

Engaged Learning: Toward Excellence in 21st-Century Christian Education

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At its heart, Christian education involves intergenerational transfer, whereby teachers declare God’s power “to the next generation” (Psalm 71:18) as well as prepare students to serve “God’s purpose” in their own generation (Acts 13:36). Along these lines, the goals of Christian schools’ mission statements are inspirational, whether developing students’ biblical worldview, preparing graduates for higher education and vocational life, or inspiring students to Christlike service.

At the February 2017 Global Christian School Leadership Summit, however, we heard from Christian school educators that there is room for improvement in fulfilling these missions. Teachers expressed concern over student disengagement in the classroom. School leaders wondered how to motivate faculty toward innovative teaching and focusing on improving student outcomes. Board members worried about market-savvy parents seeking greater educational ROI for their tuition dollars. And across these groups, there was an expressed desire to “excel still more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1, NASB) in attending to their mission statements, thereby preparing students to fulfill God’s unique call on their lives.

We propose that a comprehensive educational approach, what we call “engaged learning,” is a promising means for helping schools and institutions fulfill their multifaceted mission statements. We define engaged learning as a set of learner-centered pedagogies that attend to a range of student outcomes, situated within a larger school culture that values and prioritizes student engagement in learning. When schools and institutions develop classrooms and cultures of engagement, they build capacity for excellence in 21st-century Christian education.

Defining Engaged Learning

When defining engaged learning, it is helpful to think in terms of a set of interrelated “dimensions” that emerge from the literature and research on how students learn best. Four such dimensions are:

1. *Holistic*, meaning the learning experience attends to multiple domains of learning (e.g., cognitive, affective, behavioral, spiritual);

2. *Developmental*, which means that learning encourages growth and development toward complexity and maturity in all domains (e.g., in students’ ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and believing);
3. *Contextual*, or involving the social aspects of learning, by promoting students’ interdependence and engagement with teachers, peers, and the larger community; and
4. *Integrative*, meaning helping students to integrate learning from various sites and sources (often through active, hands-on learning combined with ongoing opportunity for reflection), thereby enabling students to “connect the dots” in their learning.

As Swaner (2012) explains, “educational settings that activate these dimensions not only facilitate gains in knowledge, real-world application of learning, and intellectual complexity, but also ... facilitate the transformational experiences we might consider engaged learning” (75).

Engaged Learning in the Christian School Context

Rather than humanistic educational philosophy, a Christian view of engaged learning is grounded in Scripture and congruent with a biblical worldview: truth remains fixed in the person of Jesus and the Word of God (John 14:16, John 17:17, 2 Timothy 3:16); authorities are to be respected (Hebrews 13:17); and honor is to be given to those to whom it is due (Romans 13:7). In the same passage of Scripture in which children are instructed to obey, however, parents (and by extension, educators) are told to not “exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1–4). What should such effective training and instruction look like?

Three relevant principles are found in Scripture. First, God has created students as whole beings (mind, body, soul, spirit) in His image (Genesis 1:27, Psalm 49:9); Christian education must therefore educate the whole person by attending to the whole person. Second, God has made each person unique “just as he wanted them to be” (1 Corinthians 12:17–20) and endowed them with “different kinds of gifts ... for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Christian education ought to celebrate this diversity through differentiated

instruction and learner-centered teaching. And third, Christian education should prepare students for the good works that God has intended for them to do (Ephesians 2:10, 2 Timothy 3:16–17) by providing opportunities for hands-on learning and skill building.

Taken together, these three principles can be seen reflected in Jesus' own teaching, which included a range of methods such as didactic instruction, narrative and storytelling (parables), modeling (washing the disciples' feet), guided practice (feeding of the 5,000), and unsupervised practice (sending the disciples out in pairs). Put simply, it will be "enough" for Christian educators to be like their own teacher, who is Jesus (Matthew 10:25). The task of Christian educators is to translate these principles into the 21st-century classroom— itself an authentic exercise in biblical integration.

