The High Cost of Disengagement

> Train teachers to call only on students who raise their hands and to build on correct responses to maintain a brisk classroom pace. This would enhance the self-confidence of already proficient students and minimize class participation and engagement among those who enter with lower proficiency.
>
> —Kim Marshall, "A How-to Plan for Widening the Gap"

Think about the typical question-and-answer session in most classrooms. We call it "the beach ball scenario" because it reminds us of a scene in which a teacher is holding a beach ball. She tosses it to a student, who quickly catches the ball and tosses it back. She then tosses it to another student. The same scenario happens perhaps three or four times during what is poorly referred to as a "class discussion." Although the teacher asks three or four questions, only two or three eager students actually get an opportunity to demonstrate active cognitive engagement with the topic at hand (we say two or three because a couple of enthusiastic students usually answer more than one question). Often even seasoned teachers can relate to the problem of calling out a question and getting a response from only one or two students. They get little feedback from the others and don't get an accurate assessment of what the others have learned until it's too late. They remember the beach ball scenario. For many, they did it just yesterday. Let's face it: we can all get lost in the beach ball scenario.

The problem with tossing the beach ball is that too many students sit, either passively or actively disengaged, giving no indication of what they are thinking or of what they have learned. They have effectively learned to fly beneath the radar. Do you remember being in this class? Was it a high school or an upper-elementary content class many moons ago? Did you actually even read the book? Well, we'll make no confessions here, for fear that high school diplomas can actually be revoked after issuance. But our point is this: unless you intentionally plan for and require students to demonstrate active participation and cognitive engagement with the topic that you are teaching, you have no way of knowing what students are learning until it's often too late to

Source: From *Total Participation Techniques* (pp. 3–11), by P. Himmele and W. Himmele, 2011, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2011 by ASCD.

repair misunderstandings. With approximately six hours of actual instructional time per school day, what percentage of that time are students actively engaged and cognitively invested in what is being taught or learned in your classroom? What evidence do we as teachers have that students are actually cognitively in tune with us? And what wonderful and deep critical thinking are we missing out on by not requiring evidence of processing and content-based interaction by our students?

Listening Objects

Unfortunately, as mentioned in the Introduction to this book, too much of today's teaching is characterized by a stand-and-deliver approach to presenting content, in which teachers simply stand at the overhead or the front of the room and deliver the material to be learned. Paolo Freire (2000) describes students in this type of a scenario as "listening objects" (p. 71). Would you like to be a *listening object*? Think about it. Would it warm your heart to know that you daily pack your children's lunches and they eagerly race off to school where they sit and become someone's *listening objects*? Education built around the notion of listening objects or stand-and-deliver teaching is not effective for young minds, and it doesn't work for adults either. At any age, people need to pause and process what they're learning. They need to chew on concepts, jot down their thoughts, compare understandings with peers, articulate their questions, and as reading specialist Keely Potter puts it, "celebrate the learning that is happening right now in my head."

Disengaging and Dropping Out

Every nine seconds, we lose a student due to dropping out (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). Although recent indicators point to progress within overall graduation rates, even the encouraging reports still indicate that at least a quarter of our students drop out (Aud et al., 2010; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Hornig Fox, 2010). The picture is bleakest for African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, whose dropout percentages are more than twice that of their white peers (Balfanz et al., 2010). Because much of our experience is with students in urban schools, we have a very real understanding that effective teaching can have a direct influence on a student's life choices.

For six years we both volunteered in California's Chino State Prisons (Bill in the men's, Pérsida in the women's). If you don't yet understand the effect that your teaching can have on students, consider volunteering in a prison. The experience will make you an instant believer in the power of your teaching. In prisons, illiteracy is rampant. Dropping out of high school is not the exception, it is the norm. In fact, three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts (Martin & Halperin, 2006). And academic self-confidence is close to nonexistent among prisoners. As soon as inmates discovered we were teachers, many would freely tell us about their academic inadequacies and failures. Many were quick to place the full extent of the blame on themselves.

The cost of school failure doesn't end with the incarcerated. Think about the toll incarceration takes on the children of inmates, including the vicious circle of incarceration. We have both met mothers and fathers whose daughters and sons were serving a prison sentence at the same time that the parents were. What kinds of educational experiences did these men and women participate in? Did they become "listening objects"? Would a better education have made a difference?

Boredom and Engagement

The reasons for dropping out vary depending on the students, but the number-one reason—cited by the dropouts themselves—is boredom (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). For most dropouts, becoming listening objects didn't work. When high school students talked about the types of teaching they wanted, they "described their preferred instructional strategies as ones that were hands-on, and that contained opportunities for debate and discussion" (Certo, Cauley, Moxley, & Chafin, 2008, p. 32). In other words, they preferred engagement, or just the opposite of boredom. These same researchers found that one of the negative consequences of a heavy emphasis on broad curricular coverage aimed at meeting academic standards was that "the quality of instruction is less engaging to students" (p. 26).

