Strategies to Improve Interpersonal Student Engagement in the Classroom

David M. Fox

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

College of Education

MASTER'S DEGREE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved

Western Oregon UNIVERSITY

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE GRADUATE FACULTY OF WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY HAVE EXAMINED THE ENCLOSED

Action Research Project Title:
Strategies to improve interpersonal student engagement in the classroom

Graduate Student: David M. Fox

Candidate for the degree of : Master of Arts in Teaching: Initial Licensure

and hereby certify that in our opinion it is worthy of acceptance as partial fulfillment of the requirements of this master's degree.

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I am extremely grateful for the support and encouragement of my wife, Kerry. There were many times that I was not in a position to mow the lawn or cook meals, and Kerry was always there to help out. There were many times that she spent weekends alone as I was hunkered down in the basement typing away on my coursework, but her full support was always made clear through her actions and words of encouragement.

I am also so grateful for extended family and friends for their support and encouragement as I was less available than usual. From now on, I will be more available for cooking, mountain biking, and playing music. Rock on.

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Chapter 1. Philosophy of Education

Growing up in a low-income and single parent household, we moved around a lot as my mother was always looking for greener pastures. As a result it wasn't until the sixth grade that I spent an entire year at the same school. My seventh through tenth grades were spent within one district in Shelton Washington, and grades eleven and twelve in a different district in Northern California. I was never a "good" student, was held back in eighth grade–something I do not publicly divulge–and barely graduated high school. I was the only one to graduate high school among my two brothers, and three step brothers-who joined our family when I was fourteen. Much of my life I simply assumed that I was not an academic person, just not good at learning, or dumb. I remember wanting to be successful in school, but I just could not understand how to accomplish what my teachers were asking of me, and I had tremendous difficulty focusing during instruction and while reading. I specifically remember staying up late in eighth grade writing a science report and having no idea how to do it. I completed it and turned it in, and got a poor grade. But I had tried in earnest, I just did not understand what the resulting work should look like, a recurring theme in my school years.

I excelled in theater arts and was awarded best thespian of my school as a sophomore, so I wasn't a complete failure. I have never blamed my teachers for my lack of success. My obvious, yet undiagnosed, learning disability was the problem. I grew up in the age of overhead transparencies and mimeograph machines, so my teachers were much more limited with the teaching resources available compared to today. I still struggle with learning, and as a result I spend about 50 hours per week on my school campus. I am okay with that because that is what is

required at this time if I am to be prepared and provide my students with meaningful content and instruction.

I practice acceptance. At some levels I am grateful to have had difficult learning experiences, because students need some teachers who understand first hand what it feels like to struggle with comprehension and attention. I know how humiliating it is to feel like you are not capable of doing the things your peers can do. I believe that with some effort, teachers can create a learning environment that reaches nontraditional learners–those designated SPED, ELL, or TAG–without sacrificing the quality of education received by traditional learners. According to Kareva and Echevarria (2013), instructional materials designed to optimize comprehension for language learners benefit *all* learners in a blended classroom. When teachers use strategies that benefit students with ADHD–highly visual, hands-on, interactive–the general population of students also benefit (McDougal et al., 2022). I do not blame my teachers for the struggles I experienced as a youth, but I do wonder what they could have done to ensure students like me didn't fall through the cracks.

My classroom averages about 25 students per class. When delivering instructional activities that require a lot of one-on-one time it is difficult to ensure each student can adequately get the help they need with only one adult in the room. As a teacher it is easy to blame the poor performance on inattention and bad behavior, but it is also quite possible that the bad behavior results from attention deficit challenges and other mental and emotional barriers that make it difficult to focus on the task at hand.

Thinking back to my own classroom experiences as a child, I remember the times that were engaging to me were typically in science when activities involved seeing, touching, and doing. Specifically, I nerded out on mushrooms, studied all the different types, checked out

related books from the library, and would go hunting for wild mushrooms and make prints from mushroom spores. I also excelled at memorizing all the bones in the head and body. Both examples include learning that relies largely on visual components to convey meaning. Topics were not theoretical, nor subjective, and more easily attainable for me. During those lessons I was engaged in the content to the extent that I did not misbehave, and school was fun.

As I look at my own content area of Social Studies, with a focus on personal finance, it is important to look for ways to make content exciting, engaging, and accessible to a variety of students. When considering my own childhood experiences, I am aware of two central factors that resulted in successful learning. One being the visual and visceral aspects of how content was presented, and the second being "learning by doing". To this day I am well aware that I can learn the basic framework of a topic through reading or lecture, but I struggle to fully embrace concepts until I have practical experience; until my hands are doing the work.

Understanding my own learning experiences, both as an adolescent and as an adult, I realize that there are many students who are distracted, not because they do not want to learn, or that they do not care, but because, for a host of reasons, it is difficult for them to connect with the content. Anything from poor attendance to cognitive learning barriers are contributors. The question for me is, what can a teacher do–what can I do–to ensure the steps are in place to establish pathways that transport learners from a place of inexperience to a place of proficiency in a topic. What can I do to ensure that methods that may present barriers to some learners' success are replaced by other methods that make learning more effective for *all* learners. I am reminded of my ESOL education where I learned that teaching strategies that are effective for language learners also tend to be more effective for the rest of the class. One strategy that comes to mind is the use of supporting graphics to highlight vocabulary and context. This same strategy

harkens back to my learning experiences in middle school, where lesson content that was strongly supported by images was the content I most easily connected with, and even became excited about.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory:

The Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, is credited with the Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development. Vygotsky argued that cognitive development in children occurred within the context of sociocultural influences. These influences include **social interaction**, learning from **more knowledgeable others** (MKOs), the **zone of proximal development** (ZPD), and **scaffolding**.

Social interaction is the process by which people learn to visualize the perspectives of others, compare and contrast those perspectives to their own, and recalibrate their understanding of ideas and concepts based on those comparisons. Vygotsy believed that higher cognitive function is rooted in social interaction (Ormrod, 2012). In my own classroom, I encourage students to communicate through various methods, like pairs of students working together on a single quick research worksheet, creating presentations in groups, and occasional board-game days, with the express purpose of getting students talking. We try to have some kind of interactive activity on a daily basis.

Learning from **More Knowledgeable Others** regards the theory that when a child has reached their maximum potential, a more knowledgeable person can help them connect current knowledge to more advanced knowledge. In the classroom teachers hold the primary MKO role, but a more competent peer can also assist their developing classmates. While I am the primary MTO in my classroom, I encourage students in my more technical classes, like computer

applications, to work with one another when problem solving. This has been particularly helpful when working with spreadsheets, as the learner and the assisting student are both strengthening their comprehension of tasks by engaging with one another. When creating groups for research and presentation projects, I try to blend groups of students of varying cognitive and language abilities in an effort to encourage learning from each other. My role as teacher in these situations is to circulate the room and assist groups with clarifications, encouragement, and reinforcement of the work they are doing well.

Vygotsy's **Zone of Proximal Development** refers to the difference between what a learner can currently do, and what more they could do with the help of an MKO. This concept also illustrates how **Scaffolding** fits in, as scaffolding can only work when students are adequately prepared to advance from one level of development to the next. Using formal and informal assessments to accurately determine where students are in their learning is necessary to ensure scaffolding will be effective. Student engagement is strengthened when new assignments are relatable and connected to past assignments. In my personal finance classes, students begin the semester by exploring their personal histories with spending and saving money, and then we slowly connect their experiential knowledge to more advanced concepts. As we advance from unit to unit, previously learned knowledge becomes applicable to new content, thereby connecting ideas through scaffolding and working within students' zones of proximal development.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is often compared and contrasted with Piaget's theory of cognitive development. However, where Piaget focused on childhood development as it relates to the biological development of an individual, Vygotsky was more concerned with the critical role of development through the influence of others. For example, a student's learning is

strengthened when their individual perspective is influenced and altered through the process of observing, interacting with, or interpreting, the meaning of the work and ideas of a peer. Vygotsky also felt that there were certain tasks that a child could only perform with the guidance or assistance of an adult. In both cases, it is arguable that students are in a better position to gain understanding of new concepts when interacting and engaging with others (Ormrod, 2012).

While Vygotsky's theory acknowledges biological factors of cognitive development, his primary focus was on developmental factors resulting from a child's exposure to their social and cultural environment (Ormrod, 2012). Over time, the informal experiences children receive at home, within the community, and among friends, coupled with exposure to formal education and other structured sources of knowledge, like religion and cultural customs, equips them with sets of tools that shape and maintain their cognitive development. The passing of these tools, through cultural and technological evolution, "greatly enhances children's thinking abilities" (Ormrod, 2012, p.314).

While the groundwork for Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has been in place since the 1920s, it has only become popularized in the U.S. over the past few decades. For centuries people have been aware of the value of practical experience and apprenticeship within the context of developing skills and mastery. So it makes sense that an academic scaffold that develops through the process of learning, application, and practice, could contribute to strengthening cognitive abilities. There is certainly a place in education for lectures and rote memorization. However, interpersonal interactions with teachers and peers, connecting learning to personal experiences and funds of knowledge, and application of knowledge in attainable steps, gives students more meaningful and lasting ways to expand their knowledge.

According to Kaya Yilmaz (2011), the basic principles of *Cognitive Apprenticeship* lie within Vygotsky's theory of proximal development, where students grasp concepts while working under the guidance of an expert–an experienced teacher or a more capable peer. As students develop, they are continually challenged to grasp at new concepts that may be slightly beyond them, but still within reach. Independent problem solving, with guidance, ushers them along a path of continuous development.

