Dan Sprange and Geoff Munns present well-researched and proven means to engender deep engagement in your classroom...

'Stop that immediately and get back to your work'

Picture a young student looking out a classroom window. A computer, books and pens are scattered around the desk. Hovering nearby, the teacher asks, 'What are you doing?' The student coolly answers, 'Thinking.' And then comes the punch line. 'Stop that immediately and get back to your work.' At one level this scene from an educational cartoon appears to be taking a gentle dig at both teachers and students caught in the 'game' of what counts in classrooms. At a deeper level, it asks questions around the importance and impact of classroom conversations.

It is this second level that is the focus of this article. The article is both theoretically and practically informed. First, it draws on research into student engagement undertaken in the Fair Go Program. Secondly, it utilises the Fair Go student engagement framework to analyse and describe observed classroom interactions across a number of school contexts in low SES schools in Sydney.

Teacher-student interactions

If we return to the cartoon and interrogate its punch line from both teacher and student positions, what questions about classroom discourse might be asked?

Is thinking not valued in this classroom?
Is important classroom work mainly signified by students just doing 'stuff'?
What messages are both being given by the teacher and received by the students?
How will students respond to these messages in their current and future educational lives?

The central argument of this article is that these and similar questions are critical to the project of student engagement. All classrooms are characterised by a complex set of teacher-student interactions (Cazden, 2001). Research in the Fair Go Program (Munns, Sawyer & Cole, 2013) has shown that skilled teachers, who are committed to engaging all their learners, interpret and adjust these interactions to create environments that give students the capacity to fit in, believe in themselves and succeed as learners. These teachers understand that every classroom interaction has the potential to deliver a message that will orientate students towards, or away from, engagement and learning success. They stack their classrooms with messages that engage and deliver student connection to school.

Classrooms, student engagement and messages

That classrooms operate as powerful message systems (see, Bernstein, 1996) that can convince students that school and education can 'work' for them (or not), is an important aspect of the Fair Go research into student engagement in low SES communities. Put briefly, this research argues that thoughtfully and purposefully planned learning experiences at high cognitive, high affective and high operative levels, together with a carefully crafted 'insider' learning environment, can create pedagogical spaces in which students receive engaging messages. The research is also very mindful that the research literature shows significant numbers of low SES students soon learn in their classrooms that they are lacking in ability, have no voice, are not valued and are compelled either to accept or to struggle over the classroom spaces (Munns, 2007; Munns & Sawyer, 2013).

[i] The Fair Go position is that classroom messages are organised into five 'discourses of power': knowledge, ability, control, place and voice

What does engagement sound like?

This article now considers what these five messages look and sound like at either 'disengaging' or 'engaging' levels. It draws on data first gathered during case study research into 'exemplary' engaging teachers, and, second, from extensive classroom observations undertaken while the first-named writer was a co-researching teacher (2008-2010), an Assistant Principal, a research mentor in the Fair Go research (2012-2014) and a DEC Teacher Mentor. These various positions provided important and rare opportunities to regularly witness and contribute to student learning across learning spaces, within and between schools. Furthermore, these opportunities provided access to a wide range of over 50 classrooms, and this offered insights into a clearer understanding of the nature of classroom interactions. In particular, observations revealed what classroom interactions commonly prevail, and these allowed an informed speculation about which words, routines and structures combine to deliver messages of engagement to students across multiple classrooms and school settings.

What follows are five tables across each of the discourses of power. The examples described in the tables do not provide messages that might be seen as especially engaging or disengaging when viewed in isolation. However, when combined with other messages over time, our suggestion here is that they build a complex web of interactions that have the potential to create disengaging or engaging learning environments.

Our combined theoretical, empirical and practical experiences show that some teachers are acutely aware of this message economy, and so are able to tune the messages of their learning spaces in ways that facilitate heightened levels of engagement. These teachers demonstrate particular sensitivity to students who are prone to disengagement and individualise messages to ensure all students (including those most vulnerable) receive engaging messages around knowledge, ability, control, place and voice on a daily basis.

