

Student Engagement: A Progressive Approach

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Abstract

Student engagement is an important part of an effective and positive classroom. With research we will explore ways to create a more engaged learning environment. Through a progressive democratic curriculum we can create a space where the students' interests and opinions are valued and implemented into the course work. Our curriculum seeks to prepare teachers with effective ways to embrace democracy and prepare them to manage and run an effective and fun classroom, where the voice of the student is heard, and students are fully engaged.

Encouraging Student Engagement: A Progressive Approach

Introduction

As students move their way throughout schools, they are struggling to keep their spirits up. Student engagement is a difficult idea for teachers to grasp; as they push through their curriculum, they lose students in the classroom. To change students' attitudes towards learning, we must, as educators, look at how we are running the class. There are many ways to make learning fun, meaningful, and engaging for students. To create an environment where students feel safe and welcomed, curious for knowledge, excited to be there, and connected to the material is the ultimate goal of the classroom. If a teacher is uninterested with their coursework, they cannot expect their students to be interested either. Through research and experience, we have discovered many ways in which all of this can be achievable.

What Lead Us to This

Through our own experiences in school and our observation placement this semester we have noticed this lack of student engagement. Students seem disconnected to the assignments and spend a majority of class time doing anything but the course work. With a more engaging classroom curriculum the arts can become a place where students are excited to be there, and feel it is an essential class that they need. Despite the clear connections between integrating art and technology into the classroom and student motivation and engagement, the arts still are the first to be cut. We hope to change this and make others realize the importance of keeping the arts around.

Curriculum Rationale

Humanity is forever evolving. The education of students is dynamic and is always shifting. By viewing education as such, it becomes more than simply a cultural transmission. In order to help push these ideas in the classroom, a progressivist approach is necessary. Giving students the power to make their own connections puts them in a higher position, and creates a mutual respect between teacher and student. When teachers act more as mediators and question-posers rather than “the boss,” there is a bond that is created where both student and teacher are learning. Students cannot be expected to put forth their best effort and be enthused when they are not engaged in their coursework, and it is the role of the teacher to create a classroom environment where they can feel excited (Zolob, 2014, pages 18-19). Creating a classroom democracy, where students help to propose their own contracts and classroom rules, also helps to create that bond.

Student engagement and motivation work hand-in-hand with a progressivist approach in the classroom. Because a progressivist approach pushes students to become leaders and role models within the classroom and creates a mutual respect between teacher and student, it motivates students to succeed and meet the expectations of their peers and teacher. There is an inherent freedom that comes along with a progressive democratic approach because students are pushed to take control of their own destiny. Students’ social skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, and collaboration skills are enhanced with this approach. The progressive approach also helps students to understand the value of deliberation and collaboration when it comes to decision-making.

Non-traditional ways of learning can really benefit a student's learning just like adding art to a classroom curriculum can be. I think creative ways of learning traditional material is the future of education, and there is lots of proof to show how it is successful to students. In the textbook, *Foundations of American Education* (2017), it discussed the Progressive Education Association (PEA) that devoted considerable space to the concept of "creative self-expression." During the 1930s the PEA conducted a study of almost 3,000 students from progressive and non progressive high schools regarding the schools' effectiveness in preparing graduates for college. The results of the 8 year study showed that students from progressive high schools not only achieved higher than students from traditional high schools but also were better adjusted socially (Webb, Metha, & Jordan, 2013, p.162). As we progress as a nation, we will continue to need creative thinkers, with which art education can assist. Art has a number of positive effects on learning, problem solving, and discovering. Everyday, "the United States must match the best academic performance in the world and offer the most creative and innovative workers"(Tucker, 2007, p.52), and integrating the arts into classrooms can help us with that.

Progressive Approach Background

Progressivism began in schools at the start of the twentieth century. John Dewey who is remembered as the father of progressivism was arguably the most influential figure in educational progressivism. "Dewey's emphasis on the importance of democratic relationships in the classroom setting necessarily shifted the focus of educational theory from the institution of the school to the needs of the school's students"(Loss. n.d). Dewey and his fellow educational Progressives drew from the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) and Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827). Froebel and Pestalozzi were among the first to

articulate the process of educating the "whole child," wherein learning moved beyond the subject matter and ultimately rested upon the needs and interests of the child. Tending to both the pupil's head and heart, they believed, was the real business of schooling, and they searched for an empirical and rational science of education that would incorporate these foundational principles (Loss. n.d). Dewey also drew inspiration from the philosopher and psychologist William James. William James philosophy joined *thinking* and *doing* as two seamlessly connected halves of the learning process. Dewey believed by focusing on this relationship that this could prepare each child with the problem solving skills to tackle obstacles throughout a students life. "According to Dewey, education was not simply a means to a future life, but instead represented a full life unto itself"(Loss. n.d). All of these philosophical beliefs and practices helped Progressives connect childhood and democracy with education. It was for these reasons that the Progressive education movement began to replace the old way of teaching through discipline and drill. "Today progressivism means pedagogical progressivism. It means basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child; it means teaching students the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject; it means promoting discovery and self directed learning by the student through active engagement; it means having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes; and it means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality. In the shorthand of educational jargon, this adds up to 'child-centered instruction', 'discovery learning' and 'learning how to learn'" (Labaree, 2005, 277) .

