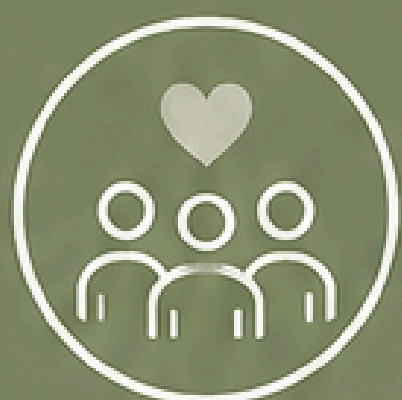




The Four Conditions of *Real Engagement*

A FIELD GUIDE FOR TEACHERS, LEADERS,
COACHES, AND MENTORS



BELONGING

Do I feel
safe here?



COMPETENCE

Do I believe
I can succeed?



AGENCY

Do my
choices matter?



NOVELTY

Is this worth
my attention?



Behavior often reflects *conditions*.
Change the conditions. Change what's *possible*.



BROOKE A. MCKINNEY



THEENGAGINGTEACHER.COM

BELONGING

The First Condition of Real Engagement ♥



CORE QUESTION:
Can I be fully present here without risking my dignity?

Belonging is not friendship. It is not agreement. It is not lowering standards. Belonging is the feeling that you can contribute, ask questions, make mistakes, and learn without losing your place in the group.

Before people participate, they look for safety.

That is true in classrooms, meetings, coaching conversations, professional development sessions, and families.

When belonging is strong, people are more likely to...

- ✓ Ask questions
- ✓ Offer ideas
- ✓ Admit confusion
- ✓ Take intellectual risks
- ✓ Recover from mistakes
- ✓ Contribute consistently

When belonging is weak, people often...

- ✗ Stay quiet
- ✗ Wait for others to speak first
- ✗ Avoid disagreement
- ✗ Withdraw socially
- ✗ Protect themselves from embarrassment
- ✗ Participate only when required

Reflection

Think about a group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.

What signals tell people they belong?

How are mistakes typically handled?

Who speaks most often?

Who rarely speaks?

What might those patterns be communicating?

Real-World Examples



CLASSROOM

A student shares an incomplete answer. The teacher explores the thinking before evaluating correctness. The student participates again later.



WORKPLACE

A manager responds to a difficult question with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Others begin contributing more openly.



COACHING OR MENTORING

A participant admits uncertainty. Instead of judgment, they receive support and challenge. Trust increases.

Field Notes

People rarely do their best thinking when they are busy protecting themselves.

BELONGING DOES NOT REDUCE RIGOR.
Belonging makes rigor possible.

REMEMBER



Participation often rises naturally when **belonging** rises.

Before You Change the Person

- ☐ Have I looked at the conditions?
- ☐ What signals of belonging currently exist?
- ☐ What is one small change I could make this week?



COMPETENCE

THE SECOND CONDITION OF REAL ENGAGEMENT



Core Question: 

Do I believe
I can succeed?

Competence is the *belief* that you have what you need to grow, contribute, and succeed.

It is not the same as confidence. Confidence is how we feel in the moment. Competence is built through evidence.

When people believe they can figure it out, they engage. When they do not, they conserve energy and avoid risk.

People want challenge. They just need the *belief* that challenge is possible.



When competence is strong, people are more likely to:

- ☒ Tackle challenging tasks
- ☒ Persist through difficulty
- ☒ Ask clarifying questions
- ☒ Seek feedback
- ☒ Stretch their thinking
- ☒ Take ownership of learning



When competence is low, people often:

- ☐ Shut down
- ☐ Depend on others
- ☐ Avoid challenging tasks
- ☐ Say "I don't know"
- ☐ Give up quickly
- ☐ Hide confusion

REFLECTION

Think about a group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.



What evidence shows people believe they can succeed?



What signals tell people they might not succeed?



Where do people show confidence?



Where do people show uncertainty or hesitation?



What patterns do you notice?

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES



CLASSROOM

The teacher provides models, examples, and scaffolds. Students attempt a hard task, make mistakes, and try again with increased skill and confidence.



WORKPLACE

A manager breaks a large goal into steps, provides resources, and celebrates progress. The team takes on bigger challenges.



