



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, September 2025, Vol. 2

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

Student Engagement: The Heart of the Matter

Here we are, already a month or two into the new school year. We have established our schedules, met our kids, and memorized how to spell and pronounce their names. We have informally observed each student's learning strengths and needs. Electronic assessments have been performed and analyzed. New school professional development sessions have brought forth all of the new "buzz words" - those words we hear often about the work the collective school, district, or state is focused on for the year. Some that I (Krista) have been hearing include Tier I, II, and III instruction, "just in time" scaffolding, productive struggle, visible learning, and high expectations. All essential concepts to be sure. What words are you hearing that describe the focus of your school, district, or state goals?



This time of year can feel overwhelming. So much to do in so little time. Just as we settle in to teaching the students we have in front of us, the first grading period and parent-teacher conferences loom large on the horizon.

Now is the time to recall our constructivist beliefs, including the understanding that each child develops at their own pace, and our focus is on providing them with engaging, whole-part-whole instruction to support their growth and development. (For more information about whole-part-whole instruction, check out our book, *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3.*)

At this point in the year, given the amount of time we have in each day, we must prioritize what is most important. Just as our students need to determine what information is most important in a nonfiction text, we can also benefit from identifying what is most important in all the information we process and act on in our classrooms and schools.

Dana and I would say what is most important is to keep our focus on student engagement and meaningful, relevant instruction. Let's start with student engagement. I love this depiction of the engagement continuum matrix from Amy Berry (2022). It includes students' *and* teachers' actions as the basis for engagement.

FIGURE 1.2 • *Disrupting to Driving: A Continuum of Student Engagement*

	ACTIVE ←			→ PASSIVE			ACTIVE
	DISRUPTING	AVOIDING	WITHDRAWING	PARTICIPATING	INVESTING	DRIVING	
Engaging in the activity	Disrupting the learning environment Refusing to participate Arguing with the teacher	Looking for ways to avoid work Being off-task Being unprepared Looking for reasons to leave the room or move around the room	“Flying under the radar” Physically separating from others Being distracted Putting in low effort	Doing the work Being on task Paying attention Responding to questions	Asking questions about what we are learning Valuing what we are learning Showing interest or curiosity in what we are learning Enjoying learning	Setting goals for my learning Seeking feedback to help me improve Seeking out challenges Monitoring and evaluating my progress	
Engaging with peers	Arguing with peers Trying to distract others	Off-task talking with others Playing around with others instead of working	Sitting with a group if directed but not interacting	Working with others when directed to do so	Sharing ideas and thinking with peers Following shared interests	Collaborating with others toward a shared goal Challenging each other to drive improvement	
Students are disengaging from the planned learning experience				Students are engaging in the planned learning experience			
<i>What goals might the teacher have for engagement in the learning experience?</i>				I want them to follow my lead and complete certain tasks	I want them to be interested in learning and actively involved in the process	I want them to be proactive and collaborative learners	

Link:

<https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/61926/reimagining-student-engagement-as-a-continuum-of-learning-behaviors>

When I analyze this continuum, I immediately notice the significant role dialogue plays in engagement, including discussion, responding to questions, asking questions, and seeking feedback. I agree that student talk is inherent to engagement in this model. I can also see how the “passive” categories can be students who are just getting by but not enjoying school or making significant progress.

I noticed the descriptors in the “investing” and “driving” categories, the highest levels of engagement. I think these students must be experiencing meaningful learning with opportunities for choice. What is meaningful to one student may not be meaningful to the next, but planning for open-ended, authentic learning tasks with some opportunity for individuality is a good starting point. For example, some students may not find multiplication personally meaningful, but if they understand its importance in various math fields and can work with a team or play a game, the task can become more relevant to them. Or, if this work is recorded in a math notebook where the teacher checks and offers specific feedback, it can significantly increase the level of meaning for a student. In this case,



the student can see their effort and progress over time, along with specific feedback, all represented in their math notebook.

In ELA close reading, I notice high levels of engagement with my older students when, after teaching a variety of annotation structures, I have them choose the annotation method that makes the most sense to them to tackle a text. It's fun to see the students consider their options, explain their thinking, and get to work.



The materials required for the task can also signify meaningful instruction. When observing classrooms or planning for engagement in my own classroom, I often think about what the students have to work with. Just a worksheet or individual packet of worksheets? Just an iPad? Sitting and watching a lecture, slides, or video? These activities are likely to result in lower levels of engagement.

What about the use of magnetic letters, sound boxes, base ten blocks, peer editing, writing notebooks, word sorts, or partner teams? Interesting books, games, and projects? Using dry erase boards for practice, iPads for recording presentations or reflections on learning? Relevant problems to solve with a team? These activities have more potential for high engagement.

Last year, in a professional learning activity, I was introduced to the Support/Challenge Matrix. It was so helpful to think about my students in this context. (You can find various depictions of this matrix online. Unbeknownst to me, it has been around since 1966!) Similar to the engagement continuum, the support and challenge matrix proposes that for growth and development to occur for students, they need to experience an appropriate balance of challenge and support. Constructivist teachers can use this matrix to meet students where they are. Here are descriptors of each zone:

High Support & High Challenge: The High-Performance Zone

Description: The ideal environment for growth and learning. Students are pushed to new limits but also have the necessary resources and encouragement to succeed.

Outcome: Promotes resilience, innovation, and sustained high performance.

High Support & Low Challenge: The Comfort Zone

Description: Students feel safe and supported, but the lack of difficulty prevents them from stretching their abilities.

Outcome: Potential goes untapped, leading to stagnated development and disengagement.