Several studies and high school reform initiatives cite student engagement as a key ingredient in helping students stay in school and be successful (ASCD, 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Lehr et al., 2004; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Voke, 2002). Two-thirds of the respondents in the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement indicated that they were bored at least daily in

high school (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). According to one student quoted in that survey, "I think that the teachers have a lot to do with how you feel about school. Some teachers do well in engaging you and others never engage anyone" (p. 20).

Making a Difference

Why would we, as authors of a book dedicated to infusing your classrooms with fun, interactive, participatory, and cognitively engaging strategies, dwell on something as depressing as the dropout problem? We do so because we know that for some students, cognitively engaging experiences can literally mean the difference between life and death. In case you think we are exaggerating, think about how dropping out is connected to crime and incarceration. Moretti (2005) estimates, through his meta-analysis, that "a one-year increase in average years of schooling reduces murder and assault by almost 30%, motor vehicle theft by 20%, arson by 13%, and burglary and larceny by about 6%" (p. 6). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) calculate that a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma (p. 2). The less education that inmates have, the more likely they are to return to prison (Harlow, 2003).

We know that effective teaching makes a difference. In fact, an analysis of student academic growth over time suggests that teacher effectiveness has a greater influence on student performance than race, socioeconomic status, or class size (Sanders & Horn, 1998). The cumulative residual effects of ineffective teaching last for years, even after exposure to ineffective teaching has been followed by exposure to effective teaching (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). In sum, the quality of education a child receives is highly dependent on the effectiveness of that child's teachers.

Whether you work in suburban or urban schools, teaching average performers, gifted high achievers and underachievers, children of immigrants, students with special needs, students who repeatedly experience school failure, or simply your average passive performer teetering between staying in and dropping out, your excellence in effective teaching could be the answer to parents' prayers and the vehicle by which they see their dreams for their son or daughter realized. One teacher can make such a difference.

Total Participation Techniques

If we were given the opportunity to choose just one tool that could dramatically improve teaching and learning, we would choose Total Participation Techniques as the quickest, simplest, most effective vehicle for doing so, because whether you're a student teacher, a novice teacher, or even a 30-year veteran, a total-participation mind-set is essential for ensuring active participation and cognitive engagement by all of your learners, as well as for providing you with effective ongoing formative assessments. *Total Participation Techniques (TPTs) are teaching techniques that allow for all students to demonstrate, at the same time, active participation and cognitive engagement in the topic being studied.* Quite simply, we believe that if you infuse your teaching with TPTs, you'll be a stronger teacher and fewer students will fall through the cracks of our educational system. TPTs can make us all better teachers.

The more we observe excellent teachers teach, the more convinced we become that the common thread in their teaching is that these teachers ensure that students become actively, cognitively, and emotionally engaged in the content being taught. And although we are the first to admit that "there is nothing new under the sun" and that the idea behind TPTs is truly a simple concept, we too often see that the actual implementation of techniques that cognitively engage students is not the norm in many classrooms. This situation is true whether we visit urban schools, rural schools, or well-to-do suburban schools. We find that over and over again, too many teachers continue to fall back into the same old pattern of "delivering" the content while allowing their students to fall into the pattern of delivering passive stares. Too much focus is often placed on the teacher as the distributor of knowledge. A TPT mindset can effectively take the focus off of teaching and place it on what, and to what extent, your students are learning.

Evidence of Active Participation

The use of Total Participation Techniques provides teachers with evidence of active participation and cognitive engagement. They can have a direct effect on the reasons most students drop out or fail to meet their academic potential. For one thing, in a TPT-conducive classroom, students are not allowed to passively hide behind the others who are always raising their hands. All students are demonstrating that they are learning and interacting and—believe it or not—doing so

while they're having a great time. You will notice that all the techniques we present require active processing at deep levels of thinking, and all but a few use interaction.

Manheim Central Middle School

Let's look at the socially tenuous and risk-conscious environment that is often present in a typical middle school classroom. According to Keely Potter, a reading specialist at Manheim Central Middle School in south-central Pennsylvania, "By the time many students hit middle school, disengagement has become a learned behavior—not for all, but for some, especially those that hold little social capital among their peers. Too many are either resistant to engagement, afraid to engage, or afraid to appear *too* engaged. So that's one of the most important things that we can try to undo as effective middle school teachers."

Keely and several other teachers at the middle school made it their priority to infuse TPTs into their daily curriculum. They graciously invited us into their classrooms and are the source of many of the examples we use throughout this book. The best teaching that we have observed involves teachers setting the stage for students to demonstrate cognitive engagement in activities that require time to process, to make connections, and to interact with peers as well as their teachers. We are convinced that the accountability and cognitive engagement that result from TPTs can make a difference between mediocrity and excellence in teaching—and between student failure and student success.

When asked about the role of Total Participation Techniques in teaching, 8th grade English teacher Matt Baker said, "I've completely bought into it." He went on to talk about how he arrived at this acceptance. And he shared his thoughts about his earlier eight years of teaching experience in a high school:

> Student interaction was rare. The idea of kids sharing something with one another, and the idea of kids sitting next to one another, was a foreign concept. The mentality was, you can't ever let them work in groups because then one person does all the work and everybody gets a good grade, and it's not fair. Everybody was in rows; if they were sharing something, it meant they were cheating. But that type of teaching doesn't work. Kids need to talk to one another. They

> cannot sit in a classroom for a whole period and not process what they are learning with one another.

