

# Increasing student engagement – the theory behind Learning Journeys

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## Introduction

The challenge of maintaining the enthusiasm of adolescents in the schooling experience has been an issue facing education professionals for many years. The traditional classroom based experience of school in which the day is segmented, students come into contact with a range of teachers and the learning is punctuated by bells, has left many feeling alienated and disengaged. There is a general perception that year 9 is the year to be dreaded at school. What is it that “switches the students off?” Why do they become disengaged and why are we unable to capture the energy and enthusiasm which is within them all? Adolescent youth have much to offer themselves and society. There is a need to change the mind-set of schools, parents and teachers about what we can expect from our students.

I make a call for learning experiences which engage students in learning that makes sense of their world through direct experience and where students have ownership of their study through a negotiated curriculum. We call these Learning Journeys.

Learning Journeys are transdisciplinary, in that the learning draws upon practices and skills across disciplines whilst maintaining the integrity of each individual discipline (Education Queensland 2002). Learning is also holistic, providing an opportunity for the student to interact with their community.

## Background

The restructure of our learning program has come in response to the successful development of a residential learning experience available to all Year 9 students in Nanjing, China. Students undertake a cultural immersion experience which is challenging – physically, emotionally and socially. During this five week block they surpass their own expectations and those of the staff accompanying them on the program. Upon returning to the conventional learning environment in Melbourne both the students and the staff of each newly returned group realize that the curriculum no longer meets their needs. It neither stretches them to their full potential nor provides the freedom and opportunities for individual learners to create, excel and extend themselves.

After a review of the current program I decided that there were a series of issues which require consideration:

1. How do we develop time and space for individuals to process and reflect on their own experiences and learning?
2. How do we build a stronger relationship between staff and students?
3. How do we most effectively organize the learning activities in ways that do not clutter the curriculum?

4. How do we provide space for the development of deep thinking skills and intellectual engagement?
5. How do we connect to the key issues facing students' lives?
6. How do we develop resilience, confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging?

One strand of the response to these issues is the development of Learning Journeys. They are part of the core learning program and occur for a full day each week, facilitated by a team of learning mentors/teachers to the Year 9 students – with a staff to student ratio of 1:15. The content of the Learning Journeys is negotiated directly with the students under the guiding curriculum framework of personal, national and international identity. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the learning, the assessment focus is on generic learning skills common to all learning areas.

In essence a Learning Journey is an extended learning experience which makes links between different learning areas and allows students to confront real world situations that have a direct impact on their lives. It is a learning experience in which they have taken a role in developing and have the chance to follow the learning to its natural conclusion. It is a flexible learning program which enables students to learn beyond the classroom, in blocks of time which are uninterrupted by the daily operations of the school.

## **What the research tells us**

The issue of engagement has been on the agenda in the Middle School literature for many years. The early development of the middle school emerged from the Junior High school model in the United States in the 1970's. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASDC) established a working group to consider the needs of Middle school and early Adolescent Learners. The report entitled, The Middle School We Need (ASDC 1975), "reemphasized the development of characteristics of adolescents and the need to respond to those characteristics in appropriate educational ways" (George, Stevenson, Thomason, Beane 1992).

Students today live in what Stolls describes as a postmodernist culture which is diverse, cynical, democratic, undergoing rapid knowledge expansion, and is negotiated in terms of the rules and values which apply to young people. (Stolls P. 2002) School experiences need to reflect this new reality in society and enable students to interact with and explore the enticing possibilities their world has on offer.

The desire to restructure schooling to better meet the needs of students, thus reducing truancy, disruptive behaviour and low academic achievement has continued as a challenge for educational institutions today. Engagement appears to be the key to unearthing the full potential of our students. Students who are engaged in their learning are focused on the task, they are occupied, and busy (Allen 1990). Ultimately, engaged students experience what Csikszentmihalyi describes as flow, "...the spontaneous, effortless experience you achieve when you have a close match between a high level of challenge and the skills you need to meet the challenge" (Scherer 2002 p.14). This intense involvement in the learning is the intent of the Learning Journeys. Csikszentmihalyi (in Scherer 2002) also notes that best outcome for an engaging learning experience is one where the student feels that the learning is both enjoyable and will profit them in the future. Easton (2002) reflects on the experiences of students from Eagle Rock School and identifies the need for active learning, high expectations and self-directed learning where students are ultimately in charge.

