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# Effective Classroom Engagement

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Keeping students engaged with their learning is an ever-present challenge. This Spotlight will help you discover how inviting guest speakers can bring relevance and excitement to classroom instruction; learn best tips and tricks for getting and maintaining students' attention from veteran educators; explore key strategies for helping students feel heard in the classroom; investigate how to engage both introverted and extroverted students; and more.

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## How Bringing STEM Experts Into Your Classroom Can Help Engage Students

By Lauraine Langreo

“

Having someone share how they use this information or the skill sets every day is like, ‘Oh, wait a minute. There’s a career connection to why I’m learning this content.’”

**DYANE SMOKOROWSKI**

National STEM Fellowship Co-Leader,  
Kansas

**T**hree new guides from the Voya Foundation’s National STEM Fellowship and the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) give educators ideas on how to provide high-quality STEM career engagement experiences for their students.

The STEM Career Engagement Guides are broken down into elementary, middle, and high school levels and provide steps toward “intentionally incorporating STEM career possibilities into the classroom,” according to a press release accompanying the guides.

The guides come as jobs in STEM fields are expected to grow twice as fast as those in non-STEM fields, and millions of STEM jobs are expected to go unfilled in the near future, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Students need to know about these careers and have confidence in themselves that “they can take on the challenges that the future will place in front of them,” said Kristen Record, one of the co-leaders of the National STEM Fellowship and the 2011 Connecticut Teacher of the Year.

How can teachers invite STEM professionals into the classroom to have authentic

engagement with their students that would fuel their interest in those careers, help them understand what they need to do to be successful, and reveal career opportunities perhaps they’ve never heard of before? That’s the question that led Voya STEM fellows to develop the career guides, Record said.

Bringing in these speakers can provide “relevance to the content in your classroom,” said Dyane Smokorowski, the other co-leader of the fellowship and the 2013 Kansas Teacher of the Year. “Often, you’ll hear students say, ‘When am I ever going to need this?’ Having someone share how they use this information or the skill sets every day is like, ‘Oh, wait a minute. There’s a career connection to why I’m learning this content.’”

Voya Foundation’s National STEM Fellowship, established in 2017, began as a way for State Teachers of the Year with STEM expertise to mentor early career educators about what excellent STEM teaching looks like.

The Voya STEM fellows found that “there was a whole bunch more that we didn’t know about [teacher] preparation and STEM careers,” Record said. “Learning about STEM careers is not part of teacher preparation.”

And even if teachers want to find guest speakers to engage their students, many of them don’t know how to find those speakers, Smokorowski said. She added that the guides offer educators a path to find “entry points, no matter where they are with technology, where they are with feeling comfortable in engaging a guest speaker, or how to prepare students to work with a guest speaker.”

Each guide, written by educators working in those grade levels, starts with an overview of why it’s important to engage students in STEM at that particular grade level. Then, it walks teachers through how to:

- Select speakers appropriate for their students;
- Prepare speakers to engage with students;
- Get students ready to engage with the guest;
- Sustain the connection with the guest beyond a one-time event.

“As you go up through the grades, it’s leveling up the exposure at an age-appropriate and grade-appropriate transition for their own career and college success later on,” Record said.

Here are some tips from the guides:

- **Be intentional about the timing to host a speaker:** A speaker can be a way to kick off new material, to enhance student work or dive deeper into concepts, or to provide closure to a unit.
- **Find STEM professionals in your community:** Teachers can reach out to former students, family members, representatives of local companies, or a local college professor. There are also free online resources that connect STEM professionals to classrooms. Teachers should also consider inviting speakers who provide diverse representation for their students.
- **Prepare the speaker:** Don't assume STEM professionals know how to interact with students, and set clear expectations with speakers by providing talking points so they can better engage with students.
- **Prepare the students:** Provide background context to students and help them come up with questions about the speaker's work, and encourage students to use their previous knowledge to help make connections between themselves and the speaker.
- **What to do after the presentation:** Have students reflect on the presentation (whether through journaling or through visual displays) and share that feedback with the speaker to help encourage and strengthen future collaborations. Student reflections can also be highlighted through social media platforms or the school website. Teachers can also encourage speakers to leave contact information so students can reach out with follow-up questions.

"As a physics teacher, I'm not deluded enough to think that my 50 kids are going to go be engineers or physics majors," Record said. "But they will use those [STEM] skills in some type of career." ■

These STEM engagement activities will show students that "there are more STEM careers out there than engineer, scientist, and doctor," Record said. Some of the other growing STEM careers are software developers, information security analysts, data scientists, and statisticians, according to a U.S. Department of Labor blog post.

