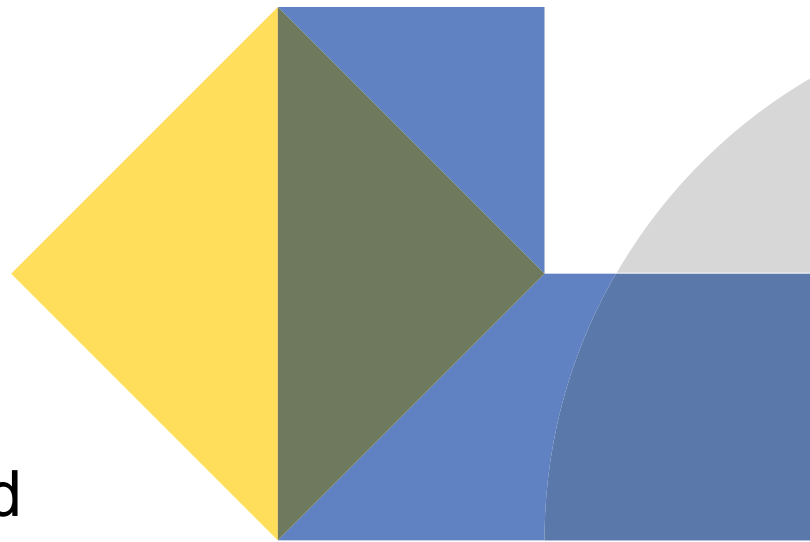


Essay 06

# Changemaking and Engagement in an Uncertain World

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## Changemaking in education is a risky business.

Think of all the pressure that might tempt a teacher to leave “well enough” alone—to keep doing exactly what has always been done. New approaches take time to perfect and failed experiments can set students back. There is often a tremendous mismatch between initiatives handed down from a district or school administration and what teachers actually do, or want to do, in their classrooms. Parental and public opinion continuously shape the work of schools and districts. Policy at every level of government adds a different set of pressures as it veers and shifts with the political winds, blowing from the north, then south, then east, and north again.

But “well enough” has never been good enough. With the rapid and dramatic shifts of the past decades—the transition from an industrial- to an information-based economy and the constant reinvention of systems that require a nimble mind and responsive intellect—“well enough” becomes a weight we hang from the necks of our students, holding them back.

When students leave school, they enter an economy that is radically different from the economy of past decades and from the economy we will see in the near future. It is estimated that *65 percent* of the jobs of 2050 do not exist today.<sup>1</sup> These are difficult odds for students who are coming through a system that doesn’t adequately prepare them to be flexible problem-solvers and creative thinkers.

## SHIFTING THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

One of the key strategies trying to radically shift the education landscape is leapfrogging—where linear, incremental change is sidestepped through out-of-the-box, bold approaches. One of the prerequisites to leapfrogging in education is the rejection of the illusion that we know what today’s children will need to know in 50 years. Instead, we need to teach students *how to teach themselves*. We need to tap into their innate curiosity, teach them to think critically about everything they encounter



(including the words of their teachers), help them learn to communicate and collaborate, and let them have a say in what happens in the classroom.

This is what we are doing at Center for Inspired Teaching. We are changemaking. We are experimenting. We are perfecting a pedagogy that leaves 20th century compliance-based education behind, and engages students 100 percent, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. A compliance-based classroom should be familiar. Classrooms where students practice rote memorization, rather than engaging in deep thinking. Classrooms where teachers create rigid protocols, rather than encouraging students' curiosity to drive the activities. Classrooms that are solidly teacher-centered and entirely teacher-directed, rather than student-centered and student-directed. Not all compliance-based classrooms look the same but they all lead in the same direction: towards the internalization and replication of the teacher's thinking, beliefs, and behaviors.

Engagement-based education is different. Rather than telling students *what* to think, Inspired Teachers teach them how to think for themselves. Engaged students learn to solve novel problems through creativity and collaboration. As often as possible, their work is relevant to their real lives. In an engaged classroom, students don't have to be told why what they learn is important—they can see it for themselves.

## **DOUBLING DOWN ON TRADITION**

In recent years, the fixation on measuring academic improvement through standardized test scores has resulted in many schools and policy makers doubling down on tradition, leaning heavily on compliance. We have seen the spread of rigorous curricula enforced through state and national mandates. Joan Goodman, Professor, University of Pennsylvania uses the term “regulated environment” to refer to schools characterized by an insistence on “compliance to pervasive rules that shadow children throughout the day;” rules that cover everything from what to wear to how to walk to how to ask permission to use the restroom. Goodman also points out that these types of schools have proliferated in recent years in the United States, particularly in low-income, urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Compliance is as rampant as it has ever been.

Supporters of this kind of schooling might argue that engagement is

present in highly-structured, pseudo-militaristic schools, which are far more prevalent in low-income communities and communities of color. Kids might have good attendance, might answer questions in class, do their work, respond positively to their teachers, and be adept at “doing school.” But this does not constitute true engagement. Instead, it is simply behavioral engagement, and it is only skin-deep. In a classroom based on behavioral engagement, even when students complete their tasks efficiently and seem to be following the classroom rules and paying attention, they are often motivated by external rewards or teacher demands, rather than curiosity or a love for learning. They have learned to function well within a system that asks little of them beyond compliance. True classroom engagement requires that students also be emotionally, intellectually, and physically engaged in their learning.