In order to achieve this level of engagement we need to ensure that students can interact directly with real world experiences, allow them to own their own learning and have tangible outcomes

which result in an impact on society. According to Dewey (Education Queensland 2002), “optimal learning and human development and growth occurs when people are confronted with substantive, real problems to solve” (Education Queensland 2002). Problem based learning challenges engage learners who have been alienated by the traditional approaches and allow students to “...talk about a problem in depth – not simply answer factual questions” (Torp and Sage 1998 p. 88). Torp and Sage suggest that there is a direct correlation between increasing student engagement and a decrease in teacher direction. A problem to solve acts as a hook for the students who are intrigued by the situation which confronts them and reduced teacher direction, along with the adoption of the position of coach or mentor empowers students to investigate for needed information.

Freire goes further and argues “that any pedagogy must be of demonstrable relevance to the immediate worlds of the students and it must enable them to analyze, theorize and intellectually engage with those worlds” (Education Queensland 2001 p. 4).

Ellyard refers to the development of new pedagogy. He believes that education planners have been most concerned with making schools for greater efficiency rather than facing the major challenges of creating people and organizations which are adaptable, creating a more equitable society (Ellyard 1998). He feels that lack of educational vision has led to an over crowded curriculum as society’s problems have been handed onto the education system to deal with. Ellyard calls for the development of a mission for the Australia where education is a component of a “preferred future”. He describes a new learning culture which should contain eight elements:

- ❑ Life-long learning
- ❑ Learner-driven learning
- ❑ Just-in-time learning
- ❑ Customised learning
- ❑ Transformative learning
- ❑ Collaborative learning
- ❑ Contextual learning
- ❑ Learning to learn ( Ellyard 1998 p. 64)

The development of the Learning Journeys is also a calculated attempt to de-clutter the curriculum. This is achieved through the Learning Journeys content being transdisciplinary, and thus it does not compartmentalize knowledge into particular subjects of learning areas, instead it makes links between issues which are confronted by students in real-world situations and assists them to make sense of their world. By creating large blocks of time (whole day learning experiences) to immerse students in the learning this also enhances the chance of developing “flow experience”.

Learning Journeys embrace Ellyard’s elements of new learning. Learning experiences have been targeted to develop a lifelong love of learning though focusing on personal best performances to boost the self-esteem of each student. Students have control over their learning with choice over the particular direction of study and the way in which they choose to present their learning. Learners do not “stockpile” all the components required to assemble a product, rather they source what they need “just in time”. Ellyard believes that this manufactures interdependence with the net result being that curiosity drives the learning. Through profiling individual students, staff and students have a shared understanding of their learning style and preferences and this leads to the curriculum being customised and differentiated to meet the needs of the individual. A collaborative learning community has been established with a team of staff and work requirements encourage collaboration by students. In developing the content of the Learning

Journeys we recognize that the primary purpose of the content is to develop broad learning skills so that students are equipped to embark on any learning situation in the future.

The assessment focus in the Learning Journeys is on generic learning skills which are the keys to learning in any situation. By applying the assessment focus on these skills rather than specific content of knowledge the end result is that students study less topics but develop greater depth (? can you be more specific?) and build a greater understanding of the learning outcomes (Education Queensland 2000).

The concept of a Learning Journey draws strongly on the “Rich Tasks” developed by The New Basics project Queensland State Education 2010. They describe a Rich Task as a “culminating performance or demonstration or product that is purposeful and models a life role” (Education Queensland 2001 p.5).

In summary the characteristics of a rich task are these:

- ❑ Is an integrated intellectual and linguistic, social and cultural practice
- ❑ Represents an educational outcome of demonstrable and substantive intellectual substance and educational value
- ❑ Is transdisciplinary
- ❑ Draws on a range of operational fields of knowledge
- ❑ Engages knowledge and skills from at least two of the new Basics clusters
- ❑ Is problem-based
- ❑ Connects to the world beyond the class room
- ❑ Has sufficient intellectual, cognitive and developmental depth and breadth to guide curriculum planning across a significant span of schooling
- ❑ Enables flexible reasonable workloads for teachers. (New Basics 2001 p. 7)

Tomlinson (2002) believes that a student’s engagement is all about establishing an environment which invites students to learn. She identified five important criteria:

1. Affirmation- it is important for students to know that they are accepted, safe and understood.
2. Contribution- each student needs to feel that they can make a difference, that they bring something unique and that their perspective is valuable. That they help others succeed in the class and that they are connected through a common work goal.
3. Purpose- students need to know what they do at school, see the significance in it and know that the work they do makes a difference to the world.
4. Power- students need to believe that what they learn is useful and will assist them on their journey beyond the classroom. They need to be able to make choices which contribute to their success.
5. Challenge- tasks needs to stretch the students and they need to know when they work hard they generally succeed, that they are accountable for their own growth and that they contribute to the growth of others.