Knowledge

The key pedagogical question

'What counts as knowledge in the classroom and which students have access to useful knowledge that connects with their lives and fosters academic development?'

Strategies for Implementation

- Students' local knowledge and experiences are used and valued as a contribution to everyone's knowledge and learning
- Frequent and serious conversations to show how learning has real life and immediate application

Disengaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
• Teacher **dispenses knowledge** and students respond for teacher judgement.	[teacher] "...*listen and I will tell you whether you are correct...*"
• Teacher is **sole arbiter** of what constitutes important knowledge.	[teacher] "...*that is the wrong answer...*"
• Knowledge is **narrowly defined**, decontextualised and developed inflexibly.	[teacher] "...*I told you this yesterday...*"
• Individual circumstances allow some students to have easy access to curriculum content while others are inadvertently excluded making them **passive witnesses to knowledge**.	[teacher] "...*just do what you think and I will give you the answers when I mark it...*"
• Discussions are dominated by a cycle of **winning information** from the teacher.	[teacher] "...*we are not doing that now, we did measurement last week...*" [teacher to another teacher] "...*I have done this with them for five weeks and that group will never get it...*"
• Student assessment is disconnected and isolated from authentic learning.	

Engaging messages

Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
Curriculum ideas are **experienced by all students** most of the time. • **Discussions** allow varied contributions and ideas to be entertained before the class arrives at the best answer, understanding or solution. • Ideas are developed together with **teacher as co-learner.** • All students have **access to powerful contextualised knowledge.** • Student learning is **connected to larger purposeful ideas**. • **Assessment is built into each learning sequence** and logically captures each students place on their learning journey (Limited use of de-contextualised summative assessment.	[teacher] *"...the first bit of your answer sounds OK, can anyone else help us improve it..."* [teacher] *"...can we trust this result? What else do we need to think about?..."* [teacher] *"..mmm interesting, I am not sure...tell me why you think you are correct..."* [teacher] *"...maybe we can see what the other group has come up with?..."* [teacher] *"...when I read this text I thought about why the author described the house in that way and realised those words made it feel haunted. I started feeling worried for the characters in the story. How did it make you feel..."*

Key Message:

'Curriculum knowledge becomes student knowledge when it is made accessible, contextualised and students have a hand in defining it'

Ability

The key pedagogical question

'Which students feel they have the ability to complete tasks of high intellectual quality and gain competence as a result of teaching?'

Strategies for implementation

- tasks are positive and allow all students to demonstrate what they know and can do but also challenge them to learn more
- students are encouraged and helped to see the connections between working well, thinking hard and feeling good

Disengaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
- Teacher has **fixed view** of ability and low expectations of some students. - Students freely **articulate negative judgement** on the ability of others and themselves. **Busy work** rather than differentiated variations on whole class activities are given to lower achieving students. - Some students are constantly being asked to work **beyond their ZPD** [Zone of Proximal Development – the scope of what a learner might achieve with guidance] and are therefore considered incapable of learning.	[teacher] *"...I have already explained this to you 3 times, how many more times do I have to explain it?..."* [teacher] *"…how many times do I have to go through this with you?"* [student] *"...I can't do it, I can't even read..."* [student] *"…I am so bad at this…"* [teacher] *"…just colour in the picture and we will go through the answers later…"* [student about another student] *"...she can't do it, she always gets it wrong..."* [teacher to another teacher] *"…I have done this with them for five weeks and that group will never get it…"*

Engaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
• Teacher seizes every opportunity to **showcase the emerging understanding** of students with vulnerable views of their ability.	[teacher] *"…that is an extraordinary insight about that character, I think I might have to call mum tonight and tell her all about it…"*
• **Regular feedback** given about progress.	[teacher to parent in phone call] *"…he was having trouble doing subtraction with trading, however this week it just clicked and he can do it. Please tell him that you and I are impressed with the progress he has made. He is racing ahead…"*
• Growth and **commitment to learning is prioritised** over outright achievement.	
• Growth and learning commitment is acknowledged with **high emotion** by the teacher.	
• Differentiated activities allow every student to work in their ZPD, be part of whole class learning and **accomplish something everyday**.	[teacher] *"…that is a clever bit of thinking, do you mind if I share what you just said with the rest of the class…"* [student] *"...I can't do it, I can't even read..."* [teacher] *"…Yes you can. I have seen you do a similar one before. How could we start it?...[teacher scaffolds]"*
• Language of **achievement level**, rather than ability, is used by teacher when discussing students.	
• Students have **recognisable learning aspirations**. • Student grouping used to ensure more **consistent success**.	[teacher] *"…it does not matter if you cannot spell that word right now, you have an amazing idea which you need to write down so you can share it with others…"*