COACHING OR MENTORING

A coach helps clarify strengths, set goals, and build skills. The coachee takes action and sees results over time.



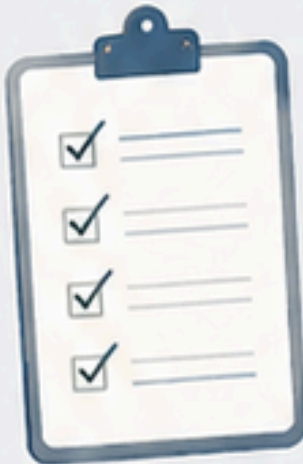
FIELD NOTES

People rarely avoid effort.
They avoid the fear of not being able to do it.

Make success visible. Make growth possible.

Clarity builds competence. 

APPLY IT



What is one thing I can do to strengthen competence in this group?



What will I do?



Who will benefit?



When will I do it?



AGENCY

THE THIRD CONDITION OF REAL ENGAGEMENT



Core Question: 

Do my choices
matter here?

Agency is the experience of influence.

It is the belief that your voice, ideas, and actions can shape what happens next.

When people have agency, they invest more deeply and take ownership of outcomes.

When they do not, they comply, wait for directions, or do the minimum required.

People want to contribute to something, not just complete it.



When agency is strong, people are more likely to:

- ☒ Take initiative
- ☒ Make decisions
- ☒ Contribute ideas
- ☒ Solve problems
- ☒ Stay engaged longer
- ☒ Hold themselves accountable



When agency is low, people often:

- ☐ Wait for instructions
- ☐ Ask, "What should I do?"
- ☐ Do only what is required
- ☐ Avoid responsibility
- ☐ Disengage over time
- ☐ Resist change

REFLECTION

Think about a group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.



Where do people have meaningful choices?



Where are decisions controlled by others?



Where do people have influence over outcomes?



Where do people feel powerless or invisible?



What patterns do you notice?

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES



CLASSROOM

Students choose a topic, select a format, or help set norms. They feel ownership and produce higher-quality work.



WORKPLACE

A team is invited to shape a plan rather than just execute one. They anticipate problems and offer better solutions.



COACHING OR MENTORING

The client sets the agenda and identifies goals. The coach asks powerful questions instead of giving answers. Commitment increases.



FIELD NOTES

People rarely resist responsibility. They resist having it taken away from them.

Offer real choices.
Share real power. Build real ownership.

Agency creates engagement. 

APPLY IT



What is one change I can make this week to increase agency?



What will I do?



Who will benefit?



When will I do it?



NOVELTY

THE FOURTH CONDITION OF REAL ENGAGEMENT



Core Question: 

Is this worth
my attention?

Novelty is the experience of interest and relevance.

It is not about entertainment. It is about meaningful difference.

When things feel novel, people lean in.

When things feel predictable, people tune out.

Novelty can come from content, process, perspective,
problem, or purpose.

It resets attention and fuels energy.



When novelty
is strong, people
are more likely to:

- ☒ Lean in with interest
- ☒ Ask more questions
- ☒ Bring new ideas
- ☒ Make unexpected connections
- ☒ Stay engaged longer
- ☒ Do deeper thinking



When novelty
is low, people often:

- ☐ Tune out
- ☐ Go through the motions
- ☐ Complain about boredom
- ☐ Say "We've already done this."
- ☐ Lose focus
- ☐ Wait for something more interesting

REFLECTION

Think about a group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.



What feels fresh and engaging in this group right now?



What feels predictable or stale?



Where do you see
curiosity and energy?



Where do you see
boredom or burnout?



What patterns do you notice about what re-engages people?

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES



CLASSROOM

A teacher uses a surprising image, a compelling question, or a new format to introduce a familiar topic. Students sit up and lean in.



WORKPLACE

A leader invites the team to approach a challenge from a completely different angle. Energy increases and ideas flow.



COACHING OR MENTORING

A coach asks a question that shifts perspective. The client sees something they hadn't considered before.



FIELD NOTES

Novelty is not random.
It is intentional difference that creates meaning.

Surprise resets attention.
Relevance sustains it.

Meaningful novelty fuels engagement. 