As I contemplate how I have been teaching in the classroom and what I might do to increase engagement, Vygotsky's theories continually surface as foundational to getting students engaged and excited about learning. When students learn by accessing prior knowledge, applying that knowledge to new content, and comparing and contrasting what they know with peers, engagement is bolstered because content is delivered through a process of meaning and relevance.

One common problem related to engagement that does not appear in many academic materials, especially older books and journals, is the high level of absences that plague high school classrooms. With absences sometimes averaging 25% per class period, some credit for lacking engagement must be placed on missed prerequisite knowledge. As the efficacy of scaffolding and positioning within the zone of proximal development is diminished through the absence of critical prior knowledge, other methods must be employed to bring irregular attenders up to speed (Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

Teachers today have a plethora of resources available promising to increase engagement in the classroom. I have employed, and continue to employ, various tactics and strategies in an effort to increase engagement, but am still mostly dissatisfied with my results. I accept that I may be the problem, and not the techniques I am attempting. However, as someone who is actively

working to improve my craft, I take extensive notes after each lesson and record what worked and what could be improved upon. I may not have had luck with some engagement strategies, but I can see where some simple tweaks may breathe new life into them.

In my experience, high school juniors and seniors tend to be more apathetic about learning than their younger counterparts. This is troubling when the content I am tasked with teaching them–personal finance–is a subject offering nearly immediate value to their lives. My students seem genuinely interested in the topic, but it is clear to me that the level of interest in *learning* is lacking. The work gets done, but with limited enthusiasm. Each day there is at least some requirement to interact with other students and to engage with the teacher. While some interpersonal activities seem to garner chatter and interaction, others leave the room mostly silent. In some cases the mood is a matter of the classroom dynamic. For example, my 4th period class is more likely to engage in class discussions and activities than my 8th period class. As a result, the 8th period class is often done early because there is less interaction. It is clear that not all classes will respond the same to similar engagement methods. However, rather than developing different strategies for each class, it would be most prudent to recognize what strategies work best for the least engaged class, and employ those strategies to the other classes.

Vigotsgy's theory is an important guide to my practice because the basic principles–social interactions, learning from more competent others, and scaffolding–are all methods that strengthen engagement and meaning in the classroom. Through these strategies I hope to increase student engagement through regular implementation of interactive activities and assignments.

Connection to InTASC Standards

I strongly believe that as a teacher I have a tremendous responsibility to find ways of delivering content to my students in ways that bring them meaningful and long lasting value in their personal lives. To be successful in the goal of making content meaningful to students, I must not only be able to assess their comprehension and progress, but I must also be able to assess the efficacy of my methods. As a practitioner, I have already been employing various methods to spur engagement in my classes, and while I am not completely satisfied with the results I am seeing, I am aware that some issues we are faced with in secondary education are not within my sphere of influence. For example, I am not the cause of student apathy, and there is little I can do to improve student attendance. However, I believe that I can practice strategies that increase student interest in our content, and that over time I will continually improve my methods to maximize student engagement. My high school implemented a relatively effective cell phone ban this year, and I have been a militant agent of policy adherence in my classroom. I can already see an enormous difference in both the quantity and quality of classwork being completed, and engagement has improved. Implementation of the new cell phone policy itself proves the cause and effect of one method on student engagement. So now I need to begin applying and measuring the effectiveness of other methods. I have already imposed some group work that has worked with some, but not with others. However, if something does not work the first time, that does not mean it will not work in the future. Consistency will establish expectations and routines that students will eventually benefit from as they become comfortable with the way things are done in my classroom.

Since my Action Research Project emphasis is on student engagement, I will need to be thinking about the environment I create for learning, how I will know if learning is happening, and what instructional strategies work best for student engagement. I began the school year

thinking a lot about the learning environment and how I should arrange desks for best student engagement.

InTASC Standard #3 focuses on how ***learning environments*** are created to support individual and collaborative learning, with an emphasis on encouraging active engagement and self-motivation through spatial design. Many teachers cluster desks into groups of four with students facing one another, while some keep them in rows, and others may set the room up like a U-shaped chamber. Last year I taught in four different classrooms, so I became familiar with some of these configurations. I found that while the clusters of four desks was good for getting students to engage with one another, it made it difficult for them to engage on what was going on at the front of the room when needed. Rows were a little too isolated. Our room has two-person tables, so I set the tables up at angles that positioned each student to view the front of the room, but it is easy for students in front tables to rotate chairs 180 degrees to face students behind them for group work (link to seating plan). Tables are also arranged so that there is a wide aisle in the center of the room that can be used for standing activities on mobile whiteboards. Our room has a lot of room for creative layout.

InTASC Standard #6, ***Assessment*** is important for several reasons. First, if I am to be successful in knowing what is and is not working for student engagement and content uptake, I must actively record informal assessments, like group activity and interaction and exit slips, as well as more formal assessments like presentations, quizzes, and application exercises. I have already employed many of these methods, and I continue to seek out more strategies to determine what I can do better. Some of the assessments provided to students have more benefit in informing my practice than in measuring their progress.

InTASC Standard #8 highlights the importance of teachers using effective ***instructional strategies*** to ensure students develop deep understanding of the content, can connect it to their personal lives, and can apply skills and knowledge learned in meaningful ways. I will use what I learn through observation and assessment to reassess and retool my methods in an effort to continuously and sustainably improve my teaching practice.

Summary

Considering my difficult beginnings as a K-12 student, I am still sometimes surprised to find myself at the front of a classroom. It happened by accident, really, as I was recruited to teach business at a career technical high school after selling my business. Only after a few years of teaching did I begin to recognize that many of my own students have the same struggle I did as a student. I do not blame my teachers for these struggles, however I do believe that curricular and instructional strategies have traditionally been designed to reach the conventional learner, not those of us with busy brains and difficulty focusing. It is possible that the proliferation of cell phone distraction (even when not in the classroom) has caused an increase in inattention and deficiencies in a student's ability to engage in collaborative learning. I want to learn how to generate meaningful and engaging teaching strategies that help students like me more easily access learning, and become excited about our content.

I look forward to digging deeper into the work of Lev Vygotsky to help me recognize some of the causes for student disengagement and learn what methods work best to excite and engage students and help make their learning experience something to look forward to. By researching Vygotsky's methods, and applying concepts as found within the InTASC standards I have selected, I plan to develop planning and teaching strategies that bring meaning into my classroom and content that has lasting positive effects on my students' lives.

Chapter 2. Literature Review and Scholarship

Because I struggled with focus and engagement during my years within public school systems, I hope to use my personal experiences and perspectives to inform new strategies that work to reach students with similar learning struggles. There are two types of engagement I want to address before focusing on my specific interest. The first regards the level of discourse between students and between teacher and students that lead to increased topic interest and knowledge. The second is the level of students' individual engagement with content and class work. Anecdotally, I have noticed that my juniors and seniors are less engaged in discussions and group activities than my freshmen and sophomore students. However, they tend to use class time effectively and work quietly on their own with a sense of focus. It is worth noting that my campus has imposed a strict cell-phone ban this year, and that policy is strictly enforced in my classroom. I believe that change to be a major factor in the improved engagement with classwork compared to the prior year. Yet while more class work–and better quality work–is getting done this year, student interpersonal engagement remains a challenge.

Through my research process, it has been my goal to find resources to help me understand the psychological and environmental factors that may be causing students to withdraw and disengage when faced with interpersonal discourse. Additionally, I am interested in understanding how to access and apply proven strategies that help normalize student engagement in the classroom.

Annotated Bibliography

Anyichie, A. C., Butler, D. L., & Nashon, S. M. (2023). Exploring teacher practices for enhancing student engagement in culturally diverse classrooms. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, *7*(5), 183–207. https://doi.org/10.33902/jpr.202322739

This journal article explores practices that enhance student engagement in a diverse classroom environment. The authors obtained data collected through classroom observation, student and teacher interviews and surveys, and student work samples. The research is focused on self-regulated learning, CRT, culturally diverse learners, and integrated pedagogy. The study concludes with a hypothesis that combining self-regulated and culturally responsive teaching practices works better in some content areas better than in others. For example, it may be more difficult to find connections between culture and mathematics than culture and social studies or language arts.

I am particularly interested in this journal article because I teach in a very diverse school with many cultural and language differences. With engagement as the focus of my ARP this article has helped me to identify methods for increasing a sense of inclusion and connection to the topics in my classroom. Personal finance is a content area that poses some challenges in terms of connecting to cultural backgrounds since much of the content is objective. However this article shows that it is possible to help students from various cultural backgrounds by designing lessons with easier access to interactive activities and language supports, as well as seeking out and applying better connections to cultural knowledge and lived experiences.

Asarta, C. J. (2023). Student engagement and interaction in the economics classroom: Essentials

for the novice economic educator. *The Journal of Economic Education*, *55*(1), 54–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2023.2269142

In this article, Asarta explores the use of multiple strategies for increasing student engagement in the novice teachers' Economics classroom. The premise of the article is that while lecturing has a valid role in teaching, its overuse can lead to negative student outcomes compared to when using cooperative learning and small-group assignments. The author concludes that novice teachers can begin with low stakes engagement strategies and build upon them using resources provided within the article.

This article succinctly stated the problem of low classroom engagement as a result of lecture oriented instruction, and went on to suggest multiple strategies to increase student interaction and involvement in topic related activities. Additionally, the author recommended several content specific resources for further exploration.

