Engaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher. As leaders and facilitators, teachers must discover what the students know and what they need to know. This discovery happens only if teachers are willing to engage students beyond a surface level. As teachers, we can create a climate for optimal learning if we understand the level of emotional awareness and emotional intelligence in the classroom. That means we need to take time to assess who we are teaching. When I first began work in the classroom, like many teachers I was most concerned, if not a bit obsessed, with whether or not a substantive amount of information and assigned material was covered. To make sure we had time in the classroom to cover the material that I believed really mattered, I did not take the time to ask students to introduce themselves or to share a bit of information about where they were coming from and what their hopes
and dreams might be. I noticed, though, that when I did make time for everyone to get acquainted, the classroom energy was more positive and more conducive to learning.

Knowing all that I know now after more than thirty years in classrooms, I do not begin to teach in any setting without first laying the foundation for building community in the classroom. To do this it is essential that teacher and students take time to get to know one another. That process can begin by simply hearing each person’s voice as they state their name. When I first encountered Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh I was awed by his insistence that when a student is in the presence of a powerful, insightful teacher much can be learned even before words are spoken. He explains: “The Chinese say, ‘When a sage is born, the water in the river and in the plants and trees on the mountains nearby became clearer and more green.’” Even though Thay (Nhat Hanh) is speaking about a spiritual teacher, those of us who have been in classrooms with incredible professors know that their presence illuminates.

When we see the classroom as a place where teacher and students can share their “inner light” then we have a way to glimpse who we are and how we might learn together. I like to engage the minds and hearts of students by doing simple writing exercises, sentence completions. We might all write a spontaneous paragraph beginning with a phrase like “my most courageous moment happened when….” Or we might bring a small object to class and all write a short paragraph about its value and importance. Reading these short paragraphs aloud to one another, we have the opportunity to see and hear each unique voice. Most professors know what it is like to sit in a classroom of twenty or more students, where you wish for scintillating dialogue and only the same two or three students talk. Writing and reading paragraphs together acknowledges the power of each student’s voice and creates the space for everyone to speak when they have meaningful comments to make.

I never ask students to do an in class writing assignment that I
am not willing to do. My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame. When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks. Engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation because it is the movement of ideas, exchanged by everyone, that forges a meaningful working relationship between everyone in the classroom. This process helps establish the integrity of the teacher, while simultaneously encouraging students to work with integrity.

The root meaning of the word “integrity” is wholeness. Hence, engaged pedagogy makes the classroom a place where wholeness is welcomed and students can be honest, even radically open. They can name their fears, voice their resistance to thinking, speak out, and they can also fully celebrate the moments where everything clicks and collective learning is taking place. Whenever genuine learning is happening the conditions for self-actualization are in place, even when that is not a goal of our teaching process. Because engaged pedagogy highlights the importance of independent thinking and each student finding his or her unique voice, this recognition is usually empowering for students. This is especially important for students who otherwise may not have felt that they were “worthy,” that they had anything of value to contribute.

Engaged pedagogy assumes that every student has a valuable contribution to make to the learning process. However, it does not assume that all voices should be heard all the time or that all voices should occupy the same amount of time. Early on in my graduate career and in the first years of teaching, I had been a student in classes where teachers were almost obsessively concerned with “fairness.” To them, this meant that every student should be given the same amount of time to speak and that every voice should have equal substantive weight. Often, this led to circumstances where students who were not prepared would
talk on and on. In the engaged classroom students learn the value of speaking and of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something meaningful to contribute. Understanding that every student has a valuable contribution to offer to a learning community means that we honor all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak. Students who excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community. This is also true of students who may not speak often but when they speak (sometimes only when reading required writing) the significance of what they have to say far exceeds those of other students who may always openly discuss ideas. And of course there are times when an active silence, one that includes pausing to think before one speaks, adds much to classroom dynamics.

When students are fully engaged, professors no longer assume the sole leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions more like a cooperative where everyone contributes to make sure all resources are being used, to ensure the optimal learning well-being of everyone. Ultimately, all professors want students to learn, and to see education as a means of self-development and self-actualization. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, I state: “To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process. This is especially true for students.” Engaged pedagogy is vital to any rethinking of education because it holds the promise of full participation on the part of students. Engaged pedagogy establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties, creating an atmosphere of trust and commitment that is always present when genuine learning happens. Expanding both heart and mind, engaged pedagogy makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good.