

## **Applying the ENGAGING Framework in Constructivist Classrooms: Interviews with Master Educators – Part II**

### **An Interview with Cindy Kline Middle School Spanish Teacher, Niagara Falls, NY**

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[Editor's Note: This is the second in a set of articles about ways in which master teachers apply the constructivist framework described by author Paul Vermette (2009) in his book, *ENGAGING teens in their own learning: 8 Keys to Student Success*. The authors are graduates of Niagara University's teacher education program, which employs constructivism as its theoretical foundation. They are now second year math educators in the Western New York area. *JPACTe* co-editor James Shuman of St. Lawrence University provided editorial assistance in finalizing the article. Further articles describing how other master teachers apply the framework will appear in subsequent issues of *JPACTe*.]

#### **Abstract**

The authors describe the work of Cindy Kline, a middle school Spanish teacher in Niagara Falls, NY. The authors use Vermette's (2009) "ENGAGING framework" as the framework to analyze Kline's constructivist teaching practices for cognitive and affective learning. The authors focus on three of Vermette's eight factors in the framework and demonstrate ways in which Kline's practice aligns not only with them but also with SEL, the social and emotional competencies published by the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2009).

"Let them play at learning"

– Cindy Kline, St. Dominic Savio Middle School, Niagara Falls, NY

#### **Introduction**

As in the second article of this series, Vermette's (2009) ENGAGING constructivist framework for effective instruction will be used to analyze the practices of a master teacher in middle school, Cindy Kline of St. Dominic Savio

Middle School in Niagara Falls, NY. To systematically examine the cognitive and affective instructional strategies that make Kline's work so effective in the classroom, we turn again to Vermette's (2009) ENGAGING framework to provide us with a common conceptual language.

In his book, *ENGAGING teens in their own learning: 8 Keys to Student Success*), Dr. Paul J. Vermette sets forth a framework of teaching meant to provide teachers with a coherent structure for engaging today's heterogeneous population with powerful and meaningful classroom learning experiences.

Vermette provides eight fundamental components (the ENGAGING framework), as a synthesis of his work in promoting student motivation and achievement in the classroom. These components include:

**E**ntice effort and build community  
**N**egotiate meaning  
**G**roup collaboratively  
**A**ctive learning and authentic assessment  
**G**raphic organizers  
**I**ntelligence interventions  
**N**ote-making  
**G**rade wisely

In Kline's case, we consider three guiding questions central to her work vis-à-vis Vermette's framework:

- *How can the ENGAGING framework be used in middle-level instruction? (Active Learning)*
- *How can the SEL framework (2009) for social and emotional development be applied to ENGAGING instruction? (Entice Effort and Build Community)*
- *How does Kline's approach to grading compare with Vermette's approach to "Grade Wisely?"*

## Teaching Spanish with “Active Learning” in Middle School

Cindy Kline is a Spanish teacher at St. Dominic Savio Middle school, a private Catholic institution in Niagara Falls, New York. She holds a B. S. degree in Business and a M. Ed. degree in education. In addition to teaching Spanish to every student in the school, grades 6, 7, and 8, she is also committed to equipping her students with the personal and social skills necessary to succeed in life. She has made social-emotional learning an integral part of her classroom objectives. After leaving a successful career in the business world, Kline now prepares students to not only speak Spanish but to thrive as adults in the global economy. She is an advocate for social-emotional learning and utilizes the ENGAGING factors as she works both with her students' cognitive and affective domains, which she calls her “dual objective.”

While learning a foreign language can be a daunting task for anyone, Senora Kline states that it is her job to make the goal of speaking, writing, reading and understanding Spanish attainable for all students. When asked how she gets her middle school kids to invest their energies and emotions (Wasserman, 2007) into trying to learn a new language, without hesitation she replied that she creates learning experiences that allow her students to “play at learning.” She fondly recalled the brightly decorated Christmas ornaments her students created, the piñatas they constructed and the *cascarones* (a Spanish tradition) they painted. Not only does this make Spanish class more fun, but she also provides her students with a memorable experience upon which to reflect as they develop

their own individualized understanding of the important concepts she teaches them. She tries to build every main concept around a hands-on project, as she integrates speaking, listening, reading and writing into every activity.

Kline is also quick to point out that just because students' projects are "hands-on" does not guarantee that deep and meaningful thinking and learning is taking place, and thus she intentionally scaffolds and assesses each learning experience in a way that fosters not only assimilation of new ideas but the subsequent transfer of those concepts to other areas of foreign language. Thus Senora Kline's approach aligns with Vermette's (2009) comparison between hands-on learning and minds-on learning, in that in order for learning in her class to be meaningful (and thus worthy of student effort), it must be both:

- (1) "Hands- On" – The students are actually *doing something* (e.g., explaining the steps to verb conjugation to a peer, researching Spanish traditions, making *cascarones*, etc.) to construct meaning and acquire understanding.
- (2) "Minds-On" – The activities must enable students to focus on "essential understandings" and core concepts. Thus students must ask and seek the answers to meaningful questions (e.g., "How are –ir, -ar and –er verbs alike and different?" "How are Spanish holiday traditions different from American traditions?" "How is the Mexican *cascarones* custom like a tradition in your family?") that will enhance their knowledge base

and develop a transferable working understanding of essential concepts.

When viewed through the lens of the ENGAGING framework, Kline's varied use of instructional strategies, practices, and ideas promotes the ENGAGING factor of active learning. Students are expected (and given opportunities) to create their own personal understandings of the essential concepts, fostering schema change in ways that are both visual and audible. It is important to highlight that most of the activities in Kline's classes are carried out in cooperative learning settings, in which groups of students must work together in order to complete their tasks. While there is a modicum of individual work in her Spanish classes, much of the individual work is connected to a larger cooperative learning project in which each student plays an integral role.