I found this article particularly helpful since it focused on stimulating interpersonal interactions and group-work, since those are my weak areas.

The strengths of this article was focusing on only six strategies that are highly effective, rather than overwhelming the reader with a long list of strategies.

One thing that could have made this article more impactful for me would be to provide additional suggestions for engaging rooms with high ratios of quiet, apathetic, or disinterested students. I believe that there are ways to empower these students, but strategies will likely take more time and planning to transition disengaged students into engaged students.

In summary, through this article Asarta makes a strong case that lecture based learning in Economics education creates negative student outcomes and decreases interest in students

pursuing economics as a field of study in higher education. Data suggests that due to recent theory on pedagogy, novice teachers are applying more student centered learning strategies compared to twenty years ago. However, simply applying more group work and student interaction does not necessarily mean outcomes are better, so it is additionally important to have assessments in place to ensure that new methods and strategies are also effective at achieving strong learning results.

The strategies and recommended resources provided in the article provide novice teachers with effective tools for implementing student centered and interactive learning.

Böttger, T., & Zierer, K. (2024). To ban or not to ban? A rapid review on the impact of smartphone bans in schools on social well-being and academic performance. *Education Sciences*, *14*(8), 906. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080906

This article examines the effects of smartphone use by children and young people at school. Bottger and Zierer support their evidence through systematic review guided by the PRISMA framework. The authors selected and examined five research studies with quantitative results, and focused on the effects of smartphone use on academic performance and social behavior. The study concluded that smartphone bans in schools are recommended to improve academic performance and to reduce learning distractions.

This article was selected as a resource because it helps identify specific data about how smartphone dependence affects academic performance and classroom distractions. My high school campus started the school year off with a meaningful smartphone ban, and while the ban is not perfect, the results of minimal phone use during class show a clear improvement in

academic performance and attention to content than experienced in my classes last year. This article helps tie my anecdotal experience with measured data to help me identify and apply working strategies to improve my own classroom behavioral guidelines.

The strengths of this article lie in the use of strong evidence to develop findings. However, the topic of smartphone distraction is relatively recent as the influx of applications, like TikTok and easy to access video games, has increased significantly over the past four years, so the number of studies with access to strong sources of data are limited at this time. As more schools across the country attempt creative systems of cell phone management I anticipate seeing an increase in data collection and research to strengthen the body of evidence currently available.

Bromley, K. (2007). Nine things every teacher should know about words and vocabulary instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *50*(7), 528–537. https://doi.org/10.1598/jaal.50.7.2

This article was selected because I believe vocabulary and word etymology help all learners,

including language learners, to grasp concepts more easily. Author, Karen Bromley, reminds us that traditional methods of learning vocabulary–vocabulary lookup, memorization, and quizzes–are not effective methods of learning the meaning and uses of vocabulary in our content areas. Embedding vocabulary within the learning environment with word walls, contextual use within lecture, reading, and writing, and ongoing reinforcement, are what give words and phrases lasting value in the academic development of students. With vocabulary as a principal contributor to all aspects of learning and engagement, teachers must keep it at the center of the learning process.

Including this journal article as a resource for my ARP is important because I believe that language, words, and etymology are central to making meaning out of content. As I consider strategies to improve engagement in my classroom, I regularly return to the fact that many of my students are either English language learners, or had been classified as ELL until recently. The selected article helps identify useful and applicable strategies for keeping language, words, and vocabulary learning as an ancillary part of any content area.

The most impactful part of this text for me is the reminder that cognates, word association, and regular use of relevant vocabulary help students tap into previous knowledge that helps them recognize nuanced differences in meaning. In my specific area of Personal Finance, there are many words with multiple meanings that need regular clarification and contextual use. For example, the word default is commonly known as a preselected computer option, like the default font used in a computer application, but in personal finance default means failure to pay back a loan. For this reason, Bromley (2007) recommends using blatant contextual references whenever possible to help establish strong meaning for struggling readers.

Burden, P. R. (2020). *Classroom management: Creating a successful K-12 learning community*. John Wiley & Sons.

I Selected Burden's book *Classroom Management* because the author's approach to management strategies considers a full spectrum of engagement variables teachers face on a daily basis. Burden has spent much of his career studying and developing educational strategies with an emphasis on classroom management strategies. Through several years spent supervising student teachers, the author developed and assessed

various management techniques and developed several tested best practices for teachers.

This book has been a major contributing source for my understanding of how closely tied classroom management is to student engagement. For the purposes of my action research project, I find the chapter on preparation for the school year to be the most important since classroom management is most effective when well defined guidelines and standards are established at the beginning of class term.

The book covers strategies for sustaining order, making meaningful connections with students, strong planning for good pacing, and connecting with families and colleagues to build strong relationships that also serve as resources for developing more effective practices. I am particularly interested in the concept of *Funds of Knowledge*, and chapter 11 provides multiple strategies for learning more about how to make meaningful connections to students' lives without losing too much planning and grading time.

The book also helps remind us that we work within teaching communities and it is important to use as many district and campus resources as possible to be successful. Specifically, not all behavior issues need to be handled by the teacher, and help from campus professionals should be sought out to handle severe or ongoing behavior issues. The advice additionally includes seeking resources for other classroom management needs so teacher planning and grading time is protected. I need these reminders and techniques to help me become more efficient with my time to maximize the value of time available with students.

Dabrowski, J., & Marshall, T. R. (2018). Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments. In *The Education Trust* (pp. 1–13). Education Trust. www.edtrust.org

This article considers how assignments can have a greater impact on student learning when content is developed with relevance to students' personal experiences in mind. As learning is contextual, positioning content within the context of the learner will deliver stronger results than teacher centered content. The authors stress the importance of creating an environment where students can connect their lived experiences with class curriculum. This is because if students are to learn and be emotionally invested in their professional or academic careers in the future, they must first develop those skills and values during their school years. Making lessons meaningful and relevant through student choice will increase student interest and engagement in other areas in their lives.

This report adds value to my research on student engagement because it discusses applicable means and methods for making lessons relevant and connected to student experiences and interests. This is an area that I am well aware of, but struggle to apply in my own classroom. For me there is value in learning how to establish opportunities for student choice when creating new lessons. The report argues that students will approach assignments with greater interest if they are given a choice in how they exhibit mastery. Examples include written assignments, videos, graphical presentations, role play, and even music–where appropriate. The idea is to take control away from the teacher and place it into the hands of students.

Gottschalk, K. K. (1994). Facilitating Discussion: A Brief Guide. In *Teaching Guides* (pp. 1–27). John S. Knight Institute for writing in the disciplines. https://knight.as.cornell.edu/teaching-guides

I found this manuscript to be particularly helpful in thinking about the process of

normalizing conversation in my classes. The author centers the entire document around methods of moving the voice of the room away from the teacher and into the hands of students. From the first sentence in the document, Gottschalk gets to the core of lecture based classes: “We don’t mean to lecture, but it is difficult to get students to talk . . .” (p.3). This article got my attention because those have been my exact words. It is even more refreshing that the author offers multiple tested solutions to apply in the classroom, from how to create rapport to better seating strategies. For an article written in 1994 I am impressed with the relevance of the strategies included.

Facilitating discussion is probably my weakest trait as a teacher. This is something I try and fail at on a daily basis. While there are times I can get students to speak up in class, their voices rarely lead to anything that would qualify as a discussion. I am fully aware that the problem lies within my own lack of ability to stimulate good conversation, and I am also aware my methods will evolve with effort. I appreciate this document because it takes a realistic approach to facing my challenges, and the Gottschalk reinforces the fact that it is a process and not simply a one off strategy. It takes time to normalize certain classroom norms. Not only does the article acknowledge the confidence of students, but also language barriers, gender stereotypes, and learning barriers. The paper goes on to illustrate how to create a space where students feel safe expressing their thoughts without fear of embarrassment or shame. This document is written in a way that is accessible, relevant, and with strategies that are easily accessible.

Grant, S. G., Swan, K., & Lee, J. (2017). *Inquiry-Based practice in social studies education:*

Understanding the inquiry design model. Taylor & Francis.

It has long been understood that for students to engage it is necessary for them to make the learning personal. The inquiry design model transfers the process of learning away from the teacher and onto the student. Grant et al provide teachers with a strong framework, supported with a graphic organizer, to help formulate meaningful content in a way that challenges students to learn through their own research and discovery. The theory is based on the idea that students will always gain more knowledge and retain more of what they learn through the process of authentic inquiry. The authors of this text draw from the findings on IDM dating back to the 1960s and recognize that while there is a lot of written material supporting the efficacy of the model, the concepts do not seem to have become well rooted in U.S. pedagogical design. This text is meant to help educators identify and use IDM methods that will bring sustaining results to their classrooms.

I was introduced to the Inquiry Design Model in my content pedagogy class and I immediately recognized the potential value of these methods for increasing student engagement. While I already include methods of inquiry in my lessons, the framework introduced and described in this text can help educators develop measurable strategies to make learning more student centered - something that has been an ongoing struggle for me. I think this text will be valuable for my practice because the authors have assembled a framework of methods and graphic organizers that help teachers to organize how lessons are delivered to achieve best outcomes for their students.

