

Compliance or Engagement: Engaging Students Remotely

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Abstract

How teachers interact with students is important, not only for students' intellectual growth but also for their social and emotional growth. In the classroom, it is easier to see when students are misunderstanding or are confused about some aspect of the lesson. By walking around the class, I can view what my students are producing, and I can see their faces, so I can tell when they are confused or overwhelmed. Then I can go to students individually and encourage them or help resolve their misunderstandings. When we moved online and developed rules to ensure compliance with our school rules for working online, I became more frustrated with finding the balance between spending my time and efforts to ensure students were in compliance with our new online regulations and my desire as a teacher to encourage and inspire students to love learning. At the beginning of our remote learning process, I found my students were not learning as well as they should have been. I realized the issues connected to the balance between compliance and true engagement for students became more difficult for me to manage as well as I wanted to. I found it was even more important to engage my students in deciding how we should work together and reflect about their learning. In my work with my students, I realized universal design principles (CAST, 2018) were even more important when the pandemic forced us to work remotely. In this article, I describe my efforts with and for my students.

Keywords: compliance, student reflection, universal design, student engagement, assessment practices

COMPLIANCE OR ENGAGEMENT: ENGAGING STUDENTS REMOTELY

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were faced with a multitude of new obstacles. With their students no longer sitting in the classroom, teachers needed to find ways to ensure students were learning. For most educators, teacher preparation programs and experience dealt with facilitating learning in person. Teachers could sit next to a child to help them get started with a task or provide them with the tools to persist through challenges. A teacher could pull a student aside and check in when it seemed they were having a rough day. While walking through the room giving a lesson, teachers could use a quick pat on a shoulder to refocus a child. None of this seemed possible through a computer screen.

Quickly, many questions arose for my colleagues and me. For example:

- How can teachers enforce these strict rules when they have no control over a student's home life?
- Does compliance with rules mean students are learning?
- Do educators want students to be compliant with the rules, or do we want our students to be invested in their learning and growth?
- Will enforcing a set of strict policies engage students?
- Will giving zeros for missed work in a global pandemic encourage students to be more invested in their coursework?

Although educators may have been struggling with these questions for a while, the pandemic brought them to the forefront. Many districts quickly turned to strict guidelines for remote learning: cameras on, sitting at desk or table, no eating/drinking, no blankets or pajamas, and in a

quiet space. The thought was that students would learn if they could replicate the school rules and environment at home. These policies left educators grappling with the differences between compliance and genuine engagement.

To examine the differences between the two, I first focus on defining the characteristics of both. In the book, *Engaging Students*, Schlechty (2011) outlined four characteristics of an engaged student: (a) attentiveness, (b) commitment, (c) persistence, and (d) the ability to find meaning and value in learning tasks. Schlechty put student engagement in a continuum, moving from rebellion and retreatism to ritual and strategic compliance and finally to engagement. According to this continuum, engaged students want to pay attention because they understand how important student engagement is for learning. Students are also committed to doing their best work and persisting through productive struggles. Compliant students are not motivated intrinsically to do well, but rather they follow along for a reward or to avoid punishment (Schlechty, 2011). These compliant students often just collect points and grades to get to a desired final grade for a course. Their learning journey does not hold much value if they achieve their end goal of a good grade. I have found educators who want to inspire their students must create an environment where risk taking and the learning journey are paramount and remove the focus from doing things just for a grade. Creating an environment like this takes time, persistence, and relationship building. So, how can educators create a truly engaged environment behind a computer screen?

Learning in a Pandemic

When schools first closed in March 2020, the Massachusetts Department of Education strongly recommended there be no new teaching and learning during this initial period. My district instructed us to provide only opportunities for students to review and enrich what they

had already learned. My district did not mandate remote classes, just optional ungraded, asynchronous work that would review previously taught material. We were encouraged to post daily in our Google Classrooms to remain in contact with our students. Every morning, I wrote messages to my eighth-grade students and provided them with online and offline English language arts activities to keep them learning. During this initial phase, many of my students did not log into or interact with my messages or optional assignments, but a handful did.

A few weeks later, when it was evident schools were not going to open for a while, the Massachusetts Department of Education required districts to create remote learning plans to get students learning new material again; this new phase of remote learning was mandatory per the Department of Education. In my middle school's remote plan, I would see my students for two class periods per week for synchronous learning, and then I would provide them asynchronous work for other days while offering office hours for those who needed more assistance with their work. I was fortunate to have most of my students attend my synchronous sessions, and we did our best to learn about Zoom.

