Domain 3: Instruction

c. Engaging Students in Learning

The Framework for Teaching by Charlotte Danielson
Why is this an important component of effective teaching?

Student engagement in learning is the centerpiece of the framework for teaching; all other components contribute to it. When students are engaged in learning, they are not merely "busy," nor are they only "on task." Rather, they are intellectually active in learning important and challenging content. The critical distinction between a classroom in which students are compliant and busy and one in which they are engaged is that in the latter students are developing their understanding through what they do. That is, they are engaged in discussion, debate, answering "what if?" questions, discovering patterns, and the like. They may be selecting their work from a range of (teacher arranged) choices, and making important contributions to the intellectual life of the class. Such activities don't typically consume an entire lesson, but they are essential components of engagement.
A lesson in which students are engaged usually has a discernible structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end, with scaffolding provided by the teacher or by the activities themselves. Student tasks are organized to provide cognitive challenge, and students are encouraged to reflect on what they have done and what they have learned. That is, there is closure to the lesson, in which students derive important learning from their own actions. A critical question for an observer in determining the degree of student engagement is "What are the students being asked to do?" If the answer to that question is filling in blanks on a worksheet, or performing a rote procedure, they are unlikely to be cognitively engaged.

In observing a lesson, it is essential not only to watch the teacher, but also to pay close attention to the students and what they are doing. The best evidence for student engagement is what students are saying and doing as a consequence of what the teacher does, has done, or has planned.
This component may be broken down into four distinct and important elements. As you review these elements, think about what they might look like in practice in the classroom.

- **Activities and assignments**
  The activities and assignments are the centerpiece of student engagement, since they determine what it is that students are asked to do. Activities and assignments that promote learning are those that require student thinking, that emphasize depth over breadth, and that may allow students to exercise some choice.

- **Grouping of students**
  How students are grouped for instruction is one of the many decisions teachers make every day. There are many options; students of similar background and skill may be clustered together, or the more advanced students may be spread around into the different groups. Alternatively, a teacher might permit students to select their own groups, or they could be formed randomly. Whatever the arrangement, skilled teachers decide it purposefully.

**Note:** Grouping of students is also an element for 2c: Managing Classroom Procedures. In that component, however, the focus is on the procedures students have been taught for working independently of teacher supervision; this component, on the other hand, centers on the use of student groups to maximize student engagement in learning.
Instructional materials and resources
The instructional materials a teacher selects to use in the classroom can have an enormous impact on student experience. While some teachers are obliged to use a school or district's officially sanctioned materials, many teachers use these selectively or supplement them with others of their choosing that are better suited to engaging students in deep learning; for example, the use of primary source materials in social studies.

Structure and pacing
Neither adults nor students like to be either bored or rushed in completing a task. Keeping things moving, within a well-defined structure, is one of the marks of an experienced teacher. And since much of student learning results from their reflection on what they have done, a well-designed lesson includes time for reflection and closure.
Determining a level of performance for a component must be grounded in evidence found during an observation of a lesson. The indicators below may be used as a guide for looking for evidence of this component in a classroom.

- Activities aligned with the goals of the lesson
- Student enthusiasm, interest, thinking, problem-solving, etc.
- Learning tasks that require high-level student thinking and are aligned with lesson objectives
- Students are highly motivated to work on all tasks and are persistent even when the tasks are challenging
- Students actively "working," rather than watching while the teacher "works"
- Suitable pacing of the lesson: neither dragging nor rushed, with time for closure and student reflection
Relevant because...

- A student asks whether they might remain in their small groups to complete another section of the activity, rather than work independently. *This observation is evidence for grouping of students—one of the elements for the component.*

- Students are asked to formulate a hypothesis about what might happen if the American voting system allowed for the direct election of presidents. *This observation provides evidence of the type of activities and assignments—an element for the component. The evidence indicates the lesson’s use of robust materials and resources, both of which are critical to student learning.*
The teacher circulates during small-group or independent work, offering suggestions to groups of students. This observation is a demonstration of the lesson’s structure and pacing—one of the elements for the component. The lesson’s pacing is highly relevant to a student’s ability to engage with the learning material. When it is uneven, students can have difficulty learning.

Most students don’t have time to complete the assignment, but the teacher moves on in the lesson anyway. This observation is a demonstration of the lesson’s structure and pacing—one of the elements for the component. The lesson’s pacing is highly relevant to a student’s ability to engage with the learning material. When it is uneven, students can have difficulty learning.

A few students do not engage with others in the classroom, even when put together in small groups. This evidence is indicative of student interactions with other students, including both words and actions—an element for Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport.
Activity: Level of Performance

You will read four classroom observation descriptions. They are numbered so that we can reference them and in no way reflect their performance level. After each of the four description, jot down what performance level you would assign it and why.
1. Virtually all students are intellectually engaged in challenging content, through well-designed learning tasks and suitable scaffolding by the teacher. Learning tasks and activities are fully aligned with the instructional outcomes. In addition, there is evidence of some student initiation of inquiry and student contributions to the exploration of important content. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed to intellectually engage with and reflect upon their learning, and to consolidate their understanding. Students may have some choice in how they complete tasks and may serve as resources for one another.
What’s the Level of Performance?