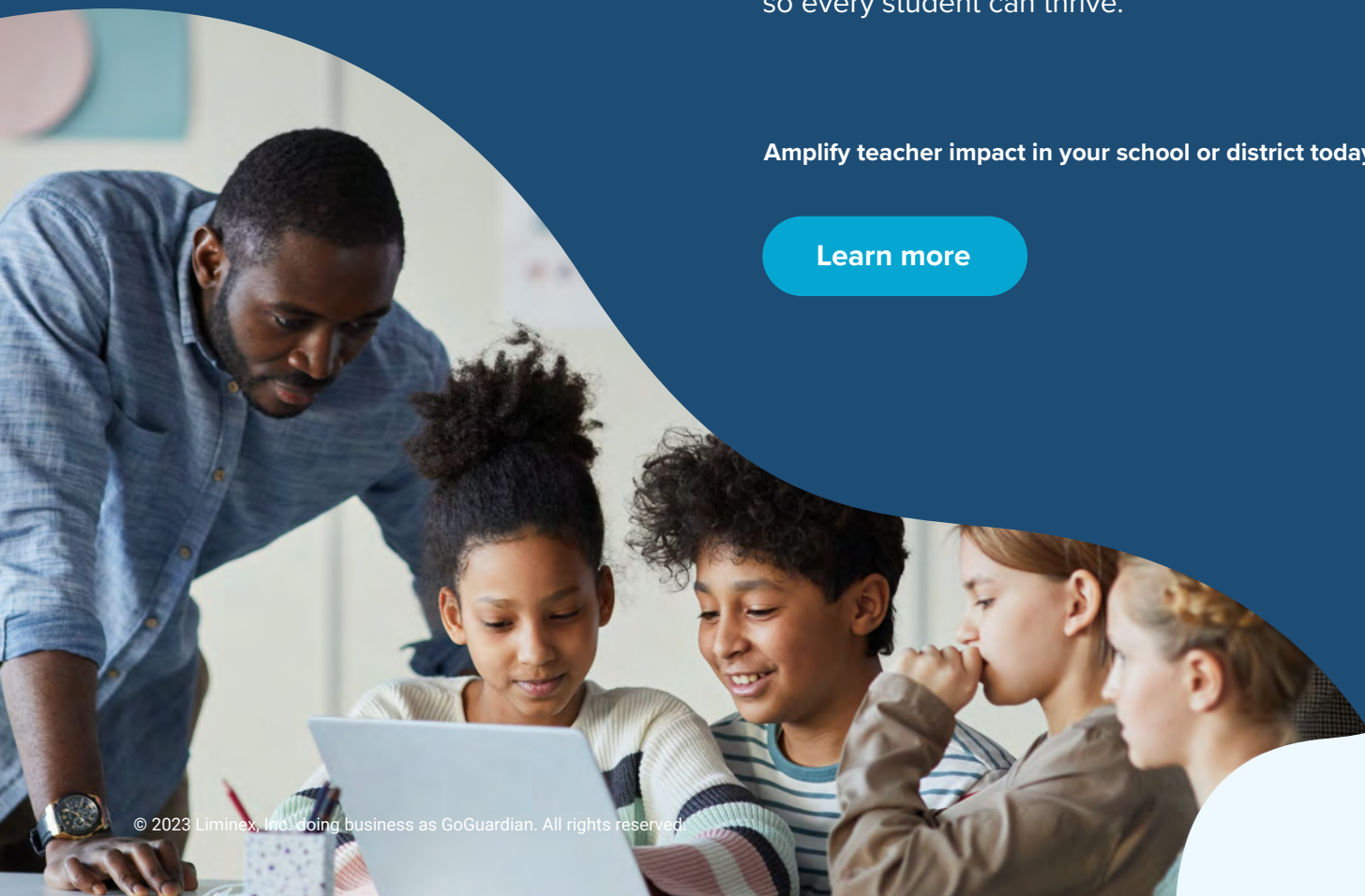


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Published October 3, 2022

# Motivation Matters: Educators Share Strategies to Engage Students

By Hayley Hardison

**F**or decades, educators have wondered how to best recapture students' traveling eyes or prevent their heads from slumping onto their desks.

Student engagement is a perennial challenge in the classroom, but some educators worry that the pandemic's shift to remote learning intensified the fight for students' attention and academic participation.

