





# Rules of engagement

Teachers have tried all sorts of tactics to ensure students are fully absorbed in a topic – but do any of them actually work? In their new book, **Dennis Shirley** and **Andy Hargreaves** explore the ‘myths’ surrounding the popular engagement strategies used in schools and reveal the approaches that have proved successful, some of which may surprise you ▶



**E**ngagement is a serious business. Just think about the word in marital terms: it is a step that involves commitment and intensity. Or, think about the word in martial terms: to “engage” means to enter into combat with somebody.

In schools, however, “engaging” is often synonymous with “easy” or even “superficial”. Teachers looking to encourage disaffected teens to engage with their lessons will plan quizzes and games, and incorporate references to popular culture into activities that students might enjoy and be able to relate to.

But there is nothing trivial about engagement. So, why, then, do we not take it more seriously in schools?

We decided that this question was worth a closer look. In our book, *Five Paths of Student Engagement: Blazing the Trail to Learning and Success*, we explore what engaging with learning may or may not mean today. Through this, we reassess some of the most popular strategies for getting students engaged: making learning relevant, using technology and having fun.

These three strategies all provide compelling narratives of engagement but, if they are adopted wholesale – if educators follow any one of them in an uncritical way – then these approaches can lure them away from the true path towards improving learning and wellbeing for all young people.

So let’s examine these engagement “myths” in turn.

### **Myth one: relevance**

A common approach to engagement is to make learning feel relevant to young people’s lives and related to their environment and interests.

If students are not interested in learning about how Shakespeare used iambic pentameter, for example, then perhaps, the thinking goes, we can make them interested by teaching them about how iambic pentameter is used in rap – and piggyback the learning on to that.

But how far does this hold true? Let’s look at an example in detail.

In Canada, the professional responsibility to improve engagement through relevance was an explicit part of the Ontario government’s 2014 Achieving Excellence agenda for education. Within this approach, “culturally relevant teachings” that were “undertaken by the whole school community” were upheld as aspirational aims. Teachers who

were “creating more relevant, applied and innovative learning experiences, that spark learners’ curiosity and inspire them to follow their passions”, were held up as exemplars.

The Ontario Ministry of Education called for “new measures of student engagement and belonging for all students” with the goal of producing “healthy, active and engaged citizens”.

This all sounds positive but, when we look more closely at how this shift played out in schools, we can see that the picture is more complicated.

As part of the process of writing the book, we worked with the Council of Ontario Directors of Education to help them form and collaborate with a consortium of 10 Canadian school districts. We examined the effects of Achieving Excellence in relation to these districts.

In one district, which had a large number of indigenous students, for example, the push to create a more relevant curriculum led teachers to design lessons that integrated students’ cultural knowledge and practices into their classes.

Part of this was the creation of an outdoor education programme – which held most classes outside – teaching indigenous life skills, such as fishing, making fires and building shelters in wilderness settings to make the curriculum more relevant to students’ lives and identities, and to build on their prior knowledge and strengths. Through this, the idea was that students would become more engaged in school as a whole and, therefore, would eventually be more willing to engage in the lessons that took place indoors, in core subjects.

The school believed it to be successful. A teacher noted: “There are kids in there and you can’t get them to do stuff like writing and reading. Then you take them outside and they are the first ones to know how to build a fire and shelter.”

But it is a mistake to imagine that students can only experience the curriculum as relevant if it speaks to their particular ethnic, linguistic or cultural group. Teachers must not fall into the trap of relevance that restricts students to what is immediate and local.

Let us demonstrate this with a second example. In southern Ontario, there is a school with no indigenous students in it at all. Leaders in this school were inspired by a national movement, known as the Red Feather Project, which sought to raise awareness about 1,180 missing or murdered indigenous women in Canada.

All students in this school researched the identity of one of the missing or murdered women, wrote down their chosen woman’s

name on a red feather, and participated in a commemorative outdoor ceremony to honour and recognise their lives. Students took an active interest in the project.

This shows how culturally relevant curriculum development can be used to engage students whose own identities don’t have direct correspondence with the cultures they are studying.

What’s immediately relevant to students isn’t always relevant to student engagement, then. Instead, having the opportunity to study a serious social issue in sufficient depth – as students did in the Red Feather Project – can be engaging in itself.

But so-called “deep learning” does not necessarily mean that learners must always be studying a serious, real-world issue, argues Canadian education professor Kieran Egan. The act of studying something in depth can itself create engagement.

In some stages of their development, Egan says, children are looking for other deep ways to think about and engage with their learning. For instance, in what Egan calls a mythic phase of development – from ages 4 or 5 to about 9 – children are drawn to ideas, plots, books and teachers that merge fantasy and reality, elicit intense emotional responses, and play with binary themes like life and death.