2. The learning tasks and activities, materials, resources, instructional groups, and technology are poorly aligned with the instructional outcomes, or require only rote responses. The lesson has no clearly defined structure, or the pace of the lesson is too slow or rushed. Few students are intellectually engaged.
3. The learning tasks and activities are partially aligned with the instructional outcomes but require only minimal thinking by students, allowing most students to be passive or merely compliant. The lesson has a recognizable structure; however, the pacing of the lesson may not provide students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.
4. The learning tasks and activities are aligned with the instructional outcomes and are designed to challenge student thinking, resulting in active intellectual engagement by most students with important and challenging content, and with teacher scaffolding to support that engagement. The lesson has a clearly defined structure and the pacing of the lesson is appropriate, providing most students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.
Level of Performance Answers

1. Highly Effective (Rubric Level 4)
2. Ineffective (Rubric Level 1)
3. Partially Effective (Rubric Level 2)
4. Effective (Rubric Level 3)

Any surprises?
Level 3: Critical Attributes

- Most students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks have multiple correct responses or approaches and/or demand higher-order thinking.
- Students have some choice in how they complete learning tasks.
- There is a mix of different types of groupings, suitable to the lesson objectives.
- Materials and resources support the learning goals and require intellectual engagement, as appropriate.
- The pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed to be intellectually engaged.

Level 3: Evidence

- Students are asked to formulate a hypothesis about what might happen if the American voting system allowed for the direct election of presidents.
- Students are given a task to do independently, then to discuss with a table group, followed by a report-out from each table.
- There is a clear beginning, middle, and end to the lesson.
- The lesson is neither rushed nor does it drag.
- Five students (out of 27) are playing video games, texting, etc.
Level 3 Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert Benchmark A.... 3:07)
(MS: Insert High Rangefinder...6:49)
Level 2: Critical Attributes

- Some students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks are a mix of those requiring thinking and recall.
- Student engagement with the content is largely passive, learning primarily facts or procedures.
- Students have no choice in how they complete tasks.
- The teacher uses different instructional groupings; these are partially successful in achieving the lesson objectives.
- The materials and resources are partially aligned to the lesson objectives; only some of them demand student thinking.
- The pacing of the lesson is uneven; it is suitable in parts, but rushed or dragging in others.

Level 2: Evidence

- In three of the five small groups, students are figuring out an answer to the assigned problem.
- Students are asked to fill in a worksheet following an established procedure.
- There is a recognizable beginning, middle, and end to the lesson.
- The teacher lectures for 20 minutes, and provides 15 minutes for the students to write an essay; most students are able to complete it during this time.
Level 2 Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert Low Rangefinder…. 5:17)
(MS: Insert Benchmark B…5:11)
Level 1: Critical Attributes

- Few students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Learning tasks require only recall or have a single correct response or method.
- The materials used ask students only to perform rote tasks.
- Only one type of instructional group is used (whole group, small groups) even when variety would better serve the instructional purpose.
- Instructional materials used are unsuitable to the lesson and/or the students.
- The lesson drags or is rushed.

Level 1: Evidence

- Most students are playing video games during the lesson.
- Students are able to fill out the lesson worksheet by copying words from the board.
- The teacher lectures for 45 minutes.
- Most students don't have time to complete the assignment, but the teacher moves on in the lesson anyway.
Level 1: Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert Benchmark A… 3:58)
(MS: Insert Benchmark B… 3:12)
Level 4: Critical Attributes

In addition to the characteristics of a level of performance 3,

- Virtually all students are highly engaged in the lesson.
- Students take initiative to modify a learning task to make it more meaningful or relevant to their needs.
- Students suggest modifications to the grouping patterns used.
- Students have extensive choice in how they complete tasks.
- Students suggest modifications or additions to the materials being used.
- Students have an opportunity for reflection and closure on the lesson to consolidate their understanding.

Level 4: Evidence

- Students are asked to write an essay "in the style of Hemingway."
- A student asks whether they might remain in their small groups to complete another section of the activity, rather than work independently.
- Students identify or create their own learning materials.
- Students summarize their learning from the lesson.
Level 4: Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert Low Rangefinder...5:02)
(MS: Insert Benchmark A...4:01)
Discussion

- After reviewing the Performance Levels for Domain 3c: Engaging Students in Learning, do you think you could distinguish between them?
- Did the sample videos of each of the performance levels in this component help to provide clarity in what each of the performance levels looks like?
- Reflect on your classroom practices.... What would the performance level of your classroom on a typical day be as it relates to this component?
Remember...

Our performance goal is to LIVE in 3... and vacation in 4.
An insight I had as a result of today’s session is…

Concepts from this session that are most applicable to my teaching practice are…

A question I have related to today’s session is…