Engaged Learning Practices

A number of instructional practices harness the holistic, developmental, contextual, and integrative dimensions of engaged learning (Ackerman 2012; Swaner 2012). At the classroom level, these include: varied pacing; student-teacher goal setting; stations and centers; flipped classrooms; flexible seating; differentiated learning products; student options for homework and assessment; learning contracts; independent studies; and hybrid learning. At the school level, these include: shared planning; differentiated curricula for students;

J- or winter-term; minicourses or electives; community mentorships; coteaching; capstone courses; internships; problem-based learning; and service-learning.

In presenting this as a portrait, however, it is important to understand that engaged learning is not just a set of practices, but also an intentionally crafted educational landscape. Thus, there is no menu of choices that—taken together—would lead to student engagement, but rather these practices can be viewed as components of an overall instructional culture that values engaged learning. In fact, although educators have been talking about differentiated instruction, experiential learning, and authentic assessment for many years, engaged learning still runs countercultural to the dominant model of education in the U.S. (based on a one-size-fits-all approach, conformity to standards tied to age and grade level, and standardized testing as the ultimate gauge of student learning). Fundamentally, engaged learning requires significant shifts in "business as usual" at our schools.

To this end, some Christian schools are implementing significant structural changes to make room for more engaged learning experiences—for example, halting the regular schedule for one day per week, and filling it with special courses or experiences (e.g., STEM lab classes, student electives, leadership courses, or internships). Some schools are also exploring specific pedagogies for engaged learning



(i.e. problem-based learning, action research, and service-learning), which have been shown through research to boost a range of student outcomes (Brownell and Swaner 2010). These pedagogies all emphasize process skills over content mastery, place more responsibility for learning on the student, require ongoing collaboration among students, transform the role of the teacher to more of a guide than an expert, and necessitate nonlinear and diverse assessments (e.g., portfolios, usable products).

Transforming Our Schools

What would it take for educators to transform their schools and classrooms through engaged learning? At its basic level, engaged learning requires a different mindset and skillset of educators. In terms of mindset (alternatively called a “disposition” in the literature), engaged learning requires that teachers view everyone in the school community as learners—including themselves. As Carol Dweck (2016) explains: “Fixed-mindset teachers often think of themselves as finished products. Their role is simply to impart their knowledge” whereas “great” teaching “starts with the growth mindset—about yourself and about children. Not just lip service to the idea that all children can learn, but a deep desire to reach in and ignite the mind of every child” (204–5). Having a growth mindset predisposes teachers to embracing the complexity, challenges, and joys of engaged learning. This has profound implications for teacher educators as well as school leaders, as they bear the responsibility for cultivating, reinforcing, and rewarding growth mindsets in teachers—as well as in themselves.

What would it take for educators to transform their schools and classrooms through engaged learning?

A mindset conducive to engaged learning is linked to developing the skillset for engaged learning. Engaged learning requires a blurring of the lines between “hard” skills—like content knowledge (e.g., chemistry or third-grade English language arts) and pedagogical knowledge (lesson planning, classroom management)—and “soft” skills, like process-mindedness, creativity, teamwork, and flexibility. Teachers need to blend both kinds of skills to create engaged learning environments that are highly collaborative, feedback-rich, and process-as-content oriented. Likewise, school leaders need a special skillset for creating cultures of engagement, to include innovation, systems thinking, and change management.

Skillsets are developed through instruction and modeling, repeated practice, and ongoing feedback. The primary way in-service educators have opportunity to develop their skillsets is through professional development (PD); thus, PD that intentionally supports and promotes engaged learning is essential. In a synthesis of the literature on PD, Swaner

(2016) found that—rather than a piecemeal set of programs and infrequent experiences—optimal PD provides ongoing time for faculty and leaders for reflection, collaboration, experimentation, and feedback within the regular school day. This leads to the cultivation of a learning community that is well-suited for engaged learning, which itself shares many of the same features.

Engaged learning reflects, in the words of Sir Ken Robinson (2015), “Not the old style of industrial education, which was designed to meet the needs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but a new style of education suited to the challenges we now face and the real talents” (xxv–xxvi) of today’s students. If implemented through pedagogical practice and transformatively embedded in school culture, engaged learning can become a catalyst for excellence in the 21st-century Christian school.

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