The book is written specifically for Social Studies, and therefore geared towards history,

civics, and similar courses, however my primary content area centers on Personal Finance (PF). Although there are many options for me to use the model in my classes, the methods used don't fit my curriculum quite as well since PF content is generally more objective than traditional social studies courses. However I still find a lot of value in the methods for improving student engagement.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, *31*(2), 132–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534

This article explores approaches to learning how to better serve students from diverse backgrounds through understanding more about what their life experiences look like outside of school. This article argues that there is significant valuable knowledge possessed within our students that is learned within their homes and neighborhoods that must be acknowledged as valid learning experiences. The text shares how teachers can create strong reciprocal relationships by making home visits and learning about how students contribute to, and learn from, their own familial, cultural, and neighborhood communities. The article concludes that teachers who connect with their students' cultural backgrounds will garner greater student and parent connection to the educational process, and will ultimately lead to a greater likelihood of student success.

I chose this article because the concepts discussed within it make perfect sense in terms of making meaningful connections to community and learning. While I recognize how difficult it would be to undergo regular visits to student homes and neighborhoods, there are grains of truth

within the article that can be accessed through other means. For example, it may be difficult to arrange for home visits, it is possible to connect by phone, newsletter, and email. One method I use to connect to students and families outside of my classroom is to attend as many sports and performing arts events as possible. Doing so benefits both myself and my students, as we see one another outside of the context of my classroom. Seeing one another outside of the classroom humanizes both of us.

While I don't see the process of home visits as a realistic option for connecting with families, I see a lot of value in this article as an encouraging force for finding ways to connect with the experiences and families of our students.

Tanner, K. D. (2013). Structure matters: Twenty-One teaching strategies to promote student engagement and cultivate classroom equity. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, *12*(3), 322–331. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.13-06-0115

The focus of this article revolves around strategies for increasing student engagement that are small but meaningful, and can be utilized on an ongoing basis. While the article is written specifically for the biology classroom, most of the strategies listed are applicable to most any classroom. The article is rooted in a constructivist framework, where students and their individual experiences, competencies, and motivation, are considered key variables to promoting new ideas. As alluded to within the article title, twenty-one strategies are suggested to help increase student engagement in an environment that is inclusive, fair, safe, and encouraging.

While I have used some of the methods mentioned in this article, I had forgotten about

some, and just have not continued using others. Revisiting some of these strategies–like drawing popsicle sticks with names and hand raising strategies–I realize there are many good strategies that not only increase participation and help break up a class period, but they are also very easily accessed and effective. I have some classes where all students refuse to speak up, so it is easy to give up on attempting these strategies. However, this article is a reminder that it is sometimes necessary to normalize strategies so students are primed for what to expect and are more likely to be prepared for interacting if called upon. This report will remain near my desk as a reference document when I am planning upcoming lessons.

Summary

At the beginning of this project my focus was generally based on student engagement. However, as I have been learning more about the topic, and after applying various new strategies in my classroom, I have found that while individual student engagement with the content has improved, I am still struggling to get students to engage with one another and with me. For this reason I have selected academic resources that align best with strategies for student centered teaching and learning. Specifically, the inquiry design model promises to shift learning from being teacher driven to being student centered. Incorporating more active classroom exercises to get students moving and interacting with others is something I recognize as being valuable to extending the quality of their learning, and I am aware that there is a lot of room for growth for me in terms of planning for such activities.

The resources I have selected provide a wide array of ideas, strategies, and measurable outcomes, that I can learn from and apply to my own methods. My goal is to improve student comprehension of knowledge in my classroom through meaningful activities while managing to

reasonably work within the amount of prep time I am afforded. I believe this is possible through patiently trying various techniques and strategies, recording my results, making adjustments, and keeping what works. It is not necessary to seek perfection, but to continuously work toward measurable progress.

Chapter 3: Methods

Action Research in education represents a sustaining process of applying inquiry based teaching strategies, assessing student outcomes, and using assessment results to inform the redesign of instruction. This process is intended to remain continual until best practices are identified and organized in a way that can make best use of curriculum delivery for a diverse and ever-changing population of students.

For teachers to effectively generate an action research plan, it is necessary to first decide on a **focus**. One must examine their experiences as a teacher and identify the strengths and weaknesses of outcomes to various lessons, followed by focusing on areas that consistently deliver lower than acceptable results.

The second step of action research is **clarifying theories**. An appropriate approach to this step is to examine academic theories and perspectives of researchers around your focus area, and to identify the values and methods most appropriate and fitting for your students and class environment. It is best to use a solid assessment matrix that helps define the needs of a particular class–students and curriculum–and apply theories that fit the specific needs of a class.

The third step, **identifying research questions**, is best done after some time getting to know who the students are and after some exploration of what seems to be working, and what does not seem to be working in the class. A complete assessment matrix and the examination of intentionally designed assessments will greatly aid in creating guiding research questions. The questions should also align with personal teaching values.

Collecting Data, step four in the action research process, involves taking action in an effort to qualify your research question. This step is perhaps the most important since without it, measurability is anecdotal at best. There are numerous data resources that can be collected to provide informative analyses. For example, student assignments, informal observations, a course syllabus, artifacts, attendance records, reflections, and course evaluations (Wu, 2023).

Analyze data, step five, in order to determine what the data tells us about our theory–the why and what–provides us with what we need to develop a grounded theory.

Step six, **Reporting results**, is important both as validation to the project author and to others who can benefit from the hard work that goes into generating such a study. Our research has value to the industry and to our students, so it is important to find conduits to sharing the work.

The seventh and final step is **taking informed action**. This is the whole point of completing the research–to put it into practice. Once this step is achieved, it takes very little time to tweak and adjust things moving forward.

Action research is the proper method for my study because it demands detailed planning, data collection, and informed application of findings to my practice. It provides me with a framework for continually analyzing and adjusting my practice to achieve best results.

The research questions guiding my study are

1. How can establishing regular routines and opportunities for interpersonal interactions increase engagement among students in the classroom?
2. What strategies and methods for lesson delivery result in the highest engagement with class materials?

Section 2. Participants and Setting

The high school I teach at is located in a residential neighborhood near downtown Salem, which serves students from predominantly lower economic neighborhoods to the north and east of the campus (Oregon Dept. of Education, 2025). The class used for my data collection was made up of 26 students, 12 girls and 14 boys in grades 10-12. Eight students were active in ELL Programs, six were post-monitored English language learners, two were receiving special education services, and one student was identified as TAG. 18 students identified as Hispanic/Latino, three as African American (one of whom was a newcomer from Africa), one as native Pacific Islander, and one student identified as Asian.

Students' funds of knowledge on campus were derived from their social connections, peer experiences, sports, performing arts, and clubs and organizations. All of the students had at least some academic funds of knowledge from multiple academic experiences in prior classes, both in middle school and in high school, that applied to our content area. Off campus sources of funds of knowledge were developed through experiences with their families, neighborhoods, social groups, and cultural enclaves. Students were encouraged to share our class topics with family and friends outside of school as a way to expand their knowledge through learning about the experiences of those they are closest to within the context of our topic (Moll, L. C. et al, 1992).

In the time spent working with this group of students, I had experienced a dynamic and diverse group of thinkers who were generally interested in our topic, and in doing well in the class. They were engaged with the material and seemed excited to learn more about our content

area. My strength with this particular group was that I had been able to keep them interested and engaged in our topic through interactive exercises and activities. I worked hard to maintain that interest through chunking instruction and including at least one activity that got them up and moving during each class period.

My areas of improvement with this group of students included finding and applying strategies to continue their interest and engagement. While the methods used were mostly successful, Tanner (2013) states that overused activities may lose their effectiveness over time, so I remained focused on refreshing my methods to keep them new and interesting.

Data Collection & Analysis

In order to do a meaningful and thorough job at using data analysis to inform my action research plan, I began with collecting information related to the students enrolled in my class. The school district provides multiple details about each student, such as grade, age, gender, familial connections, health records, learning accommodations required, language development stages, languages spoken at home, prior classes and grades, attendance, and current classes and grades. From this information I can devise an initial framework for the makeup of my class.

Additional data collection can be provided during my course. I begin each semester with a "getting to know you" or GTNY survey that asks multiple questions of students including school and topic related questions, as well as questions about their lives outside of school; work, interests, hobbies. The GTNY survey provides the kind of information necessary to understand more of the "who" about my students, and these data provide a basis for learning even more about students that I might not ever learn through daily classroom interactions.

Attendance records provide information about the percentage of classes missed by students. I have found that in order to get an accurate idea of how students in general are doing in

my class, I must compare the results of their classwork with their attendance. If I were to simply measure my results based on how students do on assignments or exams without separating the results in terms of who is attending class and who is not, I cannot effectively measure the quality of my teaching methods and strategies. Perhaps this would be less of an issue on some other campuses, but my classes averaged 33% absences on a daily basis. As illustrated in figure 3.3, the Oregon Department of Education data shows that only 35% of our students attend classes regularly compared to the state average of 66%. Regular attendance is measured by students attending a minimum of 90% of enrolled school days (Oregon Department of Education).

A good data analysis table provides a visually organized resource to simplify the process of analyzing various data sets. While some of my data tables may appear to highlight the deficiencies of my students, in actuality I will use low performance scores to identify the deficiencies in my teaching methods and make adjustments accordingly. Table 3.1 shows a simple format I use for tracking three types of assessment data.

Gradebooks also supply helpful progress information, but again, for findings to be based on accurate data, it is necessary to break results into categories that also look at attendance and participation. While gradebooks are informative, I have found that formative and informal assessments are the most useful in terms of my action research topic of increasing student engagement. See figure 3.1 for an example of my digital gradebook.