“When teaching is genuinely invitational, there exists no “switch off” to students engagement in learning (Tomlinson 2002 p. 9).”

The first Dimension of Learning as articulated by Marzano and Pickering et al (1997), echoes the need for students to feel accepted comfortable and safe. Until such time as students most basic

needs are met, the more complex learning can not be achieved, learning which encourages the development of thinking skills as explored further in dimensions 2 to 5 within the Dimensions of Learning Framework

Recent research conducted by Slade and Trent (2000) which specifically focused on males in secondary and tertiary institutions, alerts us to the need to listen to the students.

“In brief, the boys think that the adolescent years are the most significant. They are clear and uniform in their perspective of the issues and problems in those years, and in their general view that declining rates of achievement and retention are inevitable because the adult world in ‘not listening’ and ‘not genuinely interested’ in either their view, their wellbeing, and for many, their educational needs and outcomes .”(Slade M. Trent F. 2000 p.1)

From this we can see that valuing student perspectives is important, along with finding the time within the program to practice active listening and “provide timely, precise genuine and constructive feedback”( Department of Education Tasmania 2002)

One of the more significant studies to deal with the issue of engagement in the Middle years of schooling was From Alienation to Engagement: Opportunities for Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling (Cumming. J 1996)

The key findings from Cumming, J (1996), identify the ways in which to build engagement in students.

❑ **Holistic Approach**

A comprehensive and holistic approach to reform in the middle years of schooling was seen by most participants as an effective means of addressing student alienation.

❑ **Teacher Teaming**

Teachers found that working in teams created opportunities for professional review, action and reflection.

❑ **Teacher Research**

Teacher research proved to be an empowering experience for those who were prepared to look critically at their own practices and approaches.

❑ **Genuine Consultation**

Genuine consultation between students and their parents enhanced student learning as well as teacher effectiveness.

❑ **Student Participation**

Teachers found that encouraging students to participate in decisions about the way in which their learning was organised and monitored, helped students to develop skills that were valued within and beyond the school community.

❑ **Time and Space**

Using time and space in creative ways increased the range of learning opportunities for students and the capacity of teachers to be more effective.

❑ **Practical Activities**

Involving students in practical activities that were related to real-life problems appeared to make their learning more relevant and challenging.

❑ **Varied Approaches**

Providing greater choice and responsibility for the way in which students undertook their learning, tended to reduce adolescent criticism of the routine, and boring and uninteresting aspects of schooling.

❑ **Pastoral Care**

Embedding pastoral care issues within the curriculum helped to ensure that the intellectual and social needs of young adolescents were addressed simultaneously.

❑ **Parent and Community Participation**

Parent and community participation in the education of young adolescents provided encouragement for students and support for teachers.

These findings have guided the development of our Learning Journeys and highlight the breadth of changes required from the more traditional model.

The recommendations for transforming middle years schooling drawn from *Turning Points – The report of the Task force on Education of Young Adolescents – Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, June, 1989* provide further insight into the priorities when creating programs for adolescent students.

- ❑ Create small communities for learning
- ❑ Teach a core academic programme
- ❑ Ensure success for all students
- ❑ Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students.
- ❑ Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents
- ❑ Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents
- ❑ Connect schools with communities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, June, 1989)

Both of the previous two studies focus on the need for a fundamental restructure of the schooling experience in the middle years if engagement of students is to be a priority.

## **Conclusion**

Early trials of the Learning Journeys have shown us that they will have a positive effect on engagement. The opportunity to immerse students in an experience leads to greater engagement, enjoyment and attachment to the learning.

We will continue to monitor the development of the Learning Journeys over their first year of implementation.

With a focus on student engagement the staff delivering the program will also have at the heart of their endeavors the need to ensure rigor in the learning. Students will have a strong grasp of the

core skills required for VCE studies. They will be challenged in the Learning Journeys to think deeply about how their learning has changed them and their outlook on the world.

As we have developed the content of the curriculum for the Learning Journeys we have continued to return these key question: How is this going to be of use to the students, how will it enable them to make sense of their world and how will it change them?

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