Low Support & High Challenge: The Stress Zone

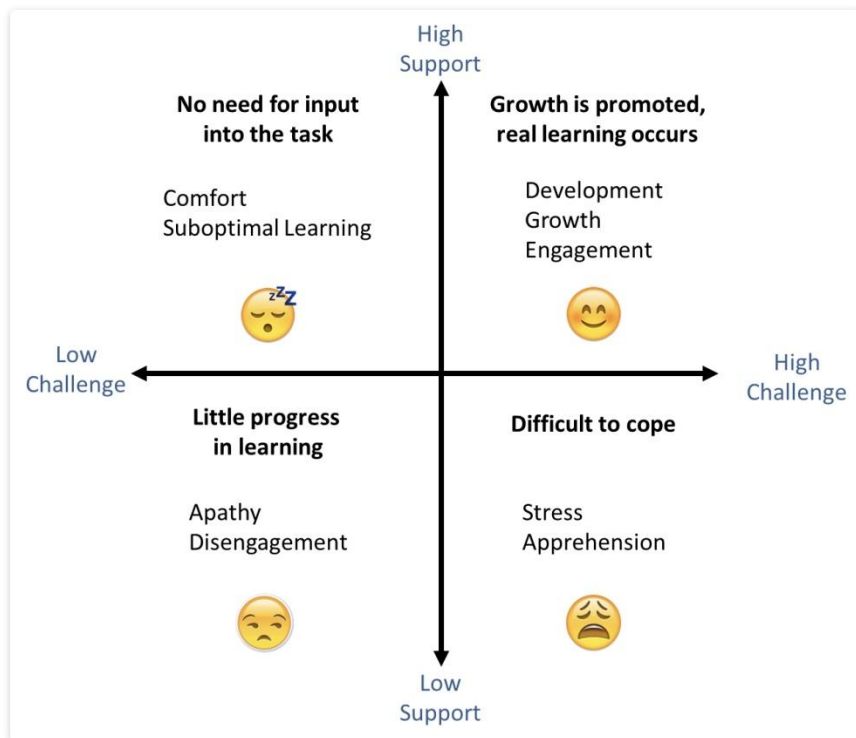
Description: Students are faced with demanding tasks but lack the necessary guidance, feedback, or resources to cope effectively.

Outcome: Results in stress, frustration, and a fear-driven culture that stifles risk-taking and innovation.

Low Support & Low Challenge: The Inertia/Apathy Zone

Description: Lacking both support and a significant challenge, students become stuck, disengaged, and unmotivated.

Outcome: Progress halts, leading to disinterest and a lack of growth opportunities.



Sanford, N. (1966). *Self and society: Social change and individual development*. New York: Atherton.

Challenge / Support Matrix

As I think back on my own education, I recall experiences in each of these zones. I see that those times when I had a good balance of support/challenge with engaging learning activities were when I



thrived. As constructivist teachers, we can use this matrix to inform our lesson planning and classroom learning environment. I currently have a student who has a very low threshold for error, specifically for using her phonics learning to solve unknown words in context. When I say, “Try that again. Look at the parts.” She says, “I don’t know.” Then I offer a more specific scaffold to support her in figuring it out on her own. I often still hear, “I just don’t know,” with added frustration because she has closed herself off to trying again. I can keep the support/challenge matrix in mind as I work with this student. Currently, we are having progressive conversations about giving a new word a try, why it’s important, and trusting that I will support her as she works through any confusion or mistakes.

Offering a balance of support and challenge is key to moving students forward. This balance can be accomplished with engaging learning activities and students who are working at the higher levels of the engagement continuum. These two resources can help us focus on what is most important right now. Use them individually, as a grade level team, school staff, or school district, to clarify priorities, successes, or goals for making school a fun, safe, rigorous, engaging, and purposeful experience for our students.

Reflection Questions for ***Engagement: The Heart of the Matter***:



When you think back to your own educational experiences, when were you most engaged in your learning? Do you remember times when the balance of challenge and support was just right for you?



How can you use these matrices to reflect on teaching and learning in your classroom or school?



What is going well with student engagement, challenge, and support? Where are areas for improvement?

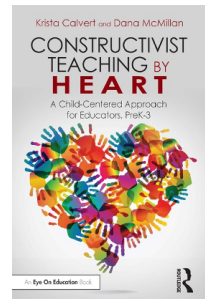
*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Engagement: The Heart of the Matter** [here](#).*

(Download newsletter to access links.)



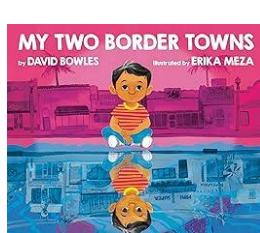
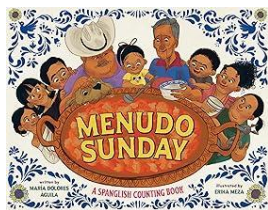
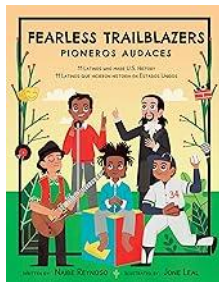
PONDER BOX

“Constructivist teachers employ a “one at a time, all at once” approach to classroom instruction where student ownership and engagement in the learning community are foundational. This happens with class meetings, student choice, differentiated learning, and projects.” pg. 75.



Teaching with High-Quality Children's Books

We're celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. This celebration runs from October 15 to November 15 each year to recognize and celebrate the contributions and influence of Hispanic culture to the achievement, culture, and history of the United States. Here are some highly engaging children's books to incorporate into your classroom curriculum:



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here](#)!

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