Classroom observations are valuable, and while I have participated in many required observations, I also sought out mentor observers when I felt I needed another set of eyes on my methods. Observation reflections from my WOU supervisor and CT were some of the most valuable sources of information regarding my professional practice. In these instances I was

often surprised by very simple and easy to apply suggestions that made very big improvements to my methods of instruction.

Class entry tickets, exit tickets, worksheets, and guided notes sheets are extremely useful sources of data that provide valuable feedback to instruction as well as serve to inform future instruction. I find that folder review (where students periodically turn in their folder for review) is an excellent way to browse student work and account for progress and understanding. Figure 3.2 shows a student work sample of a worksheet. My grading goal for folder review was less for the purpose of rewarding "correct" work, and more for observing the level of content engagement students are reflecting. For regular attenders, this information provides me with an idea of how the content is being received, and where improvements in my instruction can be made. In order to be effective in gathering and organizing data in a way that accurately conveys my teaching practice, it is necessary to remain proactive and intentional in my methods. To be successful at this, lessons are designed to include specific measurable assessments like entry and exit tickets, as well as ways to qualify less formal inputs, such as student interaction. To be successful in documenting engagement, intentional observation and recording of the activity using a clipboard helps me to qualify the effectiveness of activities. Because measuring engagement is subjective in nature, I create categories on my assessment sheet to help me identify the patterns and repetitions I am looking for among students (Sagor, R. 2000).

Research Questions	Data Source #1 Reflections	Data Source #2 Observations	Data Source #3 Attendance Records
How do informal assessments, regular group assignments and activities help to normalize student engagement in the classroom.	Recorded observation of changes to class participation over a period of time after using engagement exercises each day. Analytics will be somewhat anecdotal, but measurable in terms of quantifying the level of effort required to get students talking, with hopes that effort required to inspire interaction begins to decrease as students become more accustomed to personal interactions being a normal and expected part of our class periods. Example: compare exit ticket completion over time. Are students being more thorough and thoughtful in responses?	Lesson plans written to include regular student group work. Each lesson will include at least two opportunities for students to engage, starting with a question of the day. The second opportunity will include activities that require student group work, like think-pair-share, elbow partner discussions, and teams. These exercises provide opportunities to observe discussion engagement, academic language, and comprehension.	Comparing attendance records to students' progress helps to determine which students are struggling due to their absences and which are struggling for other reasons. When assessing collective class progress, accounting for regular absences allows for making adjustments to the data that is based on the work of present students rather than the class roster. For example, on average, 33% of students are missing for each of my class periods, so ensuring that my results are accurate requires just comparing the work of present students.

Table 3.1

		Folder Review 1	Portfolio Document	Stock Market...	Presentatior	Folder Review 2	TEST 1
		due: 3/2/20 max: 4.00 pts: 2.00 District Su	due: 3/2/20 max: 4.00 pts: 2.00 District Su	due: 3/2/20 max: 4.00 pts: 2.00 District Su	due: 4/9/20 max: 4.00 pts: 4.00 District Su	due: 4/14/2 max: 4.00 pts: 2.00 District Su	due: 4/14/2 max: 4.00 pts: 2.00 District Su
3.67	A	4	4	2	4		4
2.83	B	4	2	0	4		3
2.83	B	4	4	0	4		1
0.17	F	0	0	0	0		1
3.33	A	4	4	4	3		2
0	F				0		0
3.17	B	4	4	0	4		3
2.83	B	4	4	0	4		1
3	B	2	4	0	4		4
1.33	D	0	3	3	0		2
2.83	B	4	4	1	3		2
0.67	F	0	0	0	0		4
2.5	B	0	0	4	4		3

Figure 3.1, Gradebook page showing multiple graded assignments

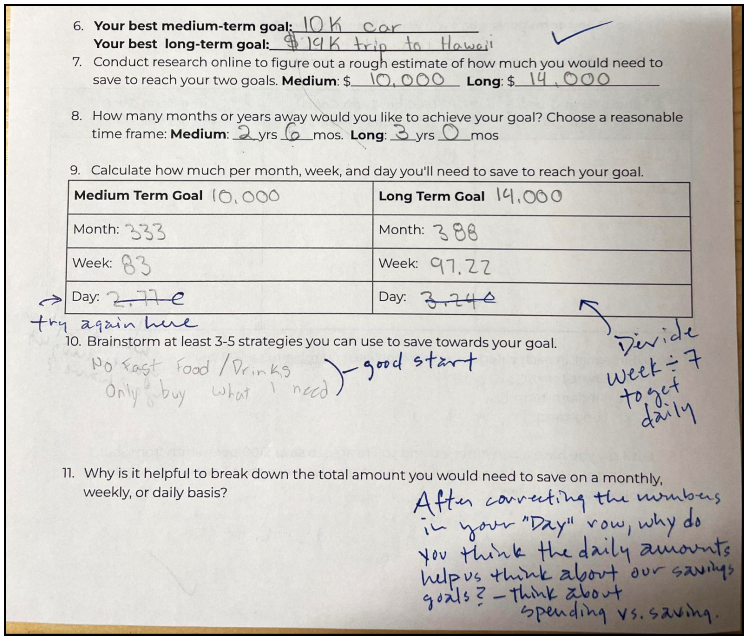

Figure 3.2, Student work sample: worksheet used for documenting student learning.

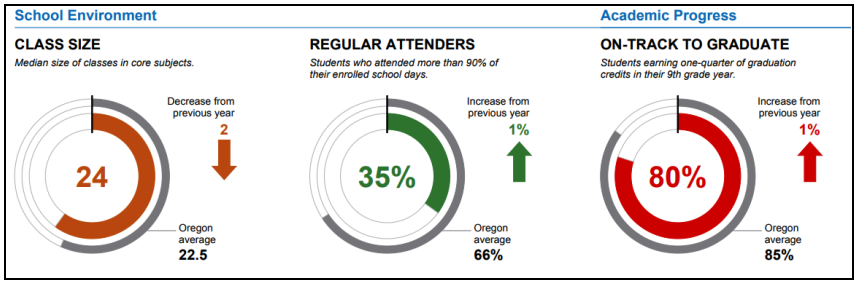

Figure 3.3, 2023-2024 school environment

Section 4. Researcher Positionality

As a middle class white male teacher in a school predominantly populated by Mexican American students from working class families there are some obvious barriers in connecting to many students when first becoming acquainted. Over time, students tend to catch on that I have a deep appreciation for Latin American culture, I am familiar with how to cook cuisine my students are familiar with, and I often let students choose the music we listen to when appropriate for the activity. My curriculum includes occasional board game days as a way to encourage student interaction. Included in the games is Loteria, a traditional Mexican bingo type game that students enjoy because it connects to their cultural heritage. Little things, like speaking in Spanish with ESL students, correct pronunciation of Spanish names, and showing genuine interest in the many cultures represented in the classroom, have the biggest impact on the process of building relationships. Many of our students come from lower economic situations. Having been raised in similar circumstances has provided me with perspective and knowledge over the various traumas and barriers that can impede a young person's access to personal progress, and I believe my past experience is useful in helping determine what steps can be taken to begin lowering some of those barriers. Showing confidence in them and celebrating their accomplishments has proven to encourage personal academic progress, in my experience.

As a middle class, older caucasian male, there are many things that separate me from my

students culturally and generationally. It is not important for me to like the things they like, or to be able to relate to them on all levels. What is important is that we can celebrate our differences, learn from one another, and to recognize our similarities.

