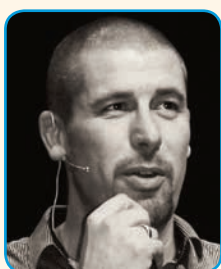


How engaged are your students?

By Dan Haesler



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Dan was a keynote speaker at EduTECH, 3–5 June 2014, where he presented 'How to use technology to enhance student engagement, motivation and wellbeing'.

Why are we so obsessed with other countries' education systems? Let me rephrase that. Why are our politicians — from all sides — so obsessed with other countries' education systems?

Take the reaction after the 2012 PISA results were published in late 2013. The federal education minister, Christopher Pyne, used these findings to illustrate that Australia's academic performance had continued to slip and 'Labor's Education Revolution has been a spectacular failure'. As he propped up the sky above Canberra, he claimed: 'These results are the worst for Australia since testing began and shows that we are falling further behind our regional neighbours'.

He also used the findings to suggest that: 'PISA shows us that our education system is high-equity where socio-economic status matters less when compared to other OECD countries'.

It is interesting to see how such reports can be misrepresented. The average voter wouldn't read the PISA report, so might not feel the need to question the Education

Minister. But I did. What the PISA findings actually tell us is this:

When student-level socio-economic background is taken into account, students in independent schools performed significantly higher than students in Catholic schools, and students in Catholic schools performed significantly higher than students in government schools.

So, to give Mr Pyne the benefit of the doubt, *perhaps* socio-economic status does matter less than some other OECD countries, but you could hardly derive from the OECD's language that Australia's system is *high-equity*.

Another — I believe — incredibly important OECD finding that has gone largely unreported is that around 20% of Australian students report feeling that they 'don't belong at school'.

So clearly, engagement is everyone's business. But be honest — are your students genuinely engaged? Or are they just doing what's expected? And now be really honest — is that good enough for you and your school?

School belonging is a vital predictor of student wellbeing and depression. Professor Ian Shochet from Queensland University of Technology found that the extent to which a student felt they belonged at school could be used to predict their current level of wellbeing as well as their wellbeing six months and five years down the track.

In fact, Shochet argues that school connectedness is an even stronger predictor of wellbeing than parental attachment.

So, how important is it to you and your school whether or not kids feel they belong there? And what to make of the fact that in Finland — you've heard of Finland I'm guessing — 35% of students feel they don't belong?

In Korea, it's worse still. Whilst they sit atop the league tables — with class sizes so big that Mr Pyne is convinced that the bigger the class the better — it's worth noting that around 40% of Korean students feel that school isn't the place for them.

I'm not saying that overseas education systems don't have anything to teach us, I just think we should view such teachings through the appropriate lens.

Closer to home, Gallup has just released the findings of their most recent *Gallup Student Poll*. Surveying over 5000 students from across Australia in March and April

2014, Gallup found that engagement falls gradually as students get older.

In essence, kids are never more engaged than when they start school, and slowly begin to disengage as each year passes.

It's important to note that Gallup defines engagement as:

The involvement in and enthusiasm for school, reflects how well students are known and how often they get to do what they do best.

The definition won't appeal to everyone, but nevertheless, it's a good conversation starter.

Gallup found that according to this definition, only around one in two Year 12s are engaged. Furthermore, they found less than half of Australian students were *hopeful*. Again, it's important to recognise that Gallup suggests being hopeful is: 'The ideas and energy we have for the future [and it is this that] drives effort, academic achievement and retention of students of all ages'.

How important is engagement? How important is it to your school that we reach all students?

To date, there have been agencies that can help schools with those students for whom the mainstream curriculum didn't meet their

needs. They are called Youth Partnership brokers. In the 2014 federal budget, their funding was cut. Not just a little. All of it.

Who will pick up these kids? Who will help them find relevance, mentors or apprenticeships?

This is compounded by the fact that young people are leaving school disengaged, with little direction or aspiration, entering a world where youth unemployment is double the national average, and in some parts of the country is as high as 40%. And of course their access to the dole has now been blocked for six months as well.

These measures have been put in place as a way to *encourage* young people into the workforce. If it weren't so serious, you'd swear it was a script from *Yes Minister*.