We asked educators on social media to share their most prized strategies to keep students engaged. Here's what they said.

## Change the pace

Educators stressed the importance of switching up activities to get students' blood pumping—and their mental gears turning.

"I keep activities short. No more than 15-20min max before students rotate on to something different."

— @AndrewVillaEDU

"Keep the kids in a constant state of anticipation and suspense. Be unpredictable and do away with routines."

— Ken Poppers

"Get up and move. Use stickys with questions on the wall and move from question to question."

— Marjie Podzielinski

"Station activities, movement from one activity to the next every 20 minutes."

— Ann Marie Melillo Cerreta

"We discuss the learning objective at the beginning of class with real world purpose behind the why. Humor. Voices when reading aloud. Transitions every 5-7 minutes. Readers theatre. Interactive guided writing. Specific compliments for contributions (participation) to draw in another class member to build upon or challenge that class members reasoning. Stations/centers during group work. Lots of movement in my classroom doing thangs"

— Kristin Hubbell



— E+/Getty

"Lots of choice. Writing an informative essay? Choose your own topic. Showing what you learned in history? Choose whether to make a drawing, a map, a poem. Working on math skills? Write your own word problems. Especially with older kids (I teach 6th grade) more choice means more engagement."

— Magdalen Marmon

## Explore the 'why'

Respondents on social media encouraged educators to connect what's happening inside of the classroom with what's happening outside of it, too.

"Relevancy with a bit of intrigue.. keep them curious!"

— @heidikeegan10

"Stay relevant! Stay in touch with what's going on around you and create relevant lessons that challenge students to think about problems/situations that impact them and their friends/family."

— Scott Adreon

"Doing meaningful work that relates to their lives."

— Liz Jorgensen

"Keeping kids engaged is letting them in on the 'why?' Of the lesson. What's this for? How does this help?"

— Elyse Schopfer

## Approach with authenticity

Authenticity lays the groundwork for student engagement, educators said. That means

being willing to be vulnerable, such as by sharing personal interests and learning experiences. From our social-media readers:

"Being myself. Charismatic cool and funny. I throw in personal stories and question them regularly"

— DrAleka Jackson-Jarrell

"I tell stories—hear me out. I'm an English and History teacher so stories are what it's all about. I have a relatively privileged background and I think that many times brown students expect that brown teachers share their experiences. I have many things in common with my kids but I have also traveled and seen the US and a few international destinations. I have attended an hbcu and an Ivey League university. I love learning and by sharing my joy about learning how the Moors ran Europe, showing students what African empires looked like and their achievements, speaking Spanish to convey meaning to ESL students (I butcher it but I try really hard and it models that we are all learning, even me). These things make me vulnerable because they are personal but they show my students that I have struggled, not fit in, had to be kind and understanding of hygiene in different cultures—all of these things are the same things that they are dealing with daily so they feel seen and are invested in everything that happens in my class."

— Samantha Lee

"Theatrics! And making it as relevant as possible to real life. Learning the kidney? Guess how this [stuff] works, it's freaking magical. I have a special way lol and should start acting my age (close to 40, but never want to be a stuffy instructor). Make it fun, catch em off guard, be a real person ..."

— Amanda Hackerott

"Be your authentic self, always. Build real relationships with them from day one so they know you're truly interested in who they are and what their passions are. Let down your guard and throw away your script, operate from the heart!"

— Samantha Sedlock

## Know your students

In a 2019 Education Week video, teacher Katie Hull Sypniewski explains the importance of student-teacher relationships and offers a few strategies to strengthen them, too. "Mountains of research highlight the

importance of a positive student-teacher relationship,” she says.

Here are some insights from our social media readers.

“To build upon their most recent success. #ridethewave”

— @IMALearnaholic

“Read Engagement by Design by Fisher and Frey. It changed everything I do for engagement. It’s not all about the theatrics. Having a sound lesson plan where students know what they are learning, how they are learning it, and what it looks like when they have learned it is more important than any ‘fun’ activity. While the activities are important, it’s not the first part of it. Having strong relationships with students, having the ‘just right’ challenge, and clarity on the learning will create engagement.”

— Whitney Walker Child

“Making students feel like they are worth educating. Teach to the ‘human’ not to the ‘machine’. Every student matters.”

— Nina Rovis-Hermann

“Whispering! Making funny voices and faces during read-alouds or random lessons. Incorporating their interests into lessons. Movement breaks. And lots of praise to all of them (especially the ones who rarely get it elsewhere) even if it’s something small, like ‘I noticed you are prepared today with a sharpened pencil! Way to go!’ Every student deserves to feel seen!”