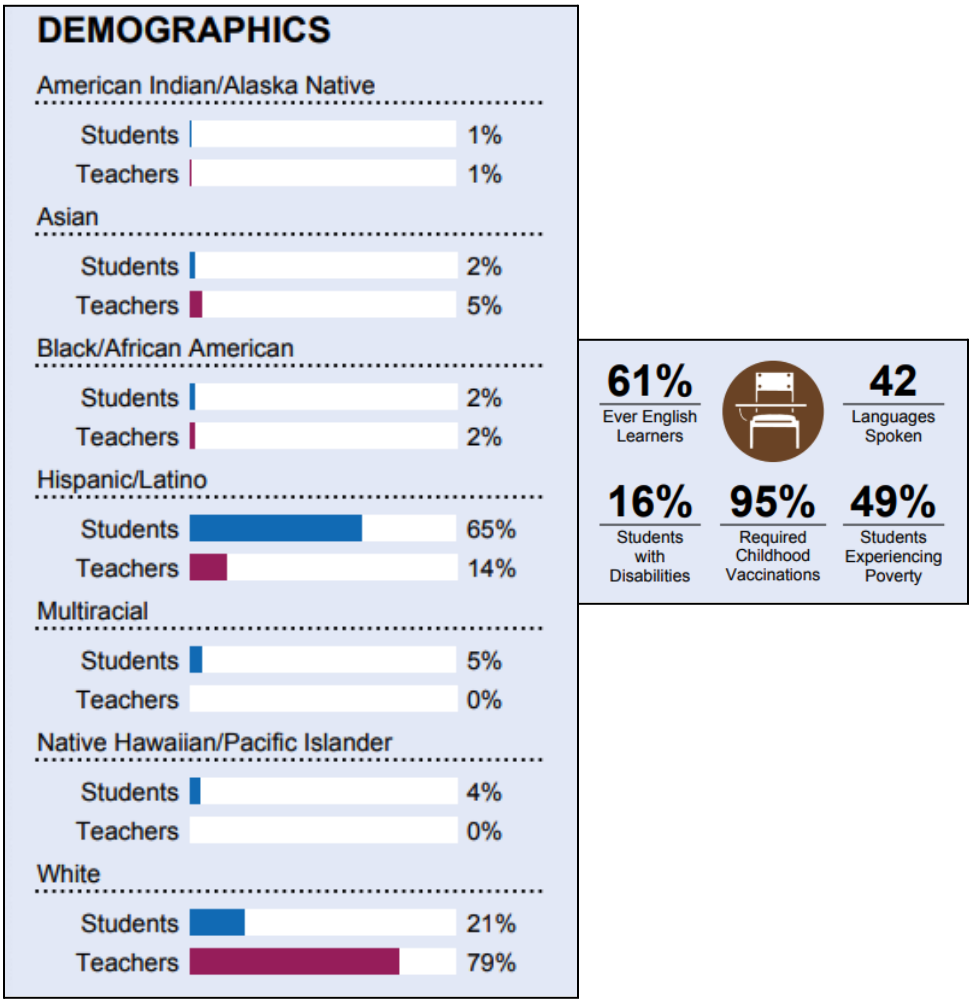

Figure 3.4, School demographics

Chapter 4: Findings

Research Question

Throughout the process of this action research project, my primary objective has been to use data collection and analysis to explore how various methods and strategies of instructional design can encourage greater student engagement in my classroom. This objective aligns well with my research question, ***"How can I use student feedback to improve my teaching practices and to enhance student engagement?"*** During my research process, three major themes emerged that I will continue using to improve my teaching practice. The themes are as follows: accessing students' funds of knowledge, interactive activities, and technology management.

Data Coding and Analysis

Without the use of evidence collection and analysis, my perspectives on the effectiveness of my work would be little more than anecdotal. In order to accurately assess the effectiveness of engagement strategies on students, data collected needed to include more than just various student assessments, like exit tickets, quizzes, graphic organizers, and other artifacts. My school district reports the lowest regular attendance rates in the state, and my specific secondary campus is composed of only 35% regular attenders compared to the state average of 66%. The term *regular attenders* refers to those who attend at least 90% of scheduled school days. I can expect an average of 30% absences for all of my classes on any given day, so when measuring student engagement, I must also take into account that students who miss a large number of class periods cannot accurately represent outcomes based on my engagement measuring methods. For the specific class studied for my WOUTPA, absences averaged 25.5% over a period of 12 weeks. To my surprise it has proven difficult to find academic papers discussing low attendance as a factor

of engagement deficiencies. To ensure my measurement averages accurately account for students who are present at least 60% of the time, I will exclude data for students with attendance levels below 60%, as shown in Table 4.1.

Student #		Absent	Present	Avg Absences	Avg Present
702955	4	13.33%	86.67%	**25.49%**	**74.51%**
704456	8	26.67%	73.33%		
762910	3	10.00%	90.00%		
701617	10	33.33%	66.67%		
703115	4	13.33%	86.67%		
706298	7	23.33%	76.67%		
706219	6	20.00%	80.00%		
763035	14	46.67%	53.33%		
719152	10	33.33%	66.67%		
746962	17	56.67%	43.33%		
703797	5	16.67%	83.33%		
748296	5	16.67%	83.33%		
700974	7	23.33%	76.67%		
707345	12	40.00%	60.00%		
701813	1	3.33%	96.67%		
707201	12	40.00%	60.00%		
700384	5	16.67%	83.33%		

Table 4.1, Class attendance record

Conditional formatting–shown in green cells on the table–shows students who have been in attendance at least 60% of the time. I had initially planned to only compare assessment records of students with minimum 70% attendance, but changed my decision because I found that many

of the students with absences in the 60%-69% range were participating well when they were in class - this is not commonly the case.

I teach at a secondary school with over 1,900 students in a mid-sized community with a population of 170,000 people. My campus is 65% Latin American students, and 49% of students are experiencing poverty. Academics for many students is not a high priority due to various factors and barriers, like language limitations, difficult personal experiences, and lack of preparedness for high-school from their earlier grades. However, I believe that there is a lot I can do to excite and engage students about the content I am teaching. I believe I have a duty to help students recognize their strengths and their natural talents and intelligences. I can do this through developing engaging lessons and activities that help them recognize their foundational personal knowledge and experiences that directly or indirectly connect to our content.

Since the start of my action research project, my focus has shifted some as I have developed a hypothesis to support my efforts. In the beginning I was simply in search of methods to get students talking to one another during class exercises. Student interaction during class exercises had been quite difficult for me as a majority of my students were not comfortable engaging within pairs or groups. Originally I looked to activities like ice breakers and turn-n-talks to encourage engaging with one another, but results were disappointing. I needed to take a different approach. Throughout work on my thesis, I kept coming back to *funds of knowledge* as an important consideration when trying to connect students with content. While the concept of culturally responsive teaching is something I have studied, and I am ESOL certified, I still feel underdeveloped in regard to adequately infusing culturally responsive teaching into my practice. My research is ongoing, and I have shifted my perspective to recognize–as my data will suggest–that simply providing regular opportunities for students to express what they already

know boosts confidence as they themselves can see how their personal knowledge and experiences connect to our content.

My data consists largely of entry/exit tickets, class activity packets, class folders, documented observations of class activities, and unit quizzes. While entry/exit tickets represent a rather informal method of data collection, I find them to be some of the most effective ways to determine what students already know, and what they are taking away from the class. Subjective in nature, these documents are easily translated into objective form; what did I know prior to the lesson? What do I know now? In order to measure the effectiveness of strategies for increasing student interpersonal engagement, and engagement with class content, it was necessary to generate regular data sets based on various measurable assessments and related factors. Coding the themes required careful planning to ensure assessments were designed to both provide maximum value to student outcomes and to include easily measurable components. Comparing student work samples to attendance data helped determine how attendance plays a role in comprehension development over time. To help me generate a clear illustration of which methods work best for engagement, I have created multiple methods of assessment, as is aligned with InTASC teaching standard #6. Over the course of researching for this project, I have concluded that informal assessments–for my content area–are a better measure of student progress than formal summatives, perhaps because the casual nature of many informal assessments allows students to approach them without overthinking what the teacher "wants" to hear. By encouraging students to approach these informal assessments by trusting their instincts, I believe results are more accurate and informative, to both me and the students because they are less likely to second guess themselves in an effort to be "correct." Translating subjective data

into objective data for the purpose of quantitative analysis is possible when well defined coding is specified in my data analysis tables.

Accessing Students' Funds of Knowledge

I believe there are multiple ways to help students recognize that they have personal knowledge and experiences connected to everything they are learning. All of their years of school up to this point adds value to student knowledge, as well as cultural knowledge learned among peer groups, teams and clubs, families, church, neighborhoods, and their greater communities. Funds of knowledge are rich resources that students should be encouraged to bring into the classroom. For my content area I try to find a connection to the personal lives of students for each lesson when possible. For example, when teaching about financial assets and liabilities, I begin the class with an entry ticket asking students to list lifestyle and character traits they possess that they consider either assets or liabilities. This particular example begins an engaging class discussion over things like GPA, school sports, the arts, helping family, attendance history, health, and relationships. Because the topic is presented in a way that everyone has access to–personal experiences–it is easy for students to transition into the lesson topic and the idea that both financial and personal outcomes are directly connected to behavior rather than chance.

Another method for accessing students' prior knowledge is giving the *question of the day* for each class period. The question is typically something students will not know the answer to, but it does require accessing prior knowledge to attempt an answer within range of the correct answer. One question-of-the-day example is "what percentage of people in the U.S. spend more on eating out than on groceries?" Nobody is likely to know the answer to this question, but prior class discussions around financial behavior and personal experience with friends and family

provide students with enough peripheral knowledge to make educated guesses. Figure 4.1 illustrates two random examples of student work showing prior knowledge at the beginning of a lesson, followed by describing what they had learned at the end of the lesson.

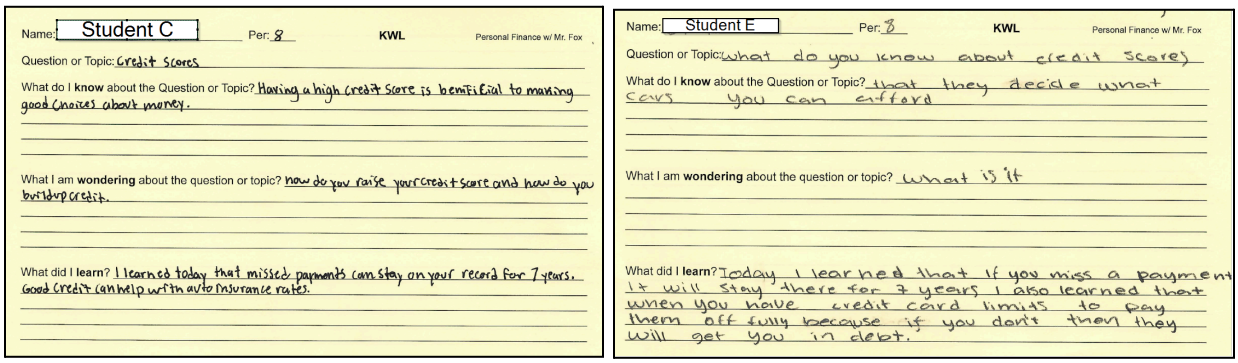

Figure 4.1, two randomly selected KWL slips referenced on the KWL table

The "what did I learn" portion of the KWL form is a critically important informal assessment of student progress in the classroom. It is this section that shows me whether learning targets have been met. The data in table 4.2 show how six randomly selected students performed on the KWL document. The column for "what I learned" illustrates that five of the six students adequately expressed the ability to identify what they learned, and two of those students showed exceeding marks, likely due to their use of strong academic vocabulary and well articulated synthesis of ideas as they relate to the learning target.

