

Book Review:
ENGAGING teens in their own learning: 8 Keys to Student Success (2008)
By Paul Vermette

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Introduction

When public education began in North America and Europe some 150 years ago, secondary schools were expected to serve as preparation for university.

Universities were training grounds for the professions and vocations such as the clergy, law, medicine, and later engineering. Few children were expected to attend high school, let alone graduate. This seemed fine for the largely agricultural and industrial societies of the day. There were lots of jobs for the boys and home life for the girls.

Those days have changed forever. As a result of many economic and social developments since the 1840s and 50s children do not move quickly into the adult work but are held in an increasingly long status period we call adolescence. The required knowledge and understandings for participating in a complex pluralistic information-loaded, globalized world were unimagined in yesterday's classrooms.

While there are volumes of research and pieces of punditry with advice for helping students, there have been few specifics to help teachers take the steps

to get there. We need more than the “cardiac method” of change in which is proclaimed, “We believe it in our hearts, so you do it.” (Green & Myers, 1990, 332). Furthermore, too much reform talk, in addition to leaving out teachers as agents of change at the classroom and school level, ignore the students: the very folks we are expending all this educational reform energy for. As doctors and clinical psychologists have known for decades, when in doubt ask the client.

So it was with these thoughts in mind that I approached *ENGAGING Teens in Their Own Learning: 8 Keys to Student Success* by Paul Vermette of Niagara University (Larchmont, NY: Eye On Education, 2008). The fact that he is a friend and colleague for more than 15 years could be both a positive and negative for this reviewer. The negative may be a lack of “objectivity” – that I may be lavish in my praise and soft on the faults. The positive is that because I know his work and the way he derives meaning, I can get behind the words on the page. Besides, a friend is someone whose faults you know, but like anyway.

Review

Teaching Teens is a book to work through and think about. It is not to be passively perused alone. Vermette offers a number of tools for faculty to do the “minds on” work, including:

- an introduction and preface noting why we need to read, think about and act on the ideas presented,
- the use of central questions to frame each section of the book and case studies to entice us (the first “E” in his ENGAGING process),

- putting his bias up front and challenging us to negotiate meaning (the first “N”) from both his perspective and the perspectives taken by the teachers featured in the case studies,
- the ENGAGING mnemonic itself: repeated and rephrased throughout so that it is never far from our thoughts— it “sticks”.

As I read and reread the book, worked through the little challenges and tests Vermette presented (chuckling when I tripped up) I thought some elements of the process were more important and also more fully developed than others. Among these were the importance of enticing students to work with students as they negotiate meaning from what they read, saw, heard, or did: the first two letters of the process. As I write this I am juggling work as a judge for a national history contest: the same one David Watkins won in 2007. The strong submissions seem to fall in line with the ENGAGING process, especially on these two components.

Throughout the book there are additional gems to make you stop and think.

Some of these include:

- the realization that Mrs. Realgood really knew her students and worked with that knowledge for their benefit (chapter one),
- the Pearl Harbor unit sequencing exercise can be a real window into the minds of teachers’ thinking as they work through unit and lesson planning (chapter two),
- the kind of Pop Quiz Mr. Reallygood gave (also in chapter two) that was not what I had expected,
- chapter four resonated strongly with me since I know two of the teachers highlighted and can attest to their quality; I hope it is clear that there is no one single or best way to create ENGAGING classrooms,
- the role of grading as a symbol and a powerful one too since it is not going to disappear in the foreseeable future,
- the frequent references to note-making (Vermette’s second “N”); this is relatively unknown or at least not heard in teacher conversations or workshop titles compared to cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, differentiating instruction, or understanding by design.

Teachers are usually too busy to read the research and ambivalent about how it connects to them: sounds like students and the curriculum, doesn't it? Chapter three does a nice job of summarizing and providing context for the pieces cited. I might have liked more of a critique on some pieces that take issue with the approach, or at least stress more the teacher as transmitter of information, though the criticism of such teaching is clear.

Vermette's 2-Step model of unit/lesson design is also clearly if briefly presented and complements similar models. Readers may need to consult his references for deeper understanding.

Grading is a tough issue. The advice and samples offered here became clearer to me as I read through the book. I think this section, reinforced the need for a group of teachers with a high level of trust to read together and work through some of the issues raised. For example O'Connor who is cited on several occasions (2002) would be opposed to bonus points based on extra work or improvement over previous grades. In Ontario we are experimenting with adjusting grades based, not on average but on a median or recent consistent performance. Grading is an emotional issue for teachers too.

The concluding sections in chapter four might have been sectioned off under "Appendix" or "Implementation tools".

The book is rich and requires, as noted earlier, a “minds on” approach before the “hands on” of teaching today’s teenagers. In teacher education I am familiar with many of the ideas presented. I shall add more for myself and for my teacher candidates on the two “Ns” in the process and see where this takes us and the teenagers entrusted to our care.

I trust that teachers and teacher educators who read this book will be as ENGAGED as am I. More importantly I hope we can work together to engage our students in the challenging, chaotic, yet rewarding, and enjoyable natural process we call learning.

References

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