



Engagement Gives Learning Meaning

KARLA LAORANGE

“Can we do that? Can we do what Dr. King did?” The unanticipated question hung in the air as twenty-eight sets of fifth grade eyes focused on me. My classroom was filled with students who had little in the way of material possessions and often felt powerless to make a positive change for themselves. As a teacher of these impoverished students, I felt their pain and desire for a better life. My mind flooded with doubts. Would I have the courage to teach my students correct principles and let them govern themselves?

I was completing what I thought would be the final lesson in a unit about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with my fifth grade class. We had watched videos, read text, and listened to eye witness accounts of the events leading up to the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. We stepped back in time to learn of segregation, non-violent resistance as conceived by Gandhi and implemented by Dr. King, freedom rides, lunch counter sit-ins, and how these events impacted our nation. Dr. King’s book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, provided a concrete example of the non-violent resistance movement.

Included in the book were ten commandments Dr. King required of his followers. The commandments included in the unit of study required observation of the ordinary rules of courtesy, performance of regular service for others, and refraining from violence in heart, tongue, or fist.

These commandments had opened my students’ minds, helping them to see that change could be brought about through polite responses and service to others, eternal and enduring truths that could guide them throughout their lives. This was in stark contrast to what many of my students had often seen and experienced throughout their young lives. Their minds had been opened as they embraced a new world of possibilities, where all had worth, regardless of race or social standing. As a young teacher, my satisfaction in knowing they had learned new, challenging content, while being presented with powerful tools that could empower them throughout their lives, was palpable.

My feelings of satisfaction dissipated, however, as I focused my attention on the real question. Would I allow my students to use what they had learned about non-violent resistance to protest our school’s lunchroom conditions? My students felt they were not treated with respect by those who worked in the lunch room and were tired of being acted upon. Students reported demeaning comments from adults and demands to perform undesirable tasks such as dumping trays and wiping spills without a thank you or acknowledgement. For students who were surrounded by their own lack, these situations reinforced their perceived absence of worth and powerlessness. On the other hand, the adults involved were coworkers with whom I had worked for years. Elementary schools have long been the bastion of unquestioning adult superiority. These young students were often expected to follow directives without input or question. With each change in lunch staff, management techniques based on this premise were passed on and perpetuated. Morally I knew my students needed to act and use their agency to create positive change. I believed in my students and the power of children to change the world in a positive way, despite their young age. I knew allowing my students to apply what they had learned would have lasting implications for me, while my students would move on. I also knew that my students had engaged in

learning with their heart, mind, and soul and were ready to apply the principles they had learned. Denying them this opportunity would invalidate their desire to learn and grow, both now and in the future.

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Fully engaging students in learning is an arduous task for any teacher, regardless of the age of his or her students. Christ, the master teacher, modeled how to engage learners throughout his ministry. He was able to engage the hearts and minds of those he taught, acting as a guide for reflection and enlightenment, as the learner came to understand eternal truths. Having been discussed for many years in educational research, engagement has recently become the focal point of educational reform. Engagement is more than participation or involvement. It requires a much deeper investment on the part of the student, one that entails feelings, sensemaking and activity (Harper and Quaye, 2009). This kind of experience occurs as students use their agency as learners to act, rather than be acted upon. Compulsion has no place in engagement. As we look to Christ as the model for teaching, distinguishing aspects of engagement are understood. Christ knew each of His students. He taught correct principles in meaningful ways and allowed his followers to determine for themselves how to apply His teachings in their lives. Christ did not coerce or compel others to apply his teachings. He allowed meaningful discussion and examination of the truths taught that included parables and examples of how truth, or lack thereof, affects the course of one's life. By so doing, Christ honored the agency of the learner. These principles serve as a guide for teachers who seek to engage their students in learning. My students' engagement had

surpassed that of their teacher. They were ready to apply and act upon their learning without direction from me.

My fifth grade students had never been exposed to Ghandi, Dr. King, the Civil Rights Movement, or nonviolent resistance. This history and content engaged them because it challenged their understanding, showed the challenges of generations that had gone before them, and the sacrifices made by others for the freedoms Americans enjoy today. This unit also caused my students to question their own identity and beliefs about the worth of others. This powerful combination of content and human rights evoked both a cognitive and emotional response, resulting in a depth of learning I had not anticipated. This experience taught me content matters. Students crave new content and ideas. They want to see ideas through multiple perspectives. As learners, students thrive when asked to think about the value of what they are learning and find their own meaning of truth as they ponder and prove their own learning. When designing course content, teachers must ask themselves what enduring principles and truths do students need to endeavor to understand in order to expand their thinking and abilities. That said, one must be cautious in assuming that just because content is new it will be interesting and meaningful to students. Content becomes significant when students are grappling with ideas, determining how to apply the knowledge learned to their life and using the knowledge to create something new to them as a learner. These experiences deepen learning and require students to make meaning of what they are learning.