APPLY IT



What is one way I can add meaningful novelty
in this group this week?



What will I do?



Who will benefit?



When will I do it?



AGENCY

THE THIRD CONDITION OF REAL ENGAGEMENT



Core Question:

Do my choices matter here?

Agency is the experience of influence.

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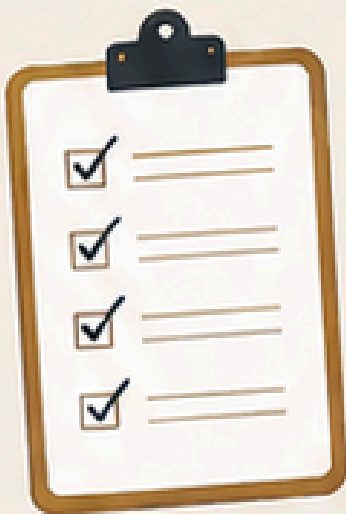
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When will I do it?



CONDITION DIAGNOSIS TOOL

UNDERSTAND THE BEHAVIOR. IDENTIFY THE CONDITIONS. CHOOSE A MOVE.

Behavior
is communication.
Conditions are
the message.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

- 1

OBSERVE
Notice a behavior or pattern that is getting in the way of engagement.
- 2

DIAGNOSE
Identify which condition or conditions might be missing or too weak.
- 3

GATHER EVIDENCE
What are you seeing or hearing that supports your hunch?
- 4

PLAN A SMALL MOVE
Choose the smallest possible intervention that could strengthen the condition.



STEP 1: OBSERVED BEHAVIOR

What behavior or pattern are you noticing?
Be specific. Stick to what you see and hear.



STEP 2: POSSIBLE MISSING CONDITIONS

Which condition or conditions might be missing or too weak right now?
Check all that apply.

BELONGING
People do not feel safe, seen, or accepted.
☐

COMPETENCE
People do not believe they can succeed or improve.
☐

AGENCY
People do not feel their voice, ideas, or choices matter.
☐

NOVELTY
People are not interested or engaged in what feels new or meaningful.
☐



STEP 3: EVIDENCE

What are you seeing or hearing that makes you think this condition is a factor?
List specific examples.



STEP 4: SMALLEST POSSIBLE INTERVENTION

What is one small move you can make to strengthen this condition?
Something you can do this week.

CHECK YOUR INTENTION

This is not about fixing people.
It's about improving the conditions so people can do their best thinking.

I want to create conditions where people can:

- ☒ Contribute
- ☒ Question
- ☒ Struggle
- ☒ Learn
- ☒ Grow

Change the condition.
Change the behavior.
Change the outcome.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

What is one assumption you are carrying about this behavior?

What might be true that you don't yet understand?

ENGAGEMENT AUDIT

SEE THE CONDITIONS. SHAPE THE OUTCOMES.

You can't improve what you don't notice.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Think about a group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.

- Rate each condition honestly.
- Look for patterns, not perfection.
- Choose one condition to strengthen first.
- Small shifts in conditions create big changes in behavior.

RATE EACH CONDITION

On a scale of 1–5, rate the current strength of each condition in your group.

1 = Very Weak 3 = Moderate 5 = Very Strong

BELONGING

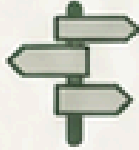

12345

NOTES:

COMPETENCE


12345

NOTES:

AGENCY


12345

NOTES:

NOVELTY


12345

NOTES:

CONDITION RADAR

Plot your ratings on the radar chart.
The shape you see tells a story.

BELONGING

5

4

3

2

1

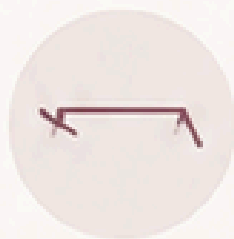
COMPETENCE

AGENCY

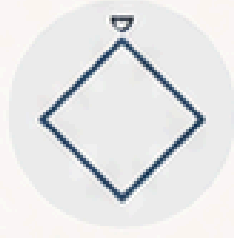
NOVELTY

What does this shape suggest about where to focus next?