I believe there is a very real possibility of further disengaging our hardest to reach young people and in doing so creating an underclass of 15- to 24-year-olds across the country.

So, I ask you again. Is this important to you and to your school?

Let's start with what we mean when we say *engagement*. The Australian *Macquarie Dictionary* defines the verb engage as:

Engage — verb: 1. to occupy the attention or efforts of (a person etc.)

Using this definition, it is apparent schools *do* engage their students. Producing *occupied* and *busy* students appears to be the goal that many schools strive for, and regularly achieve.

Think about your kids' crammed academic

curriculum, extracurricular clubs and homework schedules. Think about how much time their school demands, and how their involvement is then *rewarded* via awards, badges, report comments, assembly appearances or grades.

In schools, compliance is regarded as engagement. Does he follow the rules? Does she sit quietly in class, raise her hand to speak and wear her uniform correctly? We'll describe a student as engaged if they do no more than conform to what is expected.

Whilst the compliant student may still do well in school, by mistaking conformity and compliance for engagement we miss out on the *real* benefits of genuine engagement.

The *Macquarie Dictionary* offers another definition that I'd like to explore further:

Engage — verb: 3. To attract and hold fast: to engage the attention: to engage someone's interest

This got me thinking. Do we *attract* students to learning? Or *push* them into it? How many of your students would turn up if they didn't have to? How many of them would have done the last piece of work you set, even if they didn't have to?

I'm not suggesting that you'd have an empty classroom, but I do wonder how many empty chairs you might have.

Within psychological circles, the accepted definition of *engagement* is:

The sense of living a life high on interest, curiosity and absorption. Engaged individuals pursue goals with determination and vitality.

Froh *et al.* (2010) found that adolescents

who had a sense of engagement reported higher levels of wellbeing, life satisfaction and less problematic social behaviours.

And to help us convince those colleagues of ours who believe school is only about test scores; these students also reported higher grades.

So clearly, *engagement* is everyone's business. But be honest — are your students genuinely engaged? Or are they just doing what's expected? And now be *really* honest — is that good enough for you and your school?

If our students are to be genuinely engaged, then they need to be *intrinsically motivated*.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), for an individual to be intrinsically motivated, they need a sense of:

1. Autonomy — A sense that they have a choice in the what, why, when and how they do something
2. Competence/Mastery — They are striving to improve. Not just going over old ground, or moving at too slow a pace.
3. Belonging/Purpose — The sense that what they are doing has a real relevance to them and the world around them.

If you've read *Drive* by Dan Pink, you may have already considered how your school could enhance engagement. Pink writes clearly and concisely on the subject and, in



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my opinion, should be required reading on any teacher training course.

Here are my two cents' worth.