Key Message:

'It is easy to believe in your ability to learn when you are given regular opportunities to succeed, those around you witness your success and your teacher believes in you'

Control [ii]

Key pedagogical question:

'Who is in control of the teaching space in the classroom shared between the teacher and the learners?'

Strategies for implementation

- struggles over student behaviour are let go by teachers
- students get chances to think about, discuss and look after their own behaviour

Disengaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
- A constant **fight for control** between teacher and some students. - Constant use of teacher **power to gain compliance** with tasks and school routines. - Focus on **compliance with routines** and tasks rather than learning response. - Regular use of learning time to emphasise **teacher student hierarchy.** - Classroom time is taken up with **excessive management talk.** **Procedural engagement** valued over actual student learning.	[teacher] *"...I don't care, that is the way it has to be done and you will do it now..."* [teacher] *"...if you don't do as I say..."* [teacher] *"...well done Ali you are sitting up the straightest and have the neatest desk..."* [teacher] *"...that is not what I asked you to do....you will do it again until it is correct..."* [teacher] *"...I have told you three times and I am still waiting for you to fold your arms..."*

Engaging messages Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
- **Shared social space** with learning focussed student/teacher talk. - 4:1 **Balance between acknowledgement of achievement and correction** of behaviour (this ratio may be different in the first 4 weeks of T1 while routines are being established). - **Flexible approach** to how tasks are completed to ensure learning occurs. - A desire for student **learning response trumps compliance** with pre-determined idea of how task should work. - Teacher uses **engaging curriculum** rather than control to motivate students. - **Low emotion** and non-verbal devices used for corrective instruction. - **Creative orientation** back to learning rather than stopping learning to exercise teacher control.	[teacher] *"...doing it that way may not work but have a go and tell me what you find out..."* [Selective attending, ignoring off task behaviour then teacher immediately acknowledges pro-learning behaviour] *"...look I think David has noticed something important..."* [Low emotion correction of behaviour with non-verbal devices then as soon as student demonstrates they are making progress with task (however small) high emotion teacher acknowledgement about learning is given] *"...excellent start to your topic sentence Fatima maybe we can read yours out when you are done..."* [teacher acknowledges student next to student who is not learning] *"...thank you Houda you are looking at me so I know you are listening..."*

Key Message:

'Constant exercising of teacher power distances some students from school, learning and the curriculum'

Place

Key pedagogical question:

'Which students are valued as individuals and as learners, on what bases, and to what group and individual effect?'

Strategies for implementation

- within the full range of learning activities students are helped to make constructive connections with their own real world
- continuous and positive affirmation about the importance of all learners within their own community

Disengaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
• **One size** fits all approach.	[student about other student] *"...he is always naughty and he never does his work..."*
• Class has unintentional **social divide** between 'learners' and 'non-learners'.	[teacher] *"...you have not done any work again..."*
• '**Non-learners**' aspire to unproductive positions (places) within the classroom.	[teacher] *"…why do you always have to be the class clown?..."*
• 'Non-learners' constantly seek the attention of teacher and peers to establish and maintain the **unproductive position** they have identified for themselves.	[teacher] *"…you need to learn what respect is…"* [teacher] *"… you can do this sheet while we finish this activity …"*
• Identified 'learners' unintentionally allowed to contribute to the belief that the 'non-learners' cannot learn.	[teacher] *"…you never have a pencil and should have organised that before you came to school …"*
• Some students **not proud** of their school, where they live or their place in the classroom.	[teacher] *"…you can just go on the computer while we do this…"* [teacher] *" … if you keep this up you'll never get out of this place"*

Engaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
• All students see themselves as learners and take **ownership of knowledge**.	[teacher] *"…James you have been a great leader for your group, the class needs your group to show us how you worked that out…"*
• Students are proud of their school and class and can see themselves as **fitting into their learning community.**	[teacher] *"…remember last week you were very unsure about how to work it out, but this morning you just described the number pattern perfectly…you have got it. Well done…"*
• Despite different achievement levels the teacher finds ways to ensure **all students contribute** to classroom learning.	[teacher] *"…Yousef's group has given us a vital clue! Where would we be without your information Yousef?..."*
Every student has **examples of their learning** on the wall. • Students view **learning as an essential part of life**.	[teacher] *"…what would we do without your ideas?..."*

Key Message:

'Every student needs to see themself as a learner and if a social space is not made for them in their learning community they will attempt to define themselves in other less productive ways'

Voice

Key pedagogical question:

'Whose voices are given credence within the teaching spaces (content, ways of learning, assessment of learning) in the classroom?'

Strategies for implementation

- students are given lots of time, opportunities and tools to reflect on, assess and drive classroom learning
- classroom talk becomes more like a series of conversations between students, their teacher and each other

Disengaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
- Classroom **discourse dominated** by high achieving students and teacher. - Only immediately **correct ideas** can be entertained in discussions. - Excessive pursuit of the correct answer over student connection to knowledge. - Some students are not prepared to share their ideas about what is being learnt because of fear of failure and **excessive teacher judgment**. - Teacher is **sole arbiter** of what is correct and understanding is not regularly debated.	[teacher] *"…not the correct answer…"* [teacher] *"…come on, this is not hard. I don't know why people don't have their hands up…"* [teacher] *"…No. How could that be correct? You just need to think harder?..."* [teacher] *"…the same hands keep going up, why is it always the same people?..."* [teacher] *"…I have corrected your work and written the answers in red…"*

Engaging messages	
Classroom environment characterised by:	Can sound like:
- Students have something to say about their understanding and are more **prone to spontaneous substantive discussion** about learning and their knowledge. - Students express ideas **without fear** of failure or immediate teacher judgement. **Balance** between teacher and student talk. - Opportunities for student self reflection and **self-assessment**. - All students have regular opportunities to discuss **emerging ideas** and use teacher and peers in reciprocal processes to assess their learning progress. - Teacher uses a variety of **questioning techniques** to promote student discussion.	[teacher] *"…We have three different answers for that question. Which one is best and why?..."* [teacher] *"…Okay you think group one explained it best? Can you tell them what they did really well and what they could improve on…"* [teacher] *"…tell me what operation you used first and why…"* [teacher] *"…can you explain why you did it that way?..."* [student] *"…I am not completely sure but this is how I worked it out…"* [teacher] *"…OK he said the answer is in the middle, is there anyone who can add to that or tell us the next step?..."* [teacher] *"…tell us why you know you are correct…"* [teacher] *" … how do we know? Can we trust that? How can we be sure?*

Key Message:

'It is hard to develop and reflect on your own ideas if you don't believe your peers think they are valid and your teacher regularly tells you that you have the wrong understanding'

Final words

The research underpinning this article draws attention to classrooms as complex discursive spaces, and stresses that the pathways to student engagement invariably involve long journeys through curricular, pedagogical and relational territories. The article has highlighted one critical aspect of this long journey, and, in so doing, hopefully invites teachers to consider what 'sounds like engagement' in their own classrooms.

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[i] See, Munns et al, 2013, for a detailed report on the Fair Go Program of research and the student engagement framework.

[ii] We do not want to convey a message that a classroom full of model students can be easily delivered. However, the Fair Go research has uncovered valuable insights into teaching in some very challenging contexts (for example, housing estates, inner urban multicultural suburbs and regional and remote schools serving predominantly Indigenous communities. In these contexts, the focus on learning is enmeshed with measured and consistent strategies designed to support learners as they develop more positive relationships with education, their school and their classroom. See, Munns and Sawyer, 2013, for a summary of these approaches at personal, whole class and individual support levels.