I quickly realized my synchronous sessions were not working for all my students. Based on their participation and feedback on various weekly check-ins, giving instruction once or twice a week on a Zoom call was not sufficient for most of my students. So, we worked together through surveys and Google Docs to create a new plan for our learning: I would record 2 to 3 lessons per week for them to watch on Edpuzzle, a web platform allowing people to embed questions into video playback. Our Monday class, which was only 20 minutes, would remain mandatory and be a time for an overview of the week and general questions. Then, our one 45-minute class time later in the week would serve as office hours where students could drop in for questions or log in to work with me or individually in a breakout room. By the end of the week,

they would have an assignment to turn in, and I would check their progress with the week's lessons on Edpuzzle. These changes seemed to make a positive difference in our learning and growth, which was evident by the work and conversations we had during the final weeks of school.

Our last unit was an Investigative Journalism writing unit, and I decided we would continue a grading practice I started earlier in the year—conference grading. Students had to self-assess and reflect on their pieces before meeting with me in a grading conference. We would review their work together with their assessment checklist and reflection and then decide on a grade together. For this round, I also added a piece that asked them to assess why they should pass the 4th quarter, as we had switched to pass/fail for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. In the last 2 weeks of school, I scheduled a conference with each of my students, and many attended. We had some powerful conversations about what they had learned about themselves as students and as people. I listened as they told me about persevering with schoolwork while staying with grandparents or friends as their parents went to work at the hospital each day, battling this new virus. I heard them grieve the loss of their eighth-grade year: the Washington DC trip, graduation, recitals, etc. They opened up about their struggles to remain motivated about school when their video game consoles and the great outdoors were easily accessible. They shared their new strategies for staying organized, managing their time, and staying on top of their work. For me, engaging students in reflection allowed both of us to see how powerful this experience was for them and how much they learned about themselves during it.

Lessons Learned From Remote Teaching and Learning

When I became a teacher in 2010, I never thought I would have to face this specific challenge, which felt unsurmountable at the time. I never considered what it would be like to

teach eighth grade through a computer screen and what it would take to adapt my in-person strategies to Zoom. I also never thought I would have to say goodbye to students I had for 2 years in a video call. It was devastating at first, but, as I look back at it now, I realize I can move forward with some valuable lessons.

Universal Design for Learning Matters Even More

Universal design for learning (UDL, 2022) has been a part of my teaching for several years now, and the engagement principle became integral to how I approached remote teaching. The UDL principles encapsulate everything I want for and from my students, especially those who are remote: engaged, purposeful, motivated, persistent, and reflective. Students who are engaged will be more prepared to persist through the immense challenges of remote learning and will be able to demonstrate their understanding and growth to their teachers. Students who are purposeful and motivated understand the importance of their work and wish to learn and do well on their assignments. Reflection is essential for students to help them regulate their emotional responses. If they reach a level of frustration with a task, they will be able to recognize that, and if they are purposeful, they will be able to access strategies to help them in those moments.

In my remote practice, a choice can be provided at any point in a lesson. For example, something as simple as giving students an option to draft in a Google Doc or a notebook is a start. Many of our remote students are spending hours in front of a screen and getting the opportunity to work on paper may be a welcomed change for students who have a screen headache, prefer to work on paper, or may need to share a device with a sibling or other family member. To turn in their work, they can submit a photo or PDF scan of the notebook page. A small change like this breaks down the barriers to the assignment and allows students to control how they complete their work.

Revisiting Self-Reflection and Grading Practices

Self-reflection and assessment became even more vital to my students as we moved through the end of the 2019–2020 school year, through the 2020–2021 school year, and into this school year. There are multiple ways I incorporate these ideas into my lessons and assessments, including continuing to use conference-style grading. Students use rubrics and checklists to assess their final product and their work ethics, habits, and efforts to prepare for a grading conference. The process helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses and choose areas in which they would like more practice or teaching. As a teacher, talking with each student allows me to plan for whole-group lessons or small-group lessons that revisit and extend the skills on which the assignment is practiced.

Considerations for Future Teaching

As I move forward, I am going to continue to concentrate on the following:

- Make time for student self-reflection and voice.
- Reconsider grading practices: Are my practices capturing compliance or genuine learning and growth?
- Build-in resources and scaffolds to allow students the opportunity to persist through productive struggle.
- Provide options for students in how they learn material and how they demonstrate their learning.

Teaching and learning have been extremely challenging for the past 2½ years, but I learned we can succeed and help ourselves and our students to persist in positive ways through extreme circumstances.

References

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