— Greta Amalie

and know what to do! Plus, we’re building language skills and confidence in ELs.”

— Kerry Tee

“I utilize the Cooperative learning Model in every class session. Individual students are assigned to Base Groups who are given an in class activity, whose findings and viewpoints are shared to the whole class. I also give a guiding question before the lecture begins and each student does a write up which they submit. Knowing the different cultural group dynamics assist me to bring in teaching resources which are relevant and significance. The latter aides in creating a conducive learning environment.”

— Elizabeth Mbole ■

## Other ideas for engaging students

We’ve only scratched the surface here, and many other commenters offered additional responses. Here are some to think about:

“My school has gotten serious about no cellphones in the classroom.”

— Stephen Uhlhorn

“I’m adding repeated questions to my kindergarten teaching. E.g.

T: Where are your eyes?

Ss: On the speaker!

T: Where are your eyes?

Ss: On the speaker!

T: Where are your eyes?

Ss: On the speaker!

I was skeptical but they are engaged

Published July 14, 2022

## 3 Ways to Get Students Engaged in Their Learning

By Williamena Kwapo

**F**ostering a trusting environment, adopting social emotional learning, and incorporating student voices are ways to increase student engagement, according to experts taking part in a panel discussion this week about improving students' participation in school.

The online discussion was geared to implementing strategies that could help students be more involved in their own education. Students are engaged when content is accessible to them and they are interacting with the course material, peers, and teachers, though that may look different for every student.

"Some students might be more vocal, other students may want to write, another student may want to draw" said panelist Jonte Lee, a high school science teacher in the District of Columbia public schools. He became known as the "The Kitchen Chemist" when he turned his kitchen into a chemistry lab during the height of the pandemic to keep his students engaged in virtual learning.

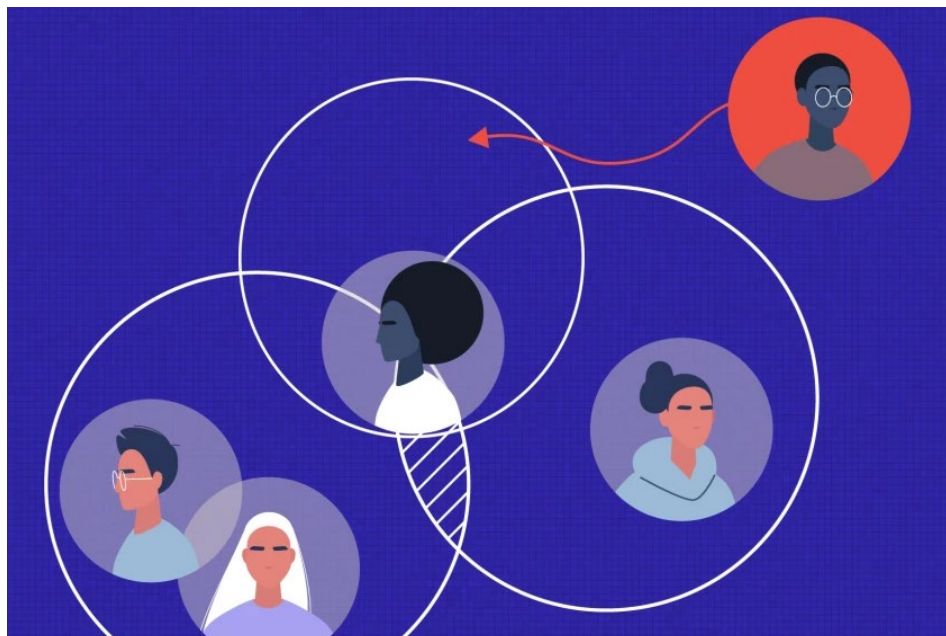
The discussion, part of Education Week's periodic "Seat at the Table" webinar series, was moderated by Peter DeWitt, an author and opinion blogger. Along with Lee, panelists included Ron Myers, a career teacher and principal in Oklahoma and Texas, and Russ Quaglia, an author and researcher studying students' self-worth, aspirations, and engagement.

The panelists focused on three main strategies schools can improve student engagement.

### Student voices begin the conversation.

Myers spoke about creating a climate of trust in the classroom so that students feel safe to engage in conversation and learn from each other because ultimately, students' voices start the conversations.

"You have to create these conditions where students feel as though they can be truthful with you," he said, "we are here to create a condition or classrooms of safety and trust so that students can help drive the learning in."



