



Reconsidering the Rules of Engagement

A great deal of what I have learned about student engagement has come in the past year as I have watched my son, Luke, cross the two-year-old threshold and begin to take on the world in increasingly interested and interesting ways. I have come to understand what experts in the field have long told us: that engagement and creativity are natural dispositions from the earliest stages of life. It is the marriage of the two that allows us to negotiate meaning in new and powerful ways.

As I write this, Luke is working on opening and closing a front door lock. He is humming to himself as he turns the lock, slowly at first, then quickly, placing his hand in front of the steel bolt as it appears and disappears back into the door. A variety of objects, including Bear, a building block, and a plastic hammer, have been used to affect the process, but each time the bolt appears and disappears as expected.

Cute? As a first-time father, everything Luke does holds some degree of fascination for me but, as a student of teaching and learning, I can't help but think beyond these moments, trying to connect them to what happens in my classroom on a day-to-day-basis. I experienced a powerful 'aha' moment this past month while exploring concepts around systems and mechanical efficiency with my students. As a unit starter, my teacher candidates and I introduced students to the work of Rube Goldberg. We looked at several of his published cartoons, examined his procedural descriptions, and then invited students to design their own drawings based on Goldberg's style of using a very complicated 'machine' to accomplish a very simple task. Students were amused, slightly confused, and more than a little dissatisfied.

"We want to build our own machines," many demanded after researching a little about Rube Goldberg contraptions and seeing some examples on *YouTube*. The timing wasn't great; I was working hard to bring our school musical into its final weeks of production, and many of my students were directly involved in the production.

"OK," I said, "But we're going to have to make sure that this is well-planned and organized. With everything else going on, we don't have a lot of room for chaos." As it turns out, we did have a lot of room for chaos – chaos that led to moments of order, insight, frustration, and – in the end – some fascinating results.

The sound of marbles rattling through cardboard tubes and homemade tracks mixed with screams of delight and frustration: this was the sound of engagement. Students – eyes fixed on the various components of their machines, tongues slightly out in concentrated effort – literally spent hours working and reworking their ideas: this was the face of engagement. Chairs fixed to tabletops with mounds of masking tape, homemade gears suspended from ceiling tiles, and practically every piece of classroom real estate claimed by one design team or another: this was our theatre of engagement.

After all was said and done, I asked students to write about what they had experienced. Many expressed thoughts about how they went about building their machines, some of the frustrations they experienced along the way, and their fascination with the process. It was Mary, however, who helped me rewrite some of my own thinking about this type of problem-based learning. She elaborated on three 'strategies' that got her group to move effectively through the process. I found her words simple, somewhat intuitive, but profoundly usable:

Strategy One: Stop and Stare. If someone were to walk in on the three of us, they would have thought it to be the most awkward silence ever, but we each had ideas bouncing around in our heads, like 'how can we connect this to that?' All it took was for one of us to stop and stare – either at the machine or somewhere else – to have a brain blast.

Strategy Two: Just do it. Sometimes too much thought would draw away from the 'sparkle' of the idea. It was just something automatic to do it. When we just did it, the whole piece flowed together.

Strategy Three: FREESTYLE! Play around. There was always something that didn't work during the making, but we played around to add to it or perfect it. We had a lot of things to play with anyways, and as someone was in the process of strategy one, they would point to the one playing with a toy car and proclaim, "We can literally use that!"

Mary's final words: "I heard Sir Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion: 'An object at rest tends to stay at rest, and an object in motion tends to stay in motion.' Although right now, the machine is at rest, the inspiration from the experience will live on in... in motion."

Engagement? You bet, but according to their rules, not mine! **I**

STEPHEN HURLEY has been involved in public education for 25 years, as a classroom teacher, as a curriculum consultant, and in teacher education at OISE/UT. Currently he is working on the development of an arts-based interdisciplinary model of classroom practice at Cardinal Newman Elementary School in Brampton, Ontario. Stephen can be reached at stephen.hurley@sympatico.ca

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The Editor, *Education Canada*
Canadian Education Association
300-317 Adelaide Street West
Toronto ON M5V 1P9
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Rédaction, *Education Canada*
Association canadienne d'éducation
317 rue Adelaide Ouest, Bureau 300
Toronto (ON) M5V 1P9
ou par courriel à
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