

Step 1

Passive or Proactive?

Which are you?

This lesson is designed to help students develop engaged perspectives. We hope you will use only the lessons that are helpful for you and that you will adapt them to fit your needs and circumstances like the teacher who created the fifth lesson. This is an introductory lesson intended to convey the importance of engagement to students. It begins with a short lecture, then provides some examples of proactive and passive ways of being, and then concludes with some opportunities to apply the concepts.

Foundational narrative:

- You could say there are TWO primary ways of *being* alive: one is passive and reactive and the other is engaged and pro-active.
- The engaged style or way of being is the only one that works in this lab or any other lab or organization you are likely to be a part of. In this lab, we are trying to lead lives where challenges don't get ignored because we are too busy, too tired, or simply don't care.
- What do we mean by passive people?
 - 1) Passive people let life happen to them.
 - 2) Passive people are too tired, too busy, too distracted to understand and figure out what is happening to them and solve problems. It would be better for the rest of us if they just said, "I am not up to it." That way, we would know where they stand and how to deal with them.

- 3) Passive people blame either the problem or the people who brought the problem to their attention. They rarely blame themselves!
- What do we mean by engaged and proactive?
 - 1) Engaged, proactive people try to understand what is going on around them. They are curious about why things are strange, uncomfortable, wrong or surprising.
 - 2) Engaged, proactive people have an attitude that helps them start the insanely creative work of addressing a problem. The work is insanely creative because there are no RIGHT answers, no technical solutions —i.e. a mobile App can't solve a problem like why people feel unsafe in their neighborhood. to solve the problem. Instead, we have to come up with our own answer.
 - 3) Engaged, proactive people understand that, in answering a critical question that doesn't have a right answer there is always a mix of excitement and apprehension at the start.

Examples of passivity and proactive engagement as ways of being:

1) Say your bike (or ???) gets stolen:

Passive: Your reaction is, "This is awful! I've got to find another way to get around."

(High school students may need prompting to get to the insight that figuring out another way to get around--which may require effort--does not help them understand why the bike was stolen.)

Engaged: "This is awful!" "How did this happen?" "I want to understand: a) when my bike was stolen? b) what kind of lock did I use or did I forget to use a lock? c) did other bikes in my neighborhood get stolen at the same time or in the same general location?"

d) Is there a pattern to bike thefts in my neighborhood/city—i.e. many bikes locked on two streets were stolen; e) what should I do differently next time? f) what should all bike riders do differently in the future?”

2) Your girlfriend/boyfriend dumps you:

Passive: Your reaction is to stay at home for months and binge watch bad movies, complain to your friends and eat lots of ice cream.

Engaged: You stay at home watching bad movies and eat lots of ice cream FOR A COUPLE OF DAYS, THEN, you step back and consider your role in the situation.

You try to understand how and why this happened: a) “What did I do or not do that contributed to making this happen?” b) “What do others who know me and/or both of us think might have contributed to our break up?” c) “Were there patterns of behavior in our relationship that I should have paid more attention to?”

B. Getting it.

Have your students come up with some examples of engaged and passive responses to life situations. The goal is not this or that answer, but to have students understand the distinction between, on the one hand, “reacting or just doing something” and, on the other, “trying to understand why something happened and/or if there is a pattern.” Bill has found it very important to honestly acknowledge to race and class can shape how engagement is viewed, it is simply harder for some of our students than others, and that no one is *always* engaged—the goal is to be capable of being engaged when it necessary, to have that mindset in your repertoire.

C. Next step

Ask your students, how do the outcomes associated with engaged seeing and being differ from those associated with passive behavior?

- First, ask them to name challenges that they think require an engaged attitude.
- Then ask, are there any patterns to the challenges they name—i.e. are they more likely to want to be engaged when it matters to them, personally or when the challenge is public and (thus) someone is watching.

The very act of challenging your students to compare and contrast these two ways of being helps them develop the qualities of seeing and being that underlie the research process. Take the time in your class to point these dispositions out