Think for a moment back to your days in school. I’m sure all of us can remember spending plenty of time sitting still at a desk, listening to a teacher, and taking copious notes. Perhaps you learned the facts taught, some for a little while and fewer for good. You may have even remembered most of what you needed on test day. If you were a good rule-follower, you probably paid attention (even when it was boring). But were you engaged? Did you care about what you were learning? Did you see how what you were learning related or mattered to your life? Or, like most students in compliance-based classrooms, were you just listening, memorizing, and reciting information because you knew you were supposed to—because you were ultimately answering to outside pressures (parents, college goals, “the future,” fear of punishment) rather than the innate call of your own passion for learning, and your growing understanding of the deep value of a good education?

Compliance-based classrooms, in their outdated thinking and focus on surface-level good behavior, breed disengagement. Recent studies indicate disengagement is an epidemic in American schools.<sup>3</sup> The 2016 Gallup Student poll found that less than half of students said they were engaged in school. Almost one-quarter of these students reported that they were *actively* disengaged.

This is a critical issue because student engagement is tied to a myriad of positive life outcomes. Actively engaged students earn higher grades and have lower dropout rates.<sup>4</sup> In addition, engagement is correlated with positive social outcomes outside of the classroom; for example, positive emotions and persistence through challenging situations.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, disengagement is correlated with decreasing student achievement, and



can lead to students dropping out of school entirely.<sup>6</sup>

Compliance-based teachers are satisfied when students say what the teachers want to hear, and when they behave and think in predictable and familiar ways. *True* student engagement, though, is much more difficult to create and much more difficult to measure. But it is what our schools desperately need.

### **THREE ELEMENTS OF ENGAGEMENT**

Inspired Teachers focus on bringing three distinct elements of engagement to every part of their teaching. There is intellectual engagement—the ability to identify and build connections between classroom content and a student’s everyday life. There is emotional engagement—the sense of belonging in the classroom and school. Finally, there is physical engagement, which involves bringing the whole body into the learning experience; it means—to steal an image from Sir Ken Robinson—treating the body as more than just a vehicle for carrying a student’s head around.

Students engage intellectually when they see the relevance of what they learn in their everyday lives.<sup>7</sup> This happens when teachers craft lessons that are responsive to their students’ interests and experiences. Instructional activities such as using authentic learning, allowing students to set their own learning agendas, focusing on creativity and collaboration in the classroom, and using small group work and discussion instead of lectures, have been found to lead to increased student achievement.<sup>8</sup> Like emotional engagement, intellectual engagement has effects outside of the classroom—it promotes both motivation and self-regulation.<sup>9</sup>

Emotionally engaged students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Emotional engagement comes from learning that addresses a student’s individual needs, and from a mutually respectful atmosphere between students and teachers. Studies show that when students identify themselves as members of a school community, it deepens their commitment to their education.<sup>10</sup>

As for physical engagement, it’s not as easy as giving students recess. When done correctly, movement becomes meaningful and students learn communication, teamwork, risk-taking, accountability, and how to exchange positive feedback with one another.<sup>11</sup> In a compliance-based

classroom, movement is unusual. But this is a serious mistake. For example, one study of elementary students found that integrating dance and math classes had a significant effect on students' positive attitudes and engagement towards math. The students were also better able to make connections across subjects, which made learning math more applicable to their lives.<sup>12</sup>

## **DEVELOPING CHANGEMAKERS**

For a teacher, transitioning from a compliance-based pedagogy to an engagement-based pedagogy is not easy. It takes time, thought, and effort. More than that, though, it means taking a risk. Lesson plans often require mid-class improvisation. Teachers cannot simply hand students a worksheet and take a breather. Discipline is not as simple as sending a student to the principal or suspending him from school. This becomes all the more difficult with the number of stakeholders a teacher has to manage—those outside winds blowing. But to be an Inspired Teacher you must be a changemaker, willing to throw wide your classroom door and share your great ideas with your colleagues and community. In short, you must be brave.

At Inspired Teaching, we teach teachers in the same way we expect them to teach students. We engage them 100 percent intellectually, emotionally, and physically. This is done intentionally for many reasons, and in no small part because we know that learners big and small don't learn in radically different ways. We want our teachers to develop students who are changemakers—in their classrooms, schools, communities, and the world. And so, we have to develop in teachers the same commitment to changemaking, which starts with a deep commitment to the mindset of engagement-based teaching and learning, and progresses to an increasing facility with the methods of engagement-based teaching and learning.

When you walk into the classroom of an Inspired Teacher, you may not spot her at first. She may be on the rug with a student, or lost in a group project. But her presence in the classroom, the school, the community, and the world is felt—because she teaches from a place of confidence and pride, and because she is not afraid to take risks herself so that she can teach her students to take risks as well, all in service of creating change that is felt both near and far.



The challenge we face in education is how to create an environment that lets change happen, that lets the changemakers shine, and that rewards courage and risk. As leaders in our fields, it is incumbent upon us to be comfortable with moving away from old systems, it is incumbent upon us to showcase and honor the educators who are bringing engagement-based teaching and learning to their classrooms and schools and communities—especially underserved communities where engagement is lacking. It is incumbent upon us to, at the very least, leave our next generations with the tools they'll need to address global challenges such as climate change, increasing wealth inequity, an aging world population, and more (we'd be especially smart to equip today's students with the skills they'll need to take care of us as we age!).<sup>13</sup> Because without changemaking, and without a significant investment in a future-friendly pedagogy of engagement, our children will be unprepared for the future they are facing, unprepared to solve the significant challenges we are leaving them, and unprepared to create a better, more equal, more just, world.

## ENDNOTES

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