KWL Data - "What do I know about credit scores?"				
Student	1 I know	2 I'm Wondering	3 I learned	4 Notes
A	+	-	-	Showed good prior knowledge - item 3 comment was not specific to question
B	✓	✓	✓-	Strong response to items 1 & 2. Answer on #3 showed good processes of our content, but lacked specificity.

C	**+**	**+**	**+**	All questions were answered clearly, and #3 illustrated clear understanding of a core concept.
D	✓	**+**	**+**	Response to item #3 is specific and gives multiple examples
E	✓	**-**	✓	Student expresses prior knowledge and what was learned well.
F	✓	✓	✓	Shows strong effort and expresses a valuable takeaway for item #3

Table 4.2, assessment matrix for KWL over prior knowledge of credit scores

Table 4.2 provided me with metrics to help determine prior knowledge students had when we began the lesson. Collecting data in this way not only provides me with important knowledge about knowledge growth with a lesson period, it also gives me lasting insight into what the age group I am teaching already understands about our topic. In this case, the data illustrate that a majority of my students knew something about our topic upon entering the class. The results in column 1, "what I know", does not reflect whether students are correct or incorrect in their response, but rather that they can demonstrate what they currently understand. If they can do this adequately, it is likely that they will be engaged for the lesson as they strive to reinforce what they know, and to gain clarification for things they are wondering about.

I believe strongly that accessing students' funds of knowledge is key to strengthening their interest in the subject matter, and using KWLs, entry tickets, exit tickets, and interactive activities are all resources that can be used to help students recognize what they already know, and that their prior knowledge actually does connect to what they are learning. I believe that when we can make both direct and indirect connections between subject content and students' prior knowledge, content becomes more personal, and thereby will likely increase buy-in.

Interactive Activities

It seems to go without saying that when interactive activities are included in lesson plans students are going to naturally become more engaged with one another. However, it is not as straightforward as I had originally thought. When I began exploring strategies for greater student engagement I did my best to interpret the examples of others into activities for my classroom, but I would not always get the results I had expected. At times, I would have 70% of a class simply refuse to try to work with others. My initial assumption was that it was simply the population I was working with. And while there may be a small amount of truth to that notion, as was measurable simply by comparing how students interact in two sections of the same class, there were two key reasons I was not having the success I thought I deserved.

First, I learned that routines must be established so that students come to class knowing that interactive activities are a class norm. I have learned that inserting these activities on a daily basis provides students with the regular opportunities they need to practice communication skills. A second reason my earlier attempts to get students talking were not working well was that some of the activities I distributed were too easy to do alone so there was little value in working as teams. The activities needed design that would make them easier or more fun when doing them together. For example, when teaching students about mutual funds, I gave them an activity where each student was given a card, as shown in figure 4.2, with the name of a company stock on it, and then posted around the room were lists of various mutual funds listing the stocks held within them.

Figure 4.2, Company stock cards illustrating company performance

The stock cards provided students the opportunity to interact with one another as they compared performance, shown as a percentage, of their random cards. This process provided me with an opportunity to informally observe how students showed comprehension as they compared their company performance to that of other students. In some cases they used deductive reasoning to determine what socio-political aspects of markets could have led to stock performance. Students then had to find the mutual fund their company was part of, and they needed to find the other students with cards related to their mutual fund. After locating fellow students with the correct cards for their mutual fund, students accessed a spreadsheet, table 4.3, showing annual stock performance so they could learn about market behavior over time.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Stock Name	Stock Ticker	Price This Year (2025)	Price Last Year (2024)	Price Two Years Ago (2023)	% Change In the Last Year	% Change from 2023 to 2024
2	Cisco Systems	CSCO	57.2	48.24	50.28	18.57%	-4.06%
3	Disney	DIS	85.01	112.95	100.3	-24.74%	12.61%
4	Home Depot	HD	354.11	337.93	295.4	4.79%	14.40%
5	IBM Corporation	IBM	240.7	181.25	127.82	32.80%	41.80%
6	3M	MMM	135.26	91.3	89.28	48.15%	2.26%

Table 4.3, Spreadsheet comparing various company stock values over a period of three years

An exercise like this gets students out of their seats, talking to one another, and increases the likelihood of connecting to the learning target.

While more involved activities, like the one referenced above, can have great learning returns, there are also many opportunities to insert bite-sized activities into everyday lessons. Figure 4.3 shows an example of a typical “question of the day”.

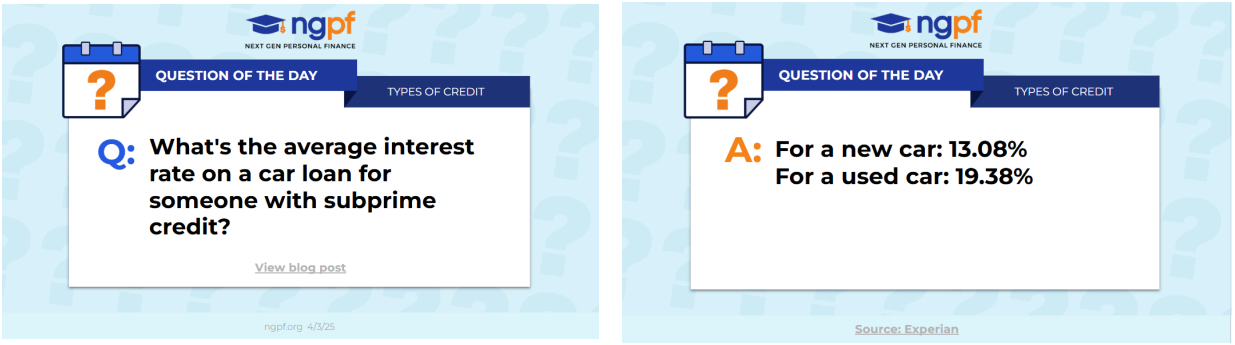

Figure 4.3 Question of the day slides

The “question of the day” has provided students with a routine that they look forward to. When I began this process it was difficult to get students to participate in guessing the answer, but after sustaining the routine over time students have come to expect it, and the majority of the class participates. I use the routine to establish an atmosphere where it is safe and encouraged to engage and participate. Ultimately I want to remind students that being right is not important here, and that there is no negative consequence to guessing an incorrect answer. During this activity I generally remind the class that there is no reason anyone in the class would know the answer and that the whole point is to find ourselves in a discussion as we contemplate the “why” of the question and answer.

Technology Management

At the point of this writing, I have been teaching for seven years, beginning just a year and a half prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Cell phone management in the classroom has been a tremendous problem since my first day teaching, so I am well aware of the addictive properties of technology when not properly regulated. My campus instituted a relatively robust cellphone ban this school year, and I have witnessed marked improvement in student attention and the quality and quantity of work since the ban has gone into place. Being a newer teacher, I was under the assumption that technology was part of the reason I could not get students to engage in class, and now I am sure of it. Technology is an important aspect of modern life, so it is not something that can be completely ignored in the classroom, but there are ways to manage how it is used to help students recognize strong utilitarian uses of their Chromebooks. While it is clear that I am one of the more strict teachers on our campus in terms of appropriate use of technology in my classes, I am also a strong advocate of exposing students to the apps and tools available on

our devices to enhance our lives. Much of my content is completed on paper because I have learned that my students tend to focus best when working on paper. In some cases students will be using an online resource, like an investment calculator, while recording results on paper. For assignments requiring complicated calculations I will sometimes allow the use of cellphones in place of calculators since Chromebooks are inefficient for this purpose. By holding to a high standard and remaining consistent in terms of technology, students know what to expect and have adjusted well to the rules. Last year I had a strict tech policy in my room, but students were still quite withdrawn and unengaged. My theory as to why students are so much more engaged this year is that with the cell phone policy in place students have had time to adjust to being free from their phones for longer periods of time, which has resulted in an increased attention span and a better ability to engage. Additionally, I only use Chromebooks for work that cannot easily be completed on paper. Of the five lessons created for section two of my WOUTPA, technology is integrated into three of those lessons: a spreadsheet amortization schedule, a savings loan calculator based on credit scores and interest rates, a credit score estimator, AutoTrader online auto listing website, and an investment calculator. By limiting the use of technology to tasks that require it, my students have shown that they have a greater tendency to see tech resources as tools rather than sources of entertainment while in class. I have also found that it is easier to design assignments that have students working together when done on paper. Technology integration is important as we prepare students for their future academic and career goals, and it is possible to teach tech integration without overly depending on software solutions for lesson delivery. While I write about limiting technology use in my classes, my ARP Assessment Matrix will show that my students still have regular access and exposure to useful technology during my classes. Aside from the use of Canva for content management and learning aids, and presenting

regular daily slideshows, of the five lessons listed in my assessment matrix, three of them require students to access industry tools for calculating financial data and for testing numeric scenarios. Balancing technology use with paper assignments and group work has resulted in classes that are visibly more engaging and productive as compared to past classes that relied more heavily on tech resources as teaching tools.