**Kline's "Dual Objective"**  
***How can the CASEL "Five Core Social and Emotional Competencies" be applied to ENGAGING instruction?***

Often in her teaching, Kline asks the questions, "How does this make you feel?" "How might others understand this situation?" or "How did you help your teammates make sense of the information?" Questions like these are at the core of her "dual objective" approach to teaching and learning, in which she has infused her Spanish activities with opportunities to develop students' socio-emotional as well as their cognitive abilities. In Kline's class, fifty percent of her students' overall mark for each grading quarter comes from their demonstration of the SEL social and emotional competencies (CASEL, 2009), as described in

Table 1. This framework was developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, an organization founded in 1994 to promote the advancement of research based social-emotional learning in K-12 schools.

**Table 1.**  
**Five Core Social and Emotional Competencies**  
**(CASEL, 2009)**

- (1) Self Awareness: The ability to accurately assess personal feelings, interests, values and strengths.
- (2) Self Management: The ability to handle one's emotions in productive ways. This includes handling stress, persevering through obstacles and expressing emotions appropriately.
- (3) Social Awareness: The ability to empathize with others and appreciate others' similarities and differences.
- (4) Relationship Skills: The ability to create and maintain appropriate relationships, resolve conflict and resist peer pressure.
- (5) Responsible decision-making: The ability to make appropriate ethical decisions that consider and respect others and promote the well-being of school and community.

Kline holds her students accountable for developing these competencies in each of her Spanish classes. (Discussion of this accountability process is discussed in the next section of this article). Through her extensive use of cooperative learning structures, she provides her students with the opportunity to display and practice these affective behaviors, which she asserts will make them more successful working adults in the future. It is important to point out that competencies such as social awareness and relationship skills cannot be addressed (or assessed) in environments where students do not interact.

Learners copying notes from the board or completing worksheets passively cannot grow social-emotionally, since those individuals are never given the chance to practice or get feedback on these competencies. Thus, when Kline discusses the development of her students' social-emotional skills, she assumes a collaborative classroom.

In terms of the ENGAGING factor, Kline's teaching of social-emotional skills is an example of "enticing effort and building community." As Vermette (2009) describes, having students work together in a safe environment almost always helps strengthen classroom community, mutual respect, and trust among diverse learners. However that community must have a set of clearly defined "norms" for social and personal behaviors, "norms" that all students not only "buy into" but also utilize daily. With the ultimate goal of internalizing these five core competencies (and transferring to the students' "real lives"), Kline's instructional strategies help to develop mutual respect in the classroom, with which meaningful life-long learning can take place.

**Grading**  
***How does Kline's approach to grading compare with Vermette's approach to "Grading Wisely?"***

One of the most unique aspects of Kline's application of the ENGAGING framework in her classroom is her "process/product" grading scheme. She grades her students based not only upon their individual contribution to their group interaction and group products, but also by their process of completing the

assignments (i.e., their affective contributions) through a series of SEL rubrics, checklists, reflections and observations ( anecdotal records). (Vermette and Kline, 2008) Her students use a rubric based partly on the CASEL Competence Framework, both to evaluate themselves and each other and also to provide Kline with feedback as to the effectiveness of their teammates. The rubric is factored into Kline’s grading plan for each of her Spanish classes. Her SEL rubric is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2  
Evaluation Rubric  
(Factors devoted to Emotional Competence...)**

Names of the students in the group	My name	<u>Student</u> <u>2</u>	<u>Student</u> <u>3</u>	<u>Etc.</u>
Scale: 5 = always; 4 = usually; 3 = sometimes; 2 = rarely; 1 = does not display				
<b>Desirable Behaviors</b>				
1. Encouraged others to offer ideas, give feedback and. Participate				
2. Handled conflict in approved ways				
3. Was prepared and kept focused and on task				
4. Interacted with patience, tolerance, respect and caring				
5. Made others feel like they belonged to the team				
6. Helped others have fun, and/ or enjoy the teamwork				
7. Provided contributions to the final form of the product				

It is important to point out that the rubric in Table 1 (above) presents only those dimensions Kline uses in grading for social-emotional learning that students demonstrate in group work and projects in the classroom. She uses other rubrics

for grading the students' cognitive-academic learning in her Spanish classes. Clearly, there are challenges in mixing social-emotional learning into grading schemes. Kline's approach presents one approach to this challenge.

According to Vermette (2009), grading wisely means that grading motivates and encourages learners to take risks and gain feedback from learning experiences. Grading is not a means by which student deficiencies are highlighted or expectations are minimized. Thus with Kline's incorporation of social-emotional "grading", students (who are expected to grow in terms of self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making) are provided criteria by which to measure their own growth. As Vermette states, "grades should allow every student a chance to experience success on a regular basis" (p. 48). With Kline's model even students who struggle with Spanish can grow (and get points for growing) into young adults.

### **Summary**

Careful examination of Cindy Kline's practices in light of Vermette's ENGAGING framework provides insights into three of the framework's components: "Entice Effort and Build Community", "Active Learning" and "Grade Wisely." Kline has been particularly thoughtful in developing these components for middle-level students in her Spanish classes by focusing on her "dual objective" of simultaneous cognitive and affective development through constructivist practices. By developing activities and grading practices to align with the

CASEL (2009) Core Social and Emotional Competencies, her work is doubly valuable in helping the success and achievement of middle-level learners.

### References

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