Certainly, this would explain children’s global fascination with the Harry Potter books and *Frozen*. These imaginary stories are about as remote from the immediate lives and communities of most students as anything could possibly be – and that is precisely what makes them so exciting.

Egan pushes this idea further in his book *Learning in Depth: A Simple Innovation That Can Transform Schooling*. Learning something in depth, he argues, builds expertise and mastery through disciplined study. Importantly, it makes learning for its own sake pleasurable and engaging.

To make his case, Egan asks readers to imagine that each child who starts school is given a topic that he or she will study for part of every week for the rest of his or her school life. The topic should lend itself to interdisciplinary inquiry. Egan gives examples such as “railways”, “apples”, “robots”, “rubber” and “dust”. Students should have no choice over their topics but, by the age of 8 or 9, most students will know more about their topic than their teachers.

This, says Egan, is true depth. It is not restricted to local or real-world relevance or students’ pre-existing interests. Indeed, it may disrupt or transcend these. What matters is sparking the learner’s intensity of inquiry into a subject that is inherently fascinating



and that all children will become interested in, if it is approached in the right way.

An engaging teacher doesn't just follow students' existing interests or passions, then. That teacher also introduces students to new interests or timeless subjects that may engage them for the rest of their lives. "The more you know about something, the more interesting it becomes," Egan asserts.

When we strive for greater engagement, it's easy to take the shortcut of appealing to local relevance or immediate connection to students' interests. However, children don't just need learning that addresses their immediate circumstances, that is socially relevant, or that involves them in a project or two. They also need to have the freedom and the opportunity to explore things in considerable depth, which will carry them far beyond their everyday lives.

### **Myth two: technology**

Another common method of trying to engage students in learning is by using technology, thanks in large part to the technology companies and experts who have developed a persuasive and popular "antidotes" to the existing schooling system.

Only by completely disrupting schools as they now exist, and starting from scratch with new technologies as the foundation, will things get better, they say.

And it is easy to be blinded by the digital light, with learning games, online polling, real-time feedback, YouTube videos, self-marking quizzes and more. In this cornucopia of digital delights, it's little wonder that students are more dazzled by technology than workbooks, exercises and teachers talking from the front of the room. The teacher's role in the age of blended learning, personalisation and online instruction, advocates say, is now to support students in their own self-directed learning: to be a facilitator, not a presenter of information.

What schools need, we're told, is disruptive innovation.

But what does that mean? It's an idea that stems from *The Innovator's Dilemma*, by Clayton M Christensen. In his book, Christensen describes how established companies become overly loyal to their current line of products and resistant to the idea of innovation that first created these products.

Frustrated innovators leave established companies that don't want to change a winning formula so they can start up on their own. Ultimately, they overtake the original companies when their disruptive alternative secures a mass market.

Christensen says these disruptive processes led to the replacement of the steam shovel ▶

by the diesel shovel, the big steel mill by mini-mills, and desktop computers by laptops and then smaller handheld devices.

With his associate, Michael Horn, Christensen went on to promote disruptive innovation as a digitally driven change strategy for school systems still stuck in the “factory age”.

Now, on the basis of little or no evidence, school systems – and even entire countries – have introduced laptops or digital tablets for every child.

The argument that schools need the same kind of technological disruption as businesses is questionable, if not dangerous. And the claims around technology and increased student engagement should be taken not just with a pinch of salt but a towering pillar of it.

Technology advanced in the name of increased student engagement should be taken not just with a pinch of salt but a towering pillar of it.

As a source of student engagement, technology does not, by itself, improve learning. When it is implemented carelessly, it can actually make learning worse by distracting students and their teachers with gimmicks and gadgetry at the expense of truly deep, challenging and all-engrossing learning.

For instance, in our work helping to increase student engagement in rural schools in the US Pacific Northwest, we saw the double-edged sword of educational technology first-hand.

We observed a number of teachers using technology in action with positive results. They planned collaboratively, with far-away colleagues in other schools, on a variety of digital platforms. They had their students make short videos about their local communities and share these with their peers in other states. These activities increased students’ engagement, the teachers said.

Other examples were not so positive. One school we visited had implemented digital tablets across the school. In many small rural schools, like this one, teachers are required to teach a lot of different subjects, which can place overwhelming demands on them to master immense amounts of content and to prepare fully for every class. So, understandably, some teachers weren’t always on top of what they were teaching.

In one social studies class, for example, the teacher resorted to directing students to the textbook page on the tablet that they all then scrolled through together, just as if it were a traditional text, only worse.

