Enrolling and Engaging our Students in Learning

Enroll - Tap into their motivation for learning.

As educators, we want to find the “Yes!” response from our students and get their commitment for exploration. Students today have many distractions in their lives. Emotions are like a roller coaster. Getting their focus – even for 10 straight minutes – can be a challenge for any teacher/tutor. The best Teacher/tutors/coaches are always planning ahead on how they will enroll students into responsible participation and focus on the unit, topic or activity. Teacher/tutors/tutors/coaches should ask themselves the following:

Guiding Questions
What's in it for my students? (Not what WE think, but what THEY think!)
To what can they relate?
To what will they agree?
To what will they commit?

Examples/Strategies for Enrolling Students
Enrolling questions
Provocative/interesting statements
Current event
Props/costuming/Skit
Use of specific music

Students make meaning by connecting to existing schema.
We need to build bridges into our students' lives in order to enroll them in a given subject. It is our existing schema that allows us to engage in picturing, and picturing that creates meaning and comprehension. The term schema refers to our intellectual capital. This is the knowledge we already have that we bring to the table in a learning situation. It is all the information we have gathered, all the vocabulary we know, all the concepts we understand, all of the experiences we have had and everything we have learned about the use of symbolic language.

Contemplate this statement: Global warming is a topic of serious concern to many scientists and environmentalists. Did this statement have any meaning for you? It may have caused you to connect into a particular bank of schema about environmental or political issues. All of our knowledge about the environment is part of a schema domain. There are many other ways to tap into this bank of knowledge, or schema domain. For example, just saying the words “environmental issues” would likely connect to the same domain.

Teaching and/or coaching students with insufficient schema for making meaning of present content is a common mistake. For example, in order for a 9th grade student to learn well in 9th grade, they need to have much of the 7th and 8th grade intellectual capital well established. If they do not, they will be greatly handicapped unless an intervention is applied to correct the deficit. Their working memories will constantly malfunction.

We have all worked with students who did not have the background knowledge or intellectual capital to
understand what we were trying to teach. They had insufficient schema. Teacher/tutors/coaches are confined by the educational fact that students make meaning by connecting to existing schema. For a student to be enrolled and successful, these connections must be made. We all have to build on the foundation that already exists.

This educational fact also sheds light on the importance of the content we teach. Every vocabulary word, math concept, cultural understanding, or scientific fact adds to the student’s schema and is valuable for future learning for that student. The importance of building a rich supply of ready to use schema cannot be overstated. This bank of schema is critical for problem solving, analysis, reasoning, and other higher order thinking skills. Teacher/tutors/tutors/coaches should ask themselves the following:

**Guiding questions**
What is in my students’ schema?
How do I discover and learn my students’ schema?
How is this content associated with my students’ schema?
In what ways do I build bridges to events, thoughts, or feelings extracted from their home, social, athletic, musical, artistic, recreational, or academic lives?

**Examples/Strategies for Discovering Existing Schema**
Ask questions
Build rapport
Use “Hot” lists (What’s a hot topic with my students today?”
Attend events
Talk about them
Follow their culture
Ask more questions
Relate to prior experiences

**ENGAGE** - Make learning a multisensory experience by using VAK

Effective Teacher/tutors/coaches are always on the lookout for ways to involve all three educational channels in the design and implementation of educational tasks and instruction. These three channels are the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic sensory input channels into the brain. Our individual balance of preferences for each of these channels is called modality. These three channels are called the three educational channels because these are the channels that deal with symbolic language and are the three channels available to Teacher/tutors/tutors/coaches for educating their students.

As educators, we each have preferences for one or possibly two of these channels. Perhaps we are a strong visual processor and learner. We will have a tendency, then, to teach with an emphasis on the visual sensory channel. We can anticipate that we will have modality mismatch with certain of our students. The idea behind VAK Teaching and/or coaching and/or coaching is that we diversify what we are doing in our design and presentation to be sure we are reaching all learners. It requires constant awareness that this dynamic exists, and a consistent effort to diversify our methodology.

From a brain science standpoint, VAK Teaching and/or coaching and/or coaching goes beyond just the need to diversify – it also has a direct impact on long term memory and recall. The encoding of memory in the human brain must scientifically come down the three factors of biology, chemistry and electricity. When we teach and have students learn using more than one educational channel, it fires more electricity into memory centers of the brain creating a greater chemical and biological change. Using more educational channels also creates more memory tags.

We might think of a memory tag as a link or pathway to the memory. For example, in trying to recall a particular piece of content, perhaps we would remember the motion attached to it, or maybe the colorful graphic organizer or picture we drew comes to mind. Perhaps we remember the sound of a word that was reinforced in class when
we had to say it three times to our neighbor before giving them a high five. Remembering this word tag causes us to remember an entire cascade of concepts related to the topic. Teacher/tutors/coaches should ask themselves the following:

**Guiding questions:**
What is the best way for these students to “get” the information?
What activities or questions would tap into what they already know?
What activities or questions would facilitate their “need to know?”
What does it “look, sound, and feel” like for students to be engaged?

