

Step 1

What does everyday engagement look like and sound like?

Engagement is physical and mental, something that one does with one's body and mind.

To be mentally engaged, it is sometimes helpful to have something to push off against to get started. Here are two ways for you and your students to be more deliberative about mental engagement.

Option 1: Students typically have a lot to say when they are asked the question, “What doesn't make sense in the world?” There are huge parts of their lives that don't make sense to them. From the simplest situation, such as coming into a room full of people and asking what is going on, to the increasing presence of terrorism and violence students can easily identify which parts of the adult world most challenges their common sense. What seems funny or hypocritical even though it isn't supposed to be? Getting in the habit of seeing what doesn't fit or seems odd is a good way to begin being analytically engaged.

Here is an exercise that illustrates this: This is the first paragraph of an article on the Ford Foundation. The Foundation gives money to groups and organizations who want to make the world better. From long experience funding projects Ford knows all the ways efforts to make the world better DON'T WORK. The paragraph lists these reasons. We share this paragraph with students (and help with vocabulary they may not understand) to give them something to respond to. We ask students to read the paragraph:

The urge to change the world is normally thwarted by a near insurmountable barricade of obstacles: failure of imagination, failure of courage, bad government, bad planning, incompetence, corruption, fecklessness, the laws of nations, the laws of physics, the weight of history, inertia of all sorts, psychological unsuitability on the

*part of would be changers, the resistance of people who would lose for the change, the resistance of people who would benefit from it, the seduction of activities other than world changing, lack of practical knowledge, lack of political skill, lack of money.*¹

Then we ask them to:

- Pick the items on this list of reasons why well intentioned projects *don't* work that are most surprising to them—i.e. many students are surprised that projects fail because of “resistance from people who would benefit from it. (You could also ask students to identify items on the list that don't seem to make sense—i.e. the laws of physics—and have them try to develop explanations for why they belong on the list.)
- Try to give a one-sentence explanation for why the author of this paragraph included the reason you chose in her list of reasons why the world rarely changes.
- Pick one of the reasons and discuss what you would do to remove this obstacle to change.

Option 2: “What is your truth? What are you thinking about right now as you are sitting in this class?”

- Try being aware of your own inner commentary. What is going through your mind right now? What are you telling yourself as you are sitting here? Whatever you are saying to yourself is evidence of engagement – even if it is a rejection of what you are hearing. “I can't believe how boring Tools for Change is.” This inner voice can sometimes function as an unconscious thought – which may be felt as discomfort. Or, some of

¹ Larissa MacFarquhar, “What Money Can Buy,” New Yorker, January 4, 2016, p. 38.

your thoughts may remind you that you need to check for more data.

Other thoughts may bother or excite you so much that they give you a reason to act— “do I dare burn the calories necessary to make this class less boring?” All of these examples are the beginnings of mental engagement that students can build on.

- As a teacher, over time, you may want to have students record some of their private thoughts or share them with the class or a group. The purpose of making students aware of their inner voices is to demonstrate that engagement isn't something other people do. It is something they are already doing and being aware of this fact makes it possible to build on this engagement, focus it and make it do something. It is easy to keep their inner conversation going, and continue to ask what each successive thought leads to or to respond to these thoughts.

c. Here are some comments students made to themselves and then recorded in their journals in a class that began with this mini-lesson. (In addition to exhibiting individual engagement these comments all invite a response of some kind and thus open-up the possibility of groups of students engaging with one another.)

- i. “I don't agree with that!” (Why?)
- ii. “That is not my experience!” (How is it different? Are there any similarities)
- iii. “That makes sense to me, why doesn't it make sense to others?”
- iv. “What would you have to believe to say that?”

- v. “You don’t conform to the stereotype I have of someone who does those things.”
- vi. “This seems like a waste, why should I bother?”
- vii. “Our community is not going to be helped by that.”
- viii. “Dr. Tobin, you keep talking about a perspective, but what is it really?”