Autonomy

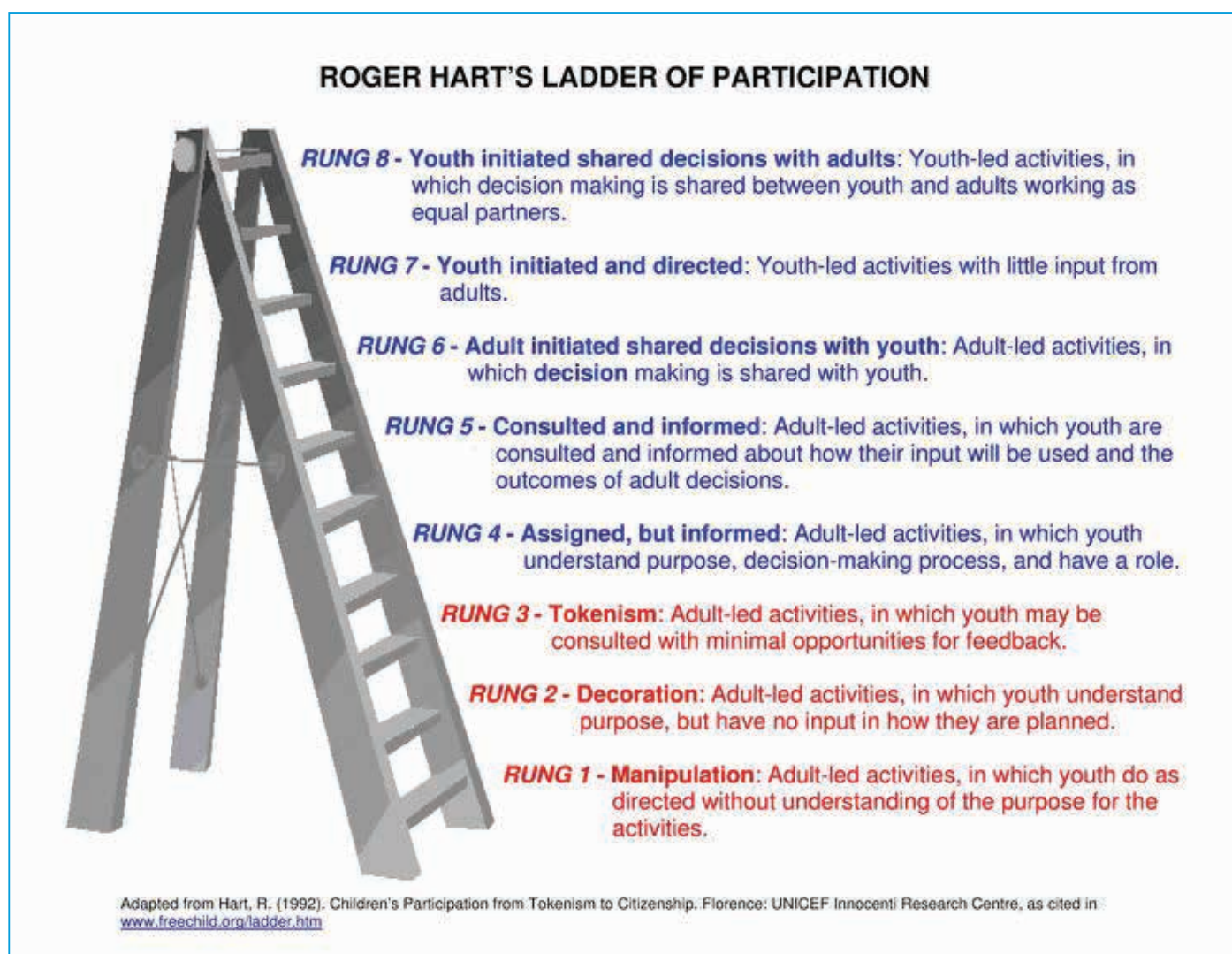
Schools go to great lengths to give students (and teachers) the impression that they encourage independence. However, in the scheme of things, most of what occurs at school is prescribed *for* the students, not *by* them.

Students have little say in the shaping of their experience at school. Take a look at the following diagram. It is known as Roger Hart's *Ladder of Participation* and has been around since the early 1990s. Some schools,

teachers or parents may look at the ladder and feel that it is simply not workable in a school environment. But I'd encourage you to think what aspects of your school could encourage more *citizenship*?

It's clear to see that each rung of the ladder indicates a proportional level of autonomy. So why not start with something easy?

- Students choose how to present their report. It could be in the form of a speech, Prezi, essay, website, Facebook page, poster and so on.
- Students can collaborate with whomever they like. And I mean *whomever*. A cousin interstate, a parent, a professor they follow on Twitter. Why do we only allow



kids to work with other kids in the same class?

- Students can choose when they will study certain aspects of the course.
- Survey students to find out what they *want* to know — in essence they help design the curriculum.
- Allocate one lesson a week where students can pursue an interest independent of the school curriculum.

Competence/Mastery

The concept of *Competence* or *Mastery* is of utmost importance, yet I believe students have little understanding of what *mastery* actually is. Let me use an analogy.

At his peak, Roger Federer was (and still is) the finest tennis player I have ever seen play. Between February 2004 and August 2008, he held the World Number One spot for a record 237 consecutive weeks. Overall, he has been at Number One for a total of 285 weeks, falling one week short of Pete Sampras' record of 286.