In contrast, Baker's classroom at Manheim Central Middle School was characterized by a consistent give-and-take among students, and between students and teacher. Students were constantly stopping, pairing up, and then joining other pairs to form small groups in order to process meaningful and complex concepts being presented through articles and literary works that were relevant to their own lives. Even if students wanted to sleep in Baker's class, they wouldn't be able to. Once a brief reading or content presentation had ended, students were out of their seats demonstrating that they could connect these concepts to their lives and to the impact that these issues have on society. In Baker's classroom, standards were met under the cover of relevance. And students were anxious to share their own take on the issues presented.

Ease of Use

It is not difficult to cognitively engage students, and it doesn't take much work. Sixth grade teacher Meghan Babcock and reading specialist Keely Potter implemented a four-week TPT-infused unit using Kate DiCamillo's book *The Tiger Rising*. According to Babcock,

> Using TPTs, the students were right with us every step of the way. It wasn't a lot of work; it just streamlined my thinking. It put more structures in place. I did the same amount of planning; I just did it in a little bit of a different way . . . even just taking the questions out of the curriculum [or standards] and doing your own little thing makes a huge difference.

According to two-year veteran Courtney Cislo, implementing TPTs is not dependent on the amount of experience a teacher has. All teachers can improve their teaching through TPT-infused lessons:

> I think for teachers that have never taught before, these techniques are so valuable, because you come out of college thinking, "OK, I'm going to do this as my anticipatory set, and then I'll do this, and next I'll read that, and finally I'll close with this." It's all me, me, me, and I, I, I. But the point is not to get your

> own agenda across; the point is that the students learn. With these techniques, you can gauge, "Oh, they've got it and I can move on," or "I should move more quickly," or "Uh-oh, I need to go back and reteach." It's a critical element for any classroom no matter how much experience a teacher has.

Although implementing TPTs may require that you actively remind yourself to do so, if you stick to it, it becomes a way of thinking. Babcock found that "the more you deliberately implement them, the more they become an expectation." Fifth grade teacher Mike Pyle agrees: "I use them every day throughout every lesson. The more you use them, the more comfortable you become with using them." But he also points out that intentionality is required:

> You really have to be intentional in the beginning of the year, because many students are used to traditional classrooms where they sit in rows. But for me, I have to have them in groups. They have to be sitting in clusters, because they do so much discussing of things back and forth, with face-partners, shoulder-buddies, and as a whole group as well. We do a lot of sharing. For example, in social studies, even when they are reading out of the text, I might have them read a section, and then they have to stop and relay what they learned to their teammates. This back and forth helps them remember what they learned.

TPTs work best in classrooms that practice this constant back and forth, from the text or teachers to students, from students to students, and from students to teachers. By definition, TPTs require active participation and cognitive engagement by everyone.

Additional Thoughts

Before we move on, we need to make a disclaimer. We are still developing in our own use of TPTs. In many instances we have discovered the importance of TPTs the hard way. And we still have days in our university classes when we simply talk too much. We've come to realize that when we are engaged and passionate about a topic, it's easy to get lost in our own talking—even when no one is listening. The wheels in our mind are turning, and the generation of ideas is refreshing (to us) as we talk and talk and talk, and everyone else is thinking about the many things

on their to-do lists. One student is focusing on the phone call she just received, another on the laundry he forgot to take out of the washer three days ago, and yet another on life's important questions, like whether or not that mole on her arm is starting to look like her Aunt Martha. This is why we no longer rely on our own good judgment to inject TPTs in our lessons. We have realized that we need safeguards to ensure against getting lost in the talking. So we now write TPTs into our slides, and we type them into our lesson plan agendas in red so that we don't forget to stop talking. And you just may have to do the same thing in whatever way will help you remember to repeatedly pause for student processing, interaction, and the reciprocity that needs to take place between students and students, as well as between teachers and students.

Deep cognitive engagement does not emerge from simply being *talked at*. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 2000, p. 72). We have the ability to make this restless, impatient, continuing, and hopeful inquiry happen in our classrooms. But it will take a deliberate infusion of opportunities to process, reflect, question, and interact with each other. So this is what we aim to do in this text: to provide teachers with simple activities that make it difficult for students to think about the phone call, the laundry, or that mole that looks like Aunt Martha. Instead, students will be too busy actively processing deep concepts in ways that require that they use higher-order thinking as they actively reflect on, analyze, and defend their judgments in meaningful interactions with their peers.

One student who participated in Potter and Babcock's TPT-infused unit offered this reflection: "I have family problems, and when I come here, it all seems perfect, and it goes away." This is our hope—that through the use of TPTs, students will become so actively engaged and so lost in the learning, they won't have time to be distracted by other things.

Reflection Questions

- During your last lesson(s), how much responsibility for demonstrating cognitive engagement did you place on your students?
- Which of your students would most benefit from your consistent use of TPTs?
- How can implementing Total Participation Techniques make you a better teacher?

