

2-2-2015

Incentivizing Your Class: The Engagement-Based Classroom Management Model

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Recommended Citation

Desautels, Lori, "Incentivizing Your Class: The Engagement-Based Classroom Management Model" (2015). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. 106.

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Incentivizing Your Class: The Engagement-Based Classroom Management Model

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When I think of our most struggling and distracted students, I see how social pain and rejection often hijack their ability to be academically focused and successful. Optimal school performance requires positive emotional connections with those students that we want to prosper while feeling capable and competent.

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When students and teachers feel this connection, we are all responding from the higher cortical regions of the brain, and our dopamine reward centers are activated by these feelings, these positive emotions. Our interactions with students are intimately connected with our own feelings and agendas. When our efforts in the classroom meet with frustration and opposition, we can inadvertently mimic our students' negative emotions.

Introducing and Customizing the Model

In this post, I'm proposing a classroom management model that I developed with the help of [Judy Willis](#). This model for behavior and emotional engagement incentivizes students to self-assess and reflect, choosing options that are socially rewarding. The model resembles a video game, with students moving through levels and noting how they feel. They choose options at each level that motivate them to the next level, which lessens growing anxiety and anger. Many of our students don't have the social modeling from their environments to assess an alternate way of approaching a problem, especially in those moments when negative emotion is growing stronger.

Just as we discuss and model other procedures, we will initially need to teach students about this model. It will look different based upon students' grade level and age. Teachers and students must agree ahead of time about how they will communicate their growing frustration, ideally with a signal or gesture that indicates a need to choose an option at a specific level. Adjust this model to the growing and changing needs of your students and your personal teaching profile.

The first aspect of this behavior engagement model is to teach our students about their own neuro-anatomy. When

we understand how the brain learns and feels -- with every word, thought, and experience -- we empower our students with the lifetime tools that will enhance their experience in and out of school.

As many teachers report that the most difficult parts of the day occur during transitions, we begin by creating a mutual goal for the students participating in this model, generating "forced academic and behavioral success." This goal must be clear, malleable, specific, and measurable:

1. John will work on the assigned project for 15 minutes without distracting his classmates by talking, gesturing, or interrupting their learning.
2. Alice will enter the classroom, gather her work or supplies, and be ready for instruction within three minutes.
3. Anthony will choose a signal and a Level 2 option within a five-minute period when feeling angry or frustrated.

Game On: Levels 1-7

Level 1

The student has reached the point of no return -- angry, closed off, disengaged, hopeless, and feeling the desire to fight, freeze, or flee. At this level, we need space and time to drain off the negative emotion. We emphasize process, effort, and attainable goals once the negative emotion has been cleared away.

Level 2

All learning has ceased. The student feels increasingly irritated, somewhat oppositional, and shuts down to feedback and learning. He or she is reacting from lower-brain and emotional centers and needs options to recharge and begin again:

- Revisiting choices previously discussed during a neutral time
- Movement, stretching, water, snack
- [Focused attention practice](#)
- Minutes off the task with an activity that de-escalates the stress response (such as running an errand for the teacher)
- Moving to another classroom to assist another teacher or serving another student
- Design instruction in an area of choice and expertise for a few minutes

Level 3

The students and teacher may begin to feel frustrated, irritated, and antsy. The distracted student may be willing to try another option and begin again.

Level 4

The student is slightly engaged, a bit distracted, and the flow of learning is interrupted. It is at Levels 3 and 4 that we move in closer to the student, touching a shoulder, showing authentic interest while observing all forms of communication. Notice with words, tone, questions, and affirmation:

- What could I do to help you?

- What do you need?
- How can we come up with a plan?
- Should I check in with you in five minutes?

Level 5

The student is less engaged but there is still effort and collaboration. We continue to implement affirmation, noticing the effort, and sharing our observations about the high engagement.

Level 6

The student is engaged and trying to complete tasks.

Level 7

The student is engaged and in the flow. Teaching and learning are happening seamlessly. Social intrinsic rewards work well here, because when someone else notices what's working well, we continue doing it.

Goals and Higher Levels of Attainment

The social rewards can be many and varied for students who attain the higher levels of this model on an hourly, daily, or weekly basis. Depending upon the student's age, grade level, and severity of reactions during stress responses, these higher levels can offer:

1. Designing a special project and teaching a younger class or another teacher
2. Choice of outside speaker aligned with the student's interest, learning about a vocation or life passion
3. Song selections for a class blog
4. Organizing a service event
5. Teacher completes weekend homework that directly ties in with the student's interests and passions
6. Positive referral certificates
7. Developing a class newspaper
8. Leading discussion groups
9. Bring in college or vocational students to share different majors and minors

Consequences for repeated low levels of engagement are still explained and enforced. If a student is not working during class time, we need to think about an alternate environment and time where he or she can complete assignments once the negative emotion has been drained. Research repeatedly reports that social rewards are sustainable and meaningful when assisting students in shifting habit, mindsets, and behaviors.

Do you offer your students incentives? Please tell us about it in the comments section below.