Arts and Technology

Arts and technology integration is key to creating an engaging learning environment. There is a clear benefit of having engaged students within their classroom; grades improve, students are motivated, they care about what they're doing, and they can build connections outside the classroom. Typically, the arts are the first to be cut due to the curriculum being deemed as less important than other curriculums; however, that is beginning to change. The Turnaround Arts Initiative (2012) is a prime example. Here, there is a push for reform in the school system, and the arts are brought to the forefront of the curriculum. As a result, there has been an increase in grades that correlate with a higher-quality art education (Stoelinga, et al, 2012, pages v-vii). STEAM, Vision 20/20, and other arts-integrating movements have become to make their way into schools (Hardiman, 2016, page 10).

Technology also helps students be connected and engaged in a modern fashion. As students move forward into the Age of Technology, it is essential for teachers to stay caught up in the classroom. Keeping coursework relevant and relatable to students helps to keep them engaged (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019, page 7; Northey et al, 2015, pages 177-178). Technology helps students to be involved with their coursework outside the walls of an institution. Studies have shown that social media sites such as Twitter allow students to be connected with their peers and teachers; students were able to collaborate with their peers and teachers were able to answer questions, as well as boast about their students' accomplishments (Kelly, 2019, page 129-133).

The question remains: what is the benefit of integrating the arts and technology in a progressive democratic classroom? One answer lies within the connection between the

curriculum. In a study done by Leysath and Brownowski (2016), the students are pushed out of their comfort zones into learning a new skill. The teachers go on to explain ceramics and the chemistry surrounding firing clay and glazing, as well as precise measuring and problem-solving within the practice. Students created their own wheel-thrown bowls and were able to easily connect what they had learned within their ceramics lesson with their chemistry class. Not only did the students' understanding of chemistry improve, they also showed an improved understanding of algebra and mathematics. Many students reported that connecting art with math and chemistry made those subjects more enjoyable as well. Finally, the students' bowls became the talk of the school. Peers could not wait to see the finished product of the collaboration between the ceramics and chemistry students (pages 6-7). Another example lies in a study done by Patrick Freer (2007). In this study, music students go outside the classroom institution into a dance studio. Students partook in music activities and dance groups, taught by a professional dancer. The students showed a much better understanding of biology and anatomy after this lesson. They reported that they would often refer back to their dance routine to remember which bones moved while taking their tests (pages 269–278). As it is clear to see from the studies above, students and teachers find a lasting benefit with integrating outside coursework into other curriculum because it helps students to build connections and see the significance of what they are learning.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

In order for learning to take place, students need to feel comfortable in the classroom and want to participate. It is crucial for educators to create an environment in which students feel safe and welcomed. Using the progressivist approach the students' voices are valued the most. In

order for students to want to use their voices though, they must believe that their opinions, suggestions, and values are being heard and respected. In the art room, students are constantly comparing their work to various other artists and artwork that they see, and they may begin thinking they aren't good at art. Many students believe that being a talented artist is an innate ability and not something that can be learned. When they try something and fail, they believe they don't belong in the art room. "Students and teachers must embrace their personal vulnerability in the art room to engage in creative risk taking that minimizes shame" (Willcox, 2017). Creating an environment where experimentation and failure is encouraged can help students take more risks and build confidence in trying new things and expressing ideas. The arts allow for that trial and error. The arts are often praised for their innate ability to create a sense of belonging and community in a classroom. Since the arts allow for the development of new skills and trying new techniques, it helps encourage students to keep trying (McFerran et al, 2017, page 2). As educators we also must show vulnerability, "If we are asking kids to write and talk about times they have felt scared, alone, confused, etc., we need to be willing to do the same" (Alber, 2011).

Teachers are the key to creating a safe classroom environment. It is an educator's responsibility to be reflective and open to new people and cultural experiences. If the teacher goes out of their way to get to know the students and the community in which they live, students will recognize this and feel more physically and emotionally safe in the classroom. When students sense that we care about their feelings, and value them as people, they are more likely to respect themselves and their classmates (Miller, 2006). New teachers have to work especially hard at making these connections. When you are new to being an educator you can be

overwhelmed with the challenges of classroom management. Beginning teachers believe that a large part of their evaluation depends on how well they can control “disruptive” students.

“Becoming overwhelmed with the challenges of learning to teach, they may “revert to teaching how they were taught which sometimes means that they teach in ways quite different from what they learn in their teacher preparation programs” (Stoughton, 2006). Trying to control students won’t work, and quick fixes to discipline do not fix the bigger issue of student engagement in class. At the end of the day teachers must remember that, “you make all the difference. These first experiences with school can help reinforce a child's curiosity and love of learning. You create the emotional and social climate of safety that makes your classroom a place for optimal learning” (Perry, n.d.).