—nadia\_bornotova/Stock/Getty

Quaglia said that, based on student surveys he has conducted, there are three main drivers of meaningful engagement: ownership, responsibility, and connectivity. Schools need to be an environment where students feel that they have ownership of and responsibility for their education.

"Let the students know what they are learning and why they are learning it," said Quaglia. "And if we cannot answer those questions, it is no wonder some students are disengaged."

### Make social-emotional learning a cornerstone.

The topic of social-emotional learning sometimes gets pushback. But the panelists said it can be key to increasing engagement with students. Referring to students by their names, asking them how they are feeling, and letting students know that their emotions are valued can translate into students processing their feelings in better ways, which can lead to engagement with peers and teachers.

### Use surveys to find out what students need and want

A survey can be a useful tool for engagement because it allows students to

express their desire for what they wish to learn and how they want to be taught. It provides students with a voice., but "don't do another survey if you are not going to do anything with it," Quaglia warns. Surveys are to be a guide for teachers and school staff to learn the needs of their students but most importantly, implement those needs.

"The students always have something to say to us. What they are not convinced of is that we are willing to listen and learn from them," said Quaglia.

Panelists agreed that there is a need to invite and expect students to participate in their education and that there is room to look within the system and implement new strategies. ■

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# Teaching Tips for Reaching Introverts and Extroverts

By Alyson Klein

**I**n introducing herself to her students, Lauren Peña sometimes tells them that she can relate to Star Trek's Dr. Spock.

If the fictional character took the popular Myers-Briggs personality test, he would probably be an ISTJ, just like Peña, a director of instructional technology and a Spanish teacher at Bishop McGuinness Catholic High School in Oklahoma City.

For those not steeped in Myers-Briggs terminology, the "I" in that acronym stands for Introvert, or a person who "recharges their battery" with some solid alone time, Peña said during a virtual presentation at the International Society for Technology in Education's annual conference June 26-29.

Introverts are often the quiet kids in the class, overshadowed by exuberant extroverts who recharge by spending time with others. To be effective, teachers need to understand that both types of students—and the "ambiverts" somewhere in the middle—have their own special strengths, Peña said.

"We have our extroverted students, who we love, who we cannot get to shut up sometimes during our class discussion," she said. "And then we have our introverted students who it's like pulling teeth to get them to say anything. So how do we go from both ends of the spectrum?"

Finding the right balance is tricky, Peña acknowledged.

But teachers can look to technology—as well as some decidedly low-tech strategies—for help, she said.

Here are some of Peña's favorite ways to ensure she's reaching the different personalities in her classroom, informed by author and lecturer Susan Cain's best-selling book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

## Use technology to help kids who would rather show engagement in a different way

Sure, teachers need to get a sense of their students' progress. But sharing something aloud in class can be tough for introverts.

"Think of technology as a bridge rather than a crutch," Peña said. "We tend to say, 'well, these kids now, they're so anxious'" and



— Courtney Hale/E+/Getty

reliant on technology that they "can't even have a conversation with somebody, so I'm going to force them to. That doesn't seem like the best way to get over a traumatic situation. It seems like another traumatic situation."

Instead, teachers should "embrace the fact that these students live online and know to how discuss things online," Peña said, giving teachers a chance to find out what introverted students have learned "without necessarily putting them at the center of attention."

Google Slides, for instance, has a "cool" feature called Q&A, Peña said, which allows a teacher to pose a question kids can answer in writing. And two tools that allow students or entire classes to create a digital bulletin board—Padlet and Jamboard—"are really good for our introverted students because it gives them an opportunity to speak up, sometimes anonymously," Peña said.

The technology doesn't have to be particularly complex, either. Teachers can look for opportunities for kids to live chat online during class. Lecture time is probably not the most appropriate moment for that since students could get distracted. But if kids are watching a movie based on a book they've read in class, they can share their reactions on something as simple as a Google Doc.

"Maybe they're asking questions," Peña said. "They're saying, 'that's not how it was in the book!'"

## Give introverts time to process and remind extroverts when to let someone else share

There's a lot of research describing introverted people as "extremely sensitive," Peña said. Sometimes, just the noise in the classroom "is enough to turn them off completely. We help with the sensitivity by allowing some time to think, by allowing some quiet in our day," she explained.

Since introverts like extra processing time, give students a heads up about what topics they'll be learning about in class the next day, or even provide discussion questions in advance. This strategy can benefit extroverts too, since they can "get their excitement out and then come to class prepared to say the things that need to be said, instead of just all the things."