**Chunking**

In order to support continuous engagement and learning, we will want to put everything (lessons, directions, activities, etc.) into bite-size pieces. The principle of chunking directly affects two important aspects of student learning: enhancing a student’s ability to encode memory and reducing risk in an effort to maintain resourceful learning states. When chunking to enhance memory encoding, it is important to consider both the size of the chunks and the logic involved. To get a sense of this, consider learning the following number: 36528691. Now consider if it would be easier to learn this number if it was chunked as follows: 365 28 691.

The same principle applies to learning a list of new vocabulary words. Teacher/tutors/coaches should chunk the words into smaller lists. In addition, the educator should consider the logic of the content grouping, putting similar or related content together. In the list of vocabulary words, the words would be grouped logically and in “bite-sized” pieces.

When chunking to reduce risk in the classroom, the teacher/tutor only allows students to see the “bite-sized” pieces. Consider this example: A science teacher/tutor is introducing a new three week unit to a group of 8th graders. As part of the introduction, this teacher/tutor hands out a vocabulary list for the entire unit which includes sixty words that the students do not know. Many of the students look at the list and immediately their brain changes state. They are experiencing an anxiety response as they look over a list that represents to them what they consider an impossible task. Thirty seconds ago they were in a resourceful state for learning, but that vanished in an instant.

The teacher/tutor could avoid this situation by using chunking. Perhaps she could break the list down into twenty words per week. This still would not be enough chunking for many students. Perhaps the teacher/tutor would break this list into four words per day. Imagine how an eighth grader might respond differently to four words a day as compared to a list with sixty words on it. Perhaps this teacher/tutor wants to chunk this even more. She might say to her students, “We are going to learn two words in six minutes.” This is chunking to manage risk and to help students encode memory. Of course, the teacher/tutor would also consider the logical grouping of the two words to maximize results.

Chunking logically helps students picture. Consider this grouping of letters: NB CT VC BSV HS. In this form, these letters would be difficult to remember, but if we could chunk them in a way that we could get a picture, it would help. NBC TV CBS VHS is a different grouping of the same letters in the same order, but chunked in a more logical way. “The apple is red” is easy to remember. Can you close your eyes and remember the sentence? Did you picture the red apple instead of the words and then go to the words? Chunking so students can easily picture will be an asset for their learning.

Chunking is also the principle behind the effectiveness of graphic organizers. A graphic organizer, like a content map or a cluster diagram, helps students understand the relationships between words and concepts by organizing them on paper. We might logically demonstrate whole to part, cause and effect, main idea to detail, or perhaps a problem to solutions. In addition to organizing content into a logical framework for learning, graphic organizers also offer the added benefit of strong visual input, which will enhance memory and recall. Teacher/tutors/coaches should ask themselves the following:
Guiding questions
What is the simplest way to group this information?
How can I make my "simplest" information more simple and comprehensible?

State Changes - “A change would do you good.” – Sheryl Crow

We will want to teach students about the importance of focusing their working memory in order for learning to occur. "Working memory" is another way of saying “paying attention!” There is no short term or long term memory unless working memory can be focused on the content being learned. The process of learning starts with working memory. Teach them how to use music and other state management strategies such as proper environment, adopting a positive attitude, and working with their physical state, such as their posture, to help focus attention. Teach them that the three aspects of state include mental, emotional and physical state. Teach them that they can choose how they show up in class and they can take charge of managing their own learning state.

Teacher/tutors/coaches will want to ask themselves the following:

Guiding questions
How do I know if students are in a resourceful learning state? What does it look, sound, and feel like?
How do I influence the state of my students?
How do I modify the state of my students?

Acknowledging Every Effort

Learning requires work. Acknowledgement for our efforts is essential. This tenet places a strong emphasis on reinforcing the effort of the middle level student in the classroom. By acknowledging effort, educators place a strong focus on effort. This focus on effort has many benefits in the educational arena. By acknowledging effort and creating a focus on effort we help our students to know that we consider good consistent effort the hallmark of a good student. One very significant benefit with a focus on effort relates to our students' self efficacy. Self efficacy is our students' concept of what they are capable of accomplishing and relates to their views of their own abilities.

When we define a student as one who gives good consistent effort we are asking the student to do something he or she can do. This is because effort is a choice. Even though some students may not be able to compete with the student sitting next to them in achievement scores, they can choose to give effort, and if effort is the sign of a good student then they can consider themselves good students. By asking students to give good consistent effort we are asking them to do something they know they can choose to do. How satisfied would you be as a professional educator if all your students did was give 100% effort? Most of us could live with that!

Teacher/tutors/coaches, academic coaches and tutors will want to ask themselves the following:

Guiding questions
For this particular effort, what is the most appropriate way to acknowledge this student(s)?
How am I consistent with acknowledgements so that every student feels effort, not ability or correctness, is the focus?

Too often we jump into delivery of content without doing the necessary steps to enroll and engage our students. Once we have them engaged, we want to keep engaging them by Teaching and/or coaching in interesting and creative ways that promote optimal learning states. The power of enrolling and engaging our students can’t be emphasized enough.