Conclusion

Throughout my most recent semester teaching I have worked to trial more creative strategies for improving student learning through increased engagement. Through data coding and analysis as a measure of effectiveness, I can confidently conclude that **accessing students' funds of knowledge**, regularly including **interactive activities**, and consistent **management of how technology** is used in the classroom, all contribute to greater student learning outcomes. While my summative assessments, like quizzes and tests, demonstrate that students are generally grasping class content, I believe informal assessments, like entry and exit tickets, and table work, are perhaps more informative of student connection to the content. This assertion is primarily based on having compared the quality of informal assessments in my first semester classes to those of my second term classes. For the latter, there was much greater focus on routines involving interactive activities, and regularly connecting new content to what students already know as a way to help them recognize that they are simply expanding knowledge they already possess. By establishing and maintaining technology use expectations, students knew when and how technology was to be used. Their exposure to apps and websites that serve as tools to assist in the inquiry process has provided students with assets that both expand their resources for

research, and reinforces how technology provides many productive benefits beyond entertainment. Data collection and analysis of these methods and strategies in my practice has provided strong tangible evidence of improvement and will remain a part of my practice. I have already used data analysis to inform how I will adjust subsequent lessons for improved results. This process will be ongoing, as each year some of my content will need to be updated to remain relevant, and students will also change each year. By continuing to collect and analyze data my practice will remain fresh, meaningful, and purposeful. Ultimately, if my students are to get the most value out of their learning experiences in my classes, I owe it to them to keep my practice up to date and relevant to them.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

Within my limited time teaching, student engagement has proved to be my greatest challenge. I know that if students cannot engage with the material, with one another, or with me, the time and effort I put into lesson planning will have little value. Admittedly, I had been assuming that a large part of my problem was smartphone addiction and general student apathy, and to some extent there may be some truth to that, but over time I have come to realize that there are various strategies and techniques that can be used to increase student engagement. A study concluded by Böttger and Zierer (2024) concluded that smartphone bans in schools improve academic performances and reduce learning distractions. The ban must be school wide, and not just based on individual teacher buy-in, because it takes time for our brains to adjust to reduced screen time over a period of time. Incremental classroom bans on secondary campuses do little to address the greater problem.

As students were mentally adjusting to a new cell phone policy at our school, I noticed that their ability to focus on lesson content was slowly improving. However, in general, students continued to struggle with interpersonal engagement with me or with peers. This problem had been evident during class discussions when asking for volunteers to answer an easy trivia question, or to simply turn and talk with a table mate.

As I began exploring literature specific to my goal of increasing student engagement, I encountered recurring themes among the various texts. However, as is true in many aspects of life, it may be easy to identify solutions but not always easy to implement them. Within the teaching profession this problem usually comes down to time. With a single prep period per day, many teachers, including myself, work more than 40 hours per week and often put additional time in on the weekend. Where do we find the time to implement new strategies and methods for

improved student outcomes? The reality is that one must first accept that there will need to be extra time spent up front to achieve long term gains. The idea is not to create a collection of useful activities that can be used over and over in the future, but rather to develop foundational templates that can easily be applied to lessons on the fly. For example, developing routines and methods for managing pacing, flow, and chunking that can be reflected upon and applied to new lessons will become a skill that can be efficiently used over and over once mastered. Having a good system in place will simplify the process to the extent that less time is needed for planning.

In addition to generating best practices for lesson development and implementation, it is necessary to also recognize the importance of acknowledging the diversity of learners and their needs. The level of cultural diversity on my campus requires additional attention and sensitivity to cultural contexts and considerations in terms of student funds of knowledge. My goal of connecting class content to the personal knowledge and experiences of my students requires me to challenge my own perspectives and to search for ways to connect the learning to what they already know–their funds of knowledge (Burden, P.R., 2020). According to Anyichie (2023), culturally diverse students learn better when lessons include interactive activities, language supports, and strong connections to cultural knowledge and lived experiences. For this reason my lessons have evolved to include regular speaking opportunities, from simple questions of the day where multiple students share their thinking, to table work and team reviews. Chunking lessons to include regular table work has proven to be valuable for blending students of varying cultural backgrounds and ability levels into supportive groups that encourage communication and strengthen confidence.

One theme that has developed during my clinical experience is that of cooperative learning. A common argument that arises when teachers consider more class time for interactive

activities is the loss of much needed teaching time. State and federal teaching standards seem to imply the need for students to master an insurmountable number of topics. In the past I felt that I would be unable to meet these standards if I spent too much class time with activities. However, I also believe that good teaching requires spending more time on fewer standards while ensuring all required standards are met. Going deeper on key standards while touching on all standards will more effectively establish the "why" of learning and position students with the knowledge and skills necessary for self-driven inquiry and research. While lecture driven classes can give a teacher assurance that all the standards are addressed, a cooperative learning environment results in greater student outcomes and content retention (Asarta, C. J., 2023).

Limitations

Throughout the process of developing my action research project I have come to understand that I will be most effective at reaching my goal of increased student engagement by creating a supportive and collaborative **learning environment**, implementing effective and meaningful **instructional strategies**, and by consistently collecting and analyzing **assessment** data. I have had some success in all of these areas and I have experienced some limitations in them as well.

I am fortunate to have a large room with room for multiple seating configurations. However, my current desks are former computer lab tables that are six feet wide, so I have some limitations on how to configure them. My current configuration allows for all students to face the front of the room during instruction, and then to face one another during group activities. There is plenty of room for setting up gallery walks and other movement activities, which have proven successful in getting students talking and interacting with one another. While the layout of my

desks is currently working, there are some limitations due to their length, however I have been informed that my room will be getting new desks and chairs next school year. With the new desks I will have the opportunity to explore more seating configurations for greater group engagement.

While I have a living word wall that changes with each new unit, my room lacks in topic specific decor and could use more visual learning supports throughout. Some of the wall space could also be dedicated to images and messaging that connect to students' personal interests and cultures. I plan to post a world map to record the many different regions of the world represented by my students. One of my walls is filled with windows to the outside, and bright overhead fluorescent lighting sometimes makes the room too bright. I plan to get blinds and individual lamps to create a more relaxing and calm aesthetic. During work time, calm instrumental hip-hop music is playing in the background to provide an auditory texture to help students feel comfortable communicating with others. My intent is to provide my students with a sense of ownership of our **learning environment** so that they also have a sense of ownership of the content.

Updating **instructional strategies** is often difficult for teachers due to the limitation of time required to alter the way we do things, but assessing the effectiveness of strategies and making minor adjustments can greatly improve student experiences. Strategies must include chunking and daily variation in lesson delivery to keep students engaged and connected. The strategies I have found to work best include establishing daily routines that students can count on, and even look forward to. I have found that direct instruction, like lecture, is best delivered in bite sized pieces followed by individual or group work. When lessons are designed with three or

four identifiable chunks, it is not as easy for students to get bored, distracted, or disengaged, and work quality and quantity is measurably better.

Planning **assessments** for the purpose of data collection is the best way to accurately qualify and quantify the effectiveness of my practice. Some of the most informative assessments I give are informal entry or exit tickets. Using standard objective tests for measuring student knowledge limits my ability to view how they synthesize what they have learned into personally useful knowledge. It is not uncommon for a student to be able to answer a question correctly without comprehending the "why" of the question. For this reason, my approach to measuring student performance has shifted from simply assessing objective knowledge to assessing the knowledge as it relates to them. When I refer to personal knowledge, I am interested in understanding what my students know when we begin a lesson or unit, and I want to know what they have learned at completion. In both cases I am more interested in how they can connect what they have learned to their personal lives than I am in how well they can answer rote objective questions. I believe that my students will have deeper, more applicable, and longer lasting knowledge of our content when they have been applying what they learn to their own lives throughout the unit.

I will continue to have students complete a national personal finance pre and post assessment, and I will supply intermittent formative assessments to measure unit knowledge. In both cases, I am more interested in the efficacy of my teaching methods than in student outcomes since the quality of my methods will largely determine those outcomes for students who regularly attend. However, for my class summative, I will assign a project based assessment that directly correlates to how each student will use what they have learned in my class in their personal lives. If students can successfully demonstrate how they plan to implement factors of

personal finance, like budgeting, investing, and saving, into their own lives, then my teaching methods are on the right track.

Conclusion

I have always cared a lot about the quality and efficacy of my teaching, however prior to working on my action research project I was aware that I had a lot of work to do. Simply put, my students were bored and unengaged. While it is easy to blame student apathy, I knew there was more I could do to affect change. Over the course of this past school year I have had many opportunities to test hypotheses and retool my methods. I acknowledge that some increased engagement has resulted from a schoolwide smartphone ban, and I also acknowledge that my own strong smartphone policy and proactive teaching methods have improved the learning experience in my classes. Students are measurably more engaged, and the obvious reason for this is the establishment of routines. Routines for how we start a class period off, expectations for partner and group work, and chunked lesson designs that keep students shifting gears before they have the opportunity to get bored. Establishing clear expectations about how classes flow influence how students approach their work and each other. The methods I am currently using to establish an effective learning environment will continue to evolve as the needs of my students evolve. The most important thing I have learned is that there is no perfect method. Each lesson may need to be presented differently to each class depending on the needs of those classes. Being open to continuous change, using assessments to inform growth areas, and updating materials and the learning environment often, are necessary for sustaining a strong sense of professional purpose and for providing students with the quality of learning they deserve.

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