Federer has won 79 career titles. He was named Laureus World Sportsman of the Year for a record four consecutive years between 2005 and 2009. And in 2011 he was voted by over 50,000 people from 25 countries as the second most trusted and respected person in the world, second only to Nelson Mandela.

If anyone were entitled to feel they had mastered their art, it would be Roger Federer.

But has he *mastered* tennis? Has he ticked it off his list of things to do? Does he feel he has nothing else to learn from his coach? No. He continues to train every day. He

attempts to refine his technique, improve his agility and increase his power.

Despite all he has achieved in tennis, Roger Federer is *still* trying to improve *every day*.

Yet too many students equate an A grade with mastery. They have achieved all there is to achieve in this area of their education. There is no need to revisit it and they see no need to attempt to improve on it. By placing grades on learning, we insinuate there is an end-point. There is no end-point for Roger Federer.

We really need to think about the importance we place on grades in school and the message it sends our kids about the value of education.

Even someone who gets 100% on a test can improve some aspect of what they do in that discipline. The question is, do students appreciate that fact?

What could students learn from Roger Federer?

More importantly, how can we ensure that our most common practices — such as assessing, feedback, reporting and grading — don't serve to undermine an individual's sense of competence, or desire to improve.

Many researchers, and Dylan William, in particular, have found the act of grading to completely undo any gains made by offering constructive feedback. In short, if kids see a grade they don't read the feedback.

Let's think for a second as to how we provide feedback. How do we encourage a student who got 20/20 to improve? Or is the feedback more centred on what a great job they've

done? Compare that to the student who got 7/20. Typically, they feel overwhelmed by the amount of feedback they get as to how to improve. And their mark only serves to reinforce the fact that they probably can't make those improvements anyway.

The solution? Well, maybe that's overstating it but we could start by offering each student three pieces of feedback as to how they could improve their work — regardless of how good it already is.

We have too many kids in our schools who feel they either don't need to learn any more or they *can't* learn any more.

A strategy of *three ways to improve* could help address that, and develop a culture of learning and mastery, as opposed to a focus on a mark that students use to reinforce a narrative about their ability and identity.

Purpose

Kids are pretty savvy. To start with, most of them carry technology in their pocket that can prove or disprove a teacher's theory in an instant — and they aren't afraid to use it!

Whilst having a sense of *autonomy* and *mastery* is crucial to creating genuine engagement, without a meaningful purpose then kids won't fully buy in. Think of this as the *fourth R* of education — *Relevance*.

All kinds of problems arise when kids realise:

- The only reason you're teaching something is because it will be on the test.
- The only reason they are learning something is because the syllabus dictates they must.

- When a teacher's response to a student's question is, or implies, 'Don't worry about that, it's not in the exam ...'

The compliant students get on with it anyway and we pat ourselves on the back for a job well done.

But those students who are independent, critical thinkers decide this holds no relevance for them and they disengage. In this sense, *disengagement* should not be seen as a disciplinary or behavioural issue. We need to recognise it for what it is — a *protest*.

Students are disengaging as a form of protest against what school is serving up to them. And, to be honest, who can blame them?

Maybe it's not the students who are the problem.

Finding relevance in the curriculum

Depending on the subject, this may be easier for some than others. The fact that we have separate subjects only serves to make them less relevant to each other and life in general. Very few of us live our lives in 40-minute blocks, where the previous 40 minutes had little, if anything, to do with the next.

Some ways we can attempt to find meaning/relevance in the curriculum:

- Work with other subject areas as often as possible.
- Have 'themes' around which every subject can focus their work.
- Find ways to incorporate a community project or charity into what you do.
- As often as possible, apply what you are doing to real-life scenarios in the 'here

and now'. Avoid saying, 'You'll need this when you're older!' — Kids DON'T care!

- Have a 'Just Because' lesson — no grades, no syllabus outcomes. Learning for the sake of learning. Make *learning* relevant and purposeful in its own right.
- Find ways for students to design their own learning by incorporating their own interests into what you are doing.

The next time you use the word 'engaged' in a report, consider this:

Are you describing an engaged student or a compliant student?

Whilst we're on the subject, how *engaged* are you in your work?

What factors, if any, prevent genuine engagement in your workplace? What can you do about it?

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