Curriculum Solution

The best approach to reaching a progressive democratic solution would be to implement the arts into the classroom, and to give the students a voice in what they are learning. In the art room, students are encouraged to express themselves creatively, and they can discuss their thoughts during critiques and discussions. Teachers are not commandeering the classroom and taking charge; they are there to mediate discussions and pose questions to help spark discussions. Students are to have a say in their projects and how the classroom functions. If something doesn’t work, the students can come together and vote on a solution rather than being unenthused. Keeping the students involved in their coursework allows for them to be more engaged because they are more excited about the work they are doing (McFerran et al, 2017, page 2).

A second solution is arts integration in other classrooms, and the integration of other curriculum into the art room. Doing so would build connections outside a singular classroom and make other courses have meaning. Making an active effort to connect with teachers from the other subject areas to work together to build a lesson together can help engage students. If students were to see algebra applied in an art room, they would be able to recognize that it is applicable outside of the math room. Vice versa, if a social studies teacher were to implement art within their projects, students would feel more interested and motivated to learn the material. The creation of art throughout history has almost always involved math, science, languages, history, etc. "People of the Eastern and Western worlds have used mathematical ideas to create patterns in woven fabrics; ornamentation for religious objects and places of worship; and adornment of the walls, floors, and ceilings of the homes of nobles. A significant amount of mathematics, including the principals of symmetrical relationships, is implicit in such designs" (Natsoulas, 2000, p.364). Making these connections between subjects can create a more meaningful and interesting classroom where learning is engaging and memorable.

Another approach to a progressive classroom is implementing field trips and taking students out of the school building. Students grow bored of being stuck in the same building all day. Keeping the content interesting and giving students the chance to see what they've been learning applied outside the classroom gives students a reason to be engaged with their coursework (Freer, 2007). One of the major benefits to a democratic classroom is helping to build a community, which, in turn, helps to build a safe and healthy learning environment. If students feel threatened by their teacher and are afraid to speak their minds, teachers cannot expect the best of their students. By creating a community where students can work together and

pose solutions to the problems presented within the classroom, teachers are pushing their students to work together for themselves and their peers, not for the threat of an authority figure (Zolob, 2014, pages 18-19).

Another way to implement the progressivist classroom solution is to connect course content to student interests. Connecting the classroom material to students' interests can motivate students and increase curiosity and knowledge about the class. Perceived relevance can spark situational interest that may occur in several forms such as using technology in the classroom, connecting the lessons to popular culture, letting students choose their own instructional materials, and many more. As interest develops, connections to the content can become deeper. The personalization approach to relevance focuses on customizing instructional content for individual students (Priniski, Hecht, & Harackiewicz, 2018). You can then connect to more personal topics, such as identity or community. Connecting lessons to what is important or meaningful is also a great way to get students to open up and increase learning.

Curriculum Assessment

For assessment of this curriculum it would be most beneficial for students to peer review and have group discussions about each other's work during and after each assignment. This way students can get feedback and advice to help improve their project and also ask each other questions and advice about moving forward. An open dialogue will help so students can communicate about their art and ideas more clearly. Student success would be measured by how much they improve and actively participate and engage in classroom activities. Self assessment would also be helpful to get students to reflect on the work they have done and their learning process. "The self-assessment method enables students to identify their strengths and weaknesses

and help them define their own goals and steps to improve themselves and meet their expected level of achievements in their education” (10 Benefits of Self - Assessment”, 2020). This type of assessment takes the focus off of grades and lets the students really dive into learning and trying new things without fear of a bad grade for risk taking. It gives them a deeper meaning to learning by really letting them evaluate what they have made and why.

To measure the effectiveness of the curriculum as a whole, teachers will take a look at the portfolios of the students at the end of the term to see if the curriculum benefited the students. After examination, teachers can adjust the curriculum and improve on it based on the growth presented in their portfolios. Also, because the classroom is democratic, students and teachers can discuss what can be improved for future generations of students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a progressive democratic approach to teaching can lead to a more engaged and motivated classroom. With a safe and healthy learning environment, students can thrive and be more engaged and enthused with their coursework. To help create this environment, one can integrate the arts and technology within the classroom. This promotes collaboration and community-building, dispels the fear of failure, helps to build connections outside the classroom, and helps students discover a sense of identity. Research has shown that students can stay engaged in the classroom if they have the right motivation, meaningful experiences, a safe classroom environment, and curiosity. Teachers have the ability to make learning fun and exciting for their students when they connect student interest with their lessons, and connect other subject areas with the arts. Implementing other curriculum, such as science and math, into the art room and vice versa allows for students to find relevance and meaning in their

coursework and build connections. In the end, this research provides evidence of the benefits of a progressivist approach in schools to get students excited and interested in what they are learning.

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