The students certainly seemed behaviourally engaged. All eyes were fixed



on their screens. They were as quiet as mice. But, in truth, they were just soporifically mesmerised by the glow of their devices. Little engagement with learning seemed to be occurring at all.

Classrooms, it turns out, can sometimes be even more boring with technology than without it.

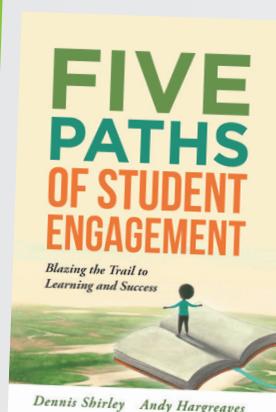
### Myth three: fun

The final myth of engagement is that engagement and fun go hand in hand.

If we can find ways to make young people enjoy school, by making lessons more entertaining and incorporating more elements of play, those young people are more likely to engage with learning – or so the thinking goes.

Where does this idea come from? The connection between play, creativity and engagement may have something to do with it.

It’s true that creativity draws on and also drives a particular kind of engagement that often becomes all-engrossing. Just think of a



### The paths of least resistance to learning

We are starting to see a shift in education, from rigid, standardised and over-tested schooling to holistic, personalised and more “human” learning. Engagement is the key to making this shift work.

But to reach the goal of serving pupils’ wellbeing and identity as well as their

attainment, primary and secondary school teachers must prepare for the journey of engagement, avoid detours and battle their enemy, disengagement, to stay on course.

Grounded in psychological and sociological theory, as well as authors Dennis Shirley’s and Andy Hargreaves’ own research, *Five Paths of Student Engagement: blazing the trail to learning and success* covers each facet of engagement and recommends practical approaches for classroom instruction, school leadership and educational policies.

of a primary school in England, which took a unique approach to teaching students metacognition strategies.

Learning in this area was celebrated by a “wizard learners” reward system. The school put a toy wizard up in the foyer; he became the model learner: a symbol of what learning is. Wizard hats and cloaks were purchased, and “wizard learners of the week” were allowed to dress up as wizards in assembly to receive a certificate. Students responded well and the school significantly improved its results as a consequence of the scheme.

Does this mean that in order to engage students in learning, we just need to make learning a lot more fun?

It’s hard to argue against fun. But fun is not always realistic, or even desirable, as a basis for engagement.

Climbing a mountain through lashing rain definitely doesn’t always feel like fun, although it can be really invigorating. Waiting your turn in a group discussion, or giving way so someone else can speak instead of you, isn’t really a fun thing to do, but these are essential skills and dispositions we have to learn in school as part of growing up.

Sometimes, as Charles Darwin noted in his book, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, when we are learning something hard or solving a difficult puzzle, we furrow our brows to concentrate. We shut out distractions in an expression of intense

engagement that is totally different from the raised eyebrows of surprise or delight.

When we’re engaged, then, it isn’t always fun. We’re not always happy. Sometimes we may even have to suffer, for weeks or months at a time. Just ask the exhausted marathon runner or the composer in dogged pursuit of the right notes.

And while it’s true that play is an essential part of creativity, creative engagement requires discipline and persistence as well as imagination and playfulness. The discovery of radium by Marie Curie in France, and of insulin by Frederick Banting in Canada, didn’t come instantaneously or easily. Each discovery followed years of professional and financial struggles, frustration and countless setbacks.

What teachers can and should take from the lives of real scientists and actual processes of scientific discovery is that they should sometimes make interactions with students more difficult, at least in the short term.

Just as in parenting, the support given by educators needs to be supplemented with a bit of positive pressure, so that students are called on from time to time to challenge themselves to try harder than they might initially have been inclined to.

If we pursue fun as a path to engagement, we could simply end up immersed in superficial entertainment, diverted from engaging with fundamental questions about human existence and the most compelling challenges of our time.

But like Curie, Banting and other scientists, students might sometimes have to be prepared to suffer a bit, as teachers push them to understand or achieve something that those students might have thought was beyond them.

Ultimately, there isn’t one best way to secure engagement – and engagement is considerably more complex than it first appears.

We have to recognise that, beyond knowing and responding to every child in an educationally purposeful way, there is no silver bullet of engagement, be it relevance, technology, fun or anything else. ●

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sculptor absorbed in her work. Everything else ceases to matter except moulding the clay. She loses track of time. She may forget to eat or sleep. In this state of flow, her work no longer feels like work – it feels like play.

This state of flow is something that teachers may aspire to recreate in their lessons. But making learning feel less like work and more like play is not always easy.

In some instances, incorporating more creative approaches might seem like a good option. Let’s consider the example