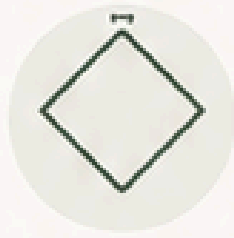
WHAT THE SHAPE MIGHT BE TELLING YOU



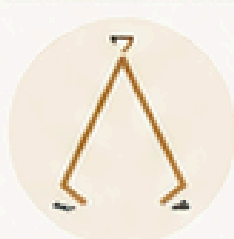
Flat and low across all four
The group may be missing multiple conditions. Start small. Build momentum.



One point is noticeably lower
Start there. That condition may be limiting engagement the most right now.



Strong and rounded
Great foundation. Look for ways to stretch and sustain each condition.



One point is very high
Leverage that strength while strengthening other conditions.

WHAT'S ONE INSIGHT YOU'RE TAKING FROM THIS?



WHAT IS ONE CONDITION YOU WILL FOCUS ON FIRST?



The condition I will focus on:

Why this one?

What might improve if this condition gets stronger?

FINAL QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, REFLECTIONS

ENGAGEMENT ISN'T A PERSONALITY TRAIT.

It's a product of conditions we can create.

THE FOUR CONDITIONS OF REAL ENGAGEMENT • BROOKE A. MCKINNEY • THEENGAGINGTEACHER.COM

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

THE FOUR CONDITIONS. ONE ENGAGED ENVIRONMENT.

Great engagement
is intentional,
not accidental.

Big Question:

Where will I focus
my energy to create
the greatest impact
in this group?



All four conditions matter. Not all four need your attention at the same time.
Use this page to reflect, prioritize, and plan your next step.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

- 1 Reflect on the current state of the four conditions in your group.
- 2 Identify the condition that, if strengthened, would create the biggest positive ripple.
- 3 Choose one small action you can take this week.
- 4 Commit to it. Follow through. Notice the impact.

1 CURRENT STATE REFLECTION

Think about the group you teach, lead, coach, or influence.
How would you rate the current strength of each condition?
1 = Very Weak 2 = Weak 3 = Moderate 4 = Strong 5 = Very Strong

BELONGING

12345

Why?

COMPETENCE

12345

Why?

AGENCY

12345

Why?

NOVELTY

12345

Why?

WHAT SUCCESS WILL LOOK LIKE
If this condition gets stronger, I will see and hear...
(What will people be doing or saying?)

2 WHERE WILL I FOCUS?

Which condition, if strengthened right now, would create the biggest positive impact in this group?

I will focus on:

Why this one?

3 MY NEXT SMALL STEP

What is one small action I can take this week to strengthen this condition?

4 COMMITMENT

When will I take this step?

How will I remind myself?

Who can hold me accountable or encourage me?

Engagement is not something we get. *It's something we create—together.*

THE FOUR CONDITIONS OF REAL ENGAGEMENT BROOKE A. MCKINNEY · THEENGAGINGTEACHER.COM



Bring This Work to Your Organization



KEYNOTES • WORKSHOPS • FACULTY DEVELOPMENT • LEADERSHIP RETREATS • CONSULTING



MEET BROOKE

Brooke A. McKinney

FOUNDER, CURRICULUM & DESIGN ARCHITECT,
PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCHER

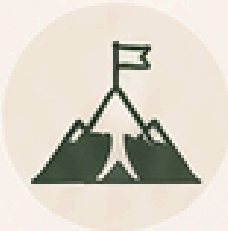
Brooke A. McKinney helps educators, leaders, and organizations create conditions where people can do their best thinking. Through speaking, consulting, and professional learning experiences, she helps audiences explore engagement, judgment, capability, trust, and learning in the age of artificial intelligence. Her work includes the Four Conditions of Real Engagement, Judgment-Centered Learning, and the SIGNAL Framework.

TED^x
SPEAKER

RESEARCHER
& DESIGNER

EDUCATOR
AT HEART

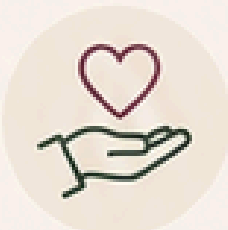
FEATURED KEYNOTES



Capability in the Age of AI
What happens when expertise becomes abundant?



When Artifacts Stop Proving Capability
Rethinking assessment, hiring, and performance in an AI world.