Before a teacher can fully engage students, he or she must come to know each learner. Readiness matters. As teachers, our focus is most often on mastery of content. An understanding of students' prior knowledge is a key component to designing experiences that engage students deeply in learning, and help them understand and use new content. Understanding what students do and don't know empowers the teacher to design curriculum that is customized to the unique understandings of each class and student. Pre-assessments yield powerful and rich data, showing areas of strengths and deficits that inform course design and requirements. Specific content can then be quickly reviewed or studied in-depth, depending on the readiness and needs of students. This

critical step in engaging the learner is a daunting task. It requires time to develop reliable questions and probes that can be administered, scored and reported efficiently for immediate use. It requires diligence to analyze the assessment and revise the information as needed.

Gaining an understanding of the knowledge students already possess interests most educators. Knowing students, however, goes far beyond assessment and evaluation of prior knowledge. It includes developing an understanding of students' interests, how they learn best, and of the types of teaching methods that will spark discussion and create opportunities for students to formulate new constructs and associations to previous learning. Students always make their own meaning of what they learn. We can leverage personal experiences to deepen the learning experience by asking students to apply their learning to their own life experiences. This means the teacher must be a learner. He or she must be willing to allow ideas to be challenged as students explore their new concepts from various vantage points, trusting that this examination will lead students to understand true principles rather than memorize content that can now be found at the click of a button. Knowing the learner involves trusting your students and yourself.

During the Martin Luther King unit, one of my fifth grade students shared with pride that his grandfather had shot and killed a black man. The class was silent as he



disclosed this story that was an affront to what most students had come to understand. I can still see this young man's face as he looked at me, knowing I did not agree with what he had shared. He was challenging me to contend with him. I felt myself fill with emotion, boiling with indignation that he had not come to understand the struggle of black America. I also

knew that my reaction had to embody what we had learned about respect for others, even those who may differ from me personally. If we are to act as influential guides who

engage students at every level, we must respect differing viewpoints. I looked at the young man who seemed to be smirking at me and acknowledged that such acts did occur. That each of us must determine what we will learn from the past and how we will allow that knowledge to shape our future. I believe my response provided a far more important lesson than memorizing dates and events. Honest sensemaking can only be realized when students are given the opportunity to learn eternal truths and then allowed to formulate their own opinions. I can, however, still feel my heart race knowing this child had, for the time, come to a different understanding than I had planned. I have come to realize, that regardless of the teaching methodology, students formulate their own opinions and shape their own learning. We can require them to support our ideas and notions in order to pass a test or class, but students will, in the end, shape their own understanding of the concepts learned. Engagement occurs when teachers act as facilitators and engage students' hearts and minds, leading them to know and understand truth.

The methods we use to convey knowledge and deepen understanding have a significant influence on the level of engagement found in the classroom. There are a plethora of strategies and practices that will engage students. When teachers step aside and students are asked to apply their new found learning in realistic situations, sensemaking and feeling combine, creating an engaging, powerful learning experience. Students become an apprentice, honing skills as they synthesize knowledge and discern truth. The role of the teacher is to design experiences that allow students to explore, test, and possibly fail, in an academically safe environment that recognizes and rewards effort, and attempts more than simply memorizing a set body of facts or concepts. Although this foundational knowledge is necessary, methods that ask students to investigate possibilities and evaluate solutions forge enduring understandings.

Once again I pondered the question. Would I allow my students to use what they had learned about nonviolent resistance to protest the school lunchroom conditions? My response surprised both my students and myself. I would support my students in their protest under one condition. Twenty-eight sets of eyes fixated on me,



again met with the principal to discuss their concerns. Students left this meeting with no agreement or plan to address their stated grievances. As a class, students agreed to a second day of protest with a surprising result. Students from other classes joined the boycott, also bringing a lunch from home. As the protest entered day three, with more students again joining the cause, the representatives met with the principal and lunchroom manager to discuss their collective concerns. In the end, some of their stated grievances were addressed. Others were not. My class determined enough progress had been made and agreed to end the boycott.

The following day students entered

waiting for the stipulation. I asked each student to agree to follow the ten commandments outlined by Dr. King, promising that regardless of the response to the lunchroom boycott, the students would only respond with kindness or silence. I made it clear that if even one student violated this requirement, I would no longer support their effort. They all agreed. First, students discussed what they would do for lunch the next day. Because these students were impoverished, almost every child had a lunch provided for them at no cost to their family. This protest would require sacrifice on their parts. Students discussed what would be done to insure each member of the class had a lunch, providing assistance to one another as needed. Next, two student representatives were selected to meet with the principal to share their concerns and the details of the planned protest. Students left school that day armed with a desire to make a positive change and a plan to make it a reality.

Each student was true to their word. Every member of the class brought a lunch from home, leaving twenty-eight unserved school lunches. The students completed the lunchroom tasks they had previously been assigned. Although negative comments were stated directly to students regarding the lunch boycott, they responded with kindness or said nothing. Classroom representatives

the lunchroom with hope and a bit of trepidation. Unsure of the response they would receive, I too held my breath as we walked to lunch. They were pleased to discover the agreement had been honored and revisions made in lunchroom operations. Beyond the study of Dr. King and nonviolent protest, my students found their voice and learned they could use their agency in a constructive way to transform their world. These students taught me engagement gives learning meaning. It reaches to the heart and soul of the learner, requiring each individual to act. Rather than passive students who mastered content, my students became empowered scholars. I was humbled and honored to be a part of their journey. I discovered that in empowering my students to engage in applying their learning we were both forever changed. 🌞

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