

5 Common Misconceptions of the Engage! Learning Model

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1. The teacher doesn't teach in a learning model.

On the contrary, the teacher is the most vital aspect of the learning model. Unlike a whole-group, direct-teach classroom where it might be argued that the teacher (as the conveyor of information) could be replaced by a virtual or online solution, in the Engage Learning Model, the teacher role is crucial; there is no substitute for a responsive, highly qualified teacher who understands the standards and the content and can model the soft skills every day. The teacher designs standards-based, challenging, relevant learning experiences. The teacher reinforces the protocols and models the communication skills, collaboration skills, creativity, and professional ethics that students need to acquire for college and career readiness. The teacher asks questions to guide student thinking and problem-solving in response to observed needs. The teacher provides small group workshops to teach students information essential to the challenge. The teacher evaluates student mastery of the standards on a daily basis and provides valuable feedback. The teacher models and teaches the critical thinking necessary to properly critique student's research questions, resources, project plans, solutions and processes. Finally, the teacher is the leader of the classroom and creates the systems and the environment that support a successful learning process.

2. The students get a group grade.

While this may be true in some project-based learning models, the Engage! Learning Model is based on individual mastery of the standards. Period. Teachers are trained to both formatively and summatively assess individual student mastery of the standards from day one through the end of every unit. Prior to a unit, students are pre-assessed to determine where each student has individual needs relating to the standards for mastery for this unit. Once the unit is launched, the five Engage! protocols are designed to support that ongoing assessment process and grades are based on student mastery of those standards through evidence in each of the steps of the protocols. For most units, individual student mastery of the standards would already be established prior to creation of a product. If the product is a group effort, a grade for that product or part of that product may be the same, but this grade would only be appropriate if the product demonstrated individual student mastery of the standards for each of the group members. Besides teacher observation, workshops, and practice materials that students complete, teachers provide progress checks throughout a unit to determine individual student mastery of the standards for that unit.

3. One student does all the work.

Once again, this may be true with doing "projects" in some classrooms, but the Engage! Learning Model has structured protocols for teaming, conflict resolution, and interventions when one or more group members are not doing their "part" of the task list. The idea of collaboration is to divide and conquer so that the work is done efficiently and to learn to interact in a productive way with people we may not choose to work with voluntarily (sound familiar?). However, clearly, productive collaboration is not automatic just because students' desks are turned toward each other. In fact, this skill is one that is very highly prized by employers and reported as rare in employees. (See "Are They Ready to Work, 2006 report or Forbes 2013 "10 Skills Employers Most Want in 20-something Employees.) ELM provides a clear structure for teachers and students to follow as they learn how to collaborate productively. Recently, a high school student in Corpus Christi told her class, "Y'all need to start paying attention to all this collaboration stuff. I got fired this weekend from my job because I can't get along with others." In ELM, students can get fired from a group after appropriate interventions and have to complete the unit alone..

4. PBL is doing projects.

PBL may be about doing projects, but the Engage! Learning Model is not about "doing projects"...it is a rigorous learning model. In ELM, students often complain of how much more the model requires of them in terms of critical thinking. One junior high student in an ELM school recently asked his teacher if he could go back to WBL (worksheet-based learning) because he was "having to think too hard" this way. In ELM, teachers design a learning experience based on a real problem (not hypothetical) in the local or global community. They collaborate with business and community leaders who challenge students to assist in solving the problem. Students collaborate to learn the standards as they research and provide solutions to the problem. Sometimes, the problem requires a product as part of the solution. However, the product is a result of a process of learning the standards and applying the knowledge and skills gained in that process to a tangible

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solution. It is not something that is assigned at the end of a unit. Teachers do not teach all the content in isolation and then give students a project to extend the learning. The challenge is given at the beginning and provides the catalyst for learning the knowledge and skills from the teacher and other resources vetted by the teacher that are aligned to the standards as students conduct research to inform their solutions. All learning is in context so that transfer of knowledge and skills is seamless.

5. The model doesn't work for math.

This model is a great way for students to learn any content or skill that has relevance in the world. If the content or skill does not have relevance in the world, why would we waste time teaching or learning it? In fact, the most common reason students do not do well in a subject is that they do not understand the relevance, and the Engage! Learning Model makes the application explicit. Therefore, it is crucial that courses where students find challenging to apply and transfer the knowledge and skills, like math, be taught this way if we want students to understand, acquire the skills and be able to retain the knowledge and skills after the test. Does that mean that math in the Engage Learning Model is only “fluff” and that students do not master the standards? Of course, that is not the case. See some of our data here. In fact, students are required to master the standards at the exact level of depth and complexity required in the standards (TEKS) which is sometimes only possible to demonstrate in a real situation like responding to the challenges in the Engage! Learning Model.