The Human Part
Why judgment, trust, and human capability matter more than ever.

WORKSHOPS & PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- ✓ The Four Conditions of Real Engagement
- ✓ Making Thinking Feel Safe
- ✓ Judgment-Centered Learning
- ✓ Designing Learning in the Age of AI
- ✓ Visible Thinking & Assessment
- ✓ Leadership, Trust, & Capability
- ✓ Custom Faculty and Leadership Development

WHO THIS WORK SERVES

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Educators | Learning & Development Teams |
| School Leaders | Nonprofits |
| Faculty & Higher Education | Corporate Leaders |
| Instructional Designers | Coaches & Mentors |

*Ideas change environments.
Environments change everything.*

LET'S CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION



Work With Brooke

- Scan to:
- ✦ Book a speaking engagement
 - ✦ Request a workshop
 - ✦ Explore resources
 - ✦ Connect directly

CONTACT
✉ brooke@theengagingteacher.com
🌐 theengagingteacher.com

*People are not problems to solve.
They are conditions to cultivate.*

BROOKE A. MCKINNEY
THE ENGAGING TEACHER

RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

The Four Conditions of Real Engagement

RESEARCH-INFORMED. PRACTICE-TESTED. HUMAN-CENTERED.

WHY THIS FRAMEWORK EXISTS

The Four Conditions of Real Engagement emerged from a synthesis of research across learning science, motivation, psychology, organizational behavior, instructional design, and leadership development.

Rather than introducing an entirely new theory of learning, the framework offers a practical lens for understanding how conditions shape behavior across classrooms, organizations, teams, and communities.

The central premise is simple: *Human behavior often reflects conditions more than character.*



BELONGING

Core Question
Do I feel safe enough to contribute?

Research Connections

- Psychological Safety
- Social Belonging
- Community of Inquiry
- Social Interdependence Theory

Key Researchers

- Amy Edmondson
- David W. Johnson
- Roger T. Johnson
- Etienne Wenger

Common Outcomes

- Participation
- Collaboration
- Risk-taking
- Trust



COMPETENCE

Core Question
Do I believe I can succeed?

Research Connections

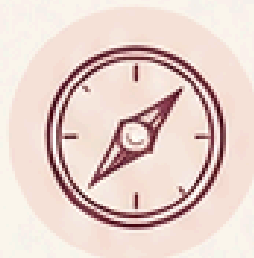
- Self-Efficacy
- Mastery Learning
- Deliberate Practice
- Formative Assessment

Key Researchers

- Albert Bandura
- Benjamin Bloom
- Anders Ericsson
- John Hattie

Common Outcomes

- Persistence
- Confidence
- Skill Development
- Resilience



AGENCY

Core Question
Do my choices matter?

Research Connections

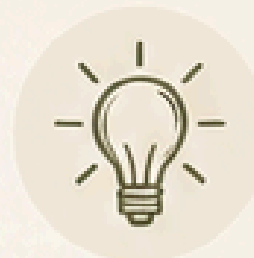
- Self-Determination Theory
- Learner Autonomy
- Ownership of Learning
- Intrinsic Motivation

Key Researchers

- Edward Deci
- Richard Ryan
- Carol Dweck

Common Outcomes

- Ownership
- Initiative
- Decision-Making
- Commitment



NOVELTY

Core Question
Is there a reason to care?

Research Connections

- Curiosity Research
- Attention & Interest
- Desirable Difficulties
- Cognitive Engagement

Key Researchers

- Robert Bjork
- Elizabeth Bjork
- Daniel Willingham

Common Outcomes

- Curiosity
- Attention
- Creativity
- Deeper Processing

ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES

The framework has also been shaped by work in:

- Visible Thinking
- Metacognition
- Cognitive Load Theory
- Communities of Practice
- Learning Transfer
- Reflective Practice
- Adult Learning Theory
- Organizational Learning

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The Four Conditions of Real Engagement is intended as a practical synthesis rather than a comprehensive theory.

It reflects both research and practice, drawing from experiences as a classroom teacher, department chair, instructional designer, faculty developer, and researcher.

The goal is not simply to understand engagement. The goal is to create environments where people can do their best thinking.

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