note: *Grouping of students is an important element of 3c. However, because it is not possible to ascertain the suitability of the grouping strategy for the lesson without fully knowing the teacher’s instructional purpose—which is not evident from a video alone—it is not included in the levels of performance for the Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument, 2013 Edition (Observable Components).*

- **Instructional materials and resources**

The instructional materials a teacher selects to use in the classroom can have an enormous impact on students’ experience. Though some teachers are obliged to use a school’s or district’s officially sanctioned materials, many teachers use these selectively or supplement them with others of their choosing that are better suited to engaging students in deep learning—for example, the use of primary source materials in social studies.

- **Structure and pacing**

No one, whether an adult or a student, likes to be either bored or rushed in completing a task. Keeping things moving, within a well-defined structure, is one of the marks of an experienced teacher. And since much of student learning results from their reflection on what they have done, a well-designed lesson includes time for reflection and closure.

Indicators include:

- Student enthusiasm, interest, thinking, problem solving, etc.
- Learning tasks that require high-level student thinking and invite students to explain their thinking
- Students highly motivated to work on all tasks and persistent even when the tasks are challenging
- Students actively “working,” rather than watching while their teacher “works”
- Suitable pacing of the lesson: neither dragged out nor rushed, with time for closure and student reflection