Extroverts may need help structuring time in another way. When kids talk in pairs or small groups, set a timer so that extroverts realize, "I'm only allowed this much time to talk and then I need to ask my friends what they think," Peña said.

## If a student says they have anxiety, assume they are telling the truth

Anxiety, which has been on the rise during the pandemic, can present as introversion, Peña said.



It's true that some students may say they're anxious in order to get more time on an assignment, or take a test another day, Peña said. "We know that our high schoolers [have] learned that anxiety is a word they can use to get out of doing schoolwork sometimes," she said. But "we also have our students who are legitimately anxious and legitimately cannot get a doctor's note saying so. So I would rather err on the side of being kind to kids."

### **Remember, introversion isn't a problem to be dealt with**

Peña once taught at a school that encouraged teachers to use "Socratic seminars," a style of deep classroom discussion that requires spoken participation from each student.

One of her colleague's shy son found those discussions very difficult. She shared this with his teacher, who told her "that's okay, we will fix that," Peña recalled. The mother was taken aback, she said.

"It just made her kind of sad," Peña said. "She felt like the teacher thought it was his job to fix her son. He's not broken, just quiet. And that is a totally acceptable way to be." ■



—Z.wei/iStock/Getty

Published April 24, 2022

## 3 Counterintuitive Findings About Motivation That Teachers Can Use

By Sarah D. Sparks

San Diego

**M**otivating students can be a tricky, at times exhausting business, but educators say it's never been more important to get students engaged in their learning after years of disruptions.

At the annual American Educational Research Association conference here, global and national motivation experts from education, business, and other fields discussed what instructional approaches and student characteristics make the biggest difference in academic drive. In the process, they have raised questions about some educational truisms about the best ways to incentivize student engagement in learning.

Here are a few insights for teachers.

### Myth: To motivate students for a difficult task, it's important to make it fun and entertaining

Prior research has found people have a harder time keeping themselves motivated for a “serious” task, like comparing prices, than for a “fun” task like running a fantasy football team, even if, for example, both contain similar math requirements.

But E. Tory Higgins and Emily Nakkawita

of Columbia University found that peoples' persistence in continuing tasks was more closely connected to how well they fit what they considered the goals of the tasks themselves. Participants dedicated more time both to tasks framed and presented as important and those framed and presented as enjoyable. By contrast, they were less persistent when researchers added more enjoyable elements to tasks presented as important.

“The direct educational implication of this is, don't assume in education that the best thing to do is to surround [an activity] with something enjoyable,” Higgins said. “It depends on whether someone considers the activity fun or important. If it's considered fun, then adding something enjoyable surrounding the situation can inspire them to redo the activity—but if it's important, [fun] actually will undermine it.

“The idea here is that when you have fit you have interest and engagement in the activity, so because you're more engaged in the activity, you either intensify the fun, which means you want to do it again or you intensify the importance, and so you want to do it again,” he said.

### Myth: A student who needs a bit of a push on homework just needs some advice from their teacher

Yes, but the student can be even *more* motivated by giving advice to other kids instead.

That's because it's easier to seek help for others rather than for oneself, and easier to learn from someone else's failure rather than your own, according to Ayelet Fishbach, professor of behavioral science and marketing at the University of Chicago and author of *Get It Done: Surprising Lessons From the Science of Motivation*. In a series of studies, Fishbach has found that children and adults are significantly less likely to be able to draw lessons from their failures than their successes, and are more likely to avoid activities they have previously failed or struggled in.

While most people seek advice when they start to work toward a goal, Fishbach found in one series of studies that they can be more encouraged to work toward goals like improving study habits or controlling tempers if they give others help instead.

“We are consistently motivated by giving other people advice ... and interestingly, people do not predict that they will be motivated by giving advice.”

### Myth: Getting students to set goals for themselves is the most important way to motivate them

To succeed academically over time, students must learn to motivate themselves rather than just relying on encouragement from teachers and peers, but Carlton Fong, of Texas State University, found some strategies students choose are more effective than others.

In a meta-analysis of more than 400 studies of children and adolescents, Fong studied six ways that students try to control their own motivation:

- Master self-talk, such as telling oneself you are competent or will perform well on a task;
- Interest enhancement, such as making a game of a task or aligning it with your personal interests;
- Warning yourself of the external consequences of not doing or succeeding on a task;
- Environmental control, such as setting up your work space to reduce interruptions; and
- Proximal goal-setting, or breaking down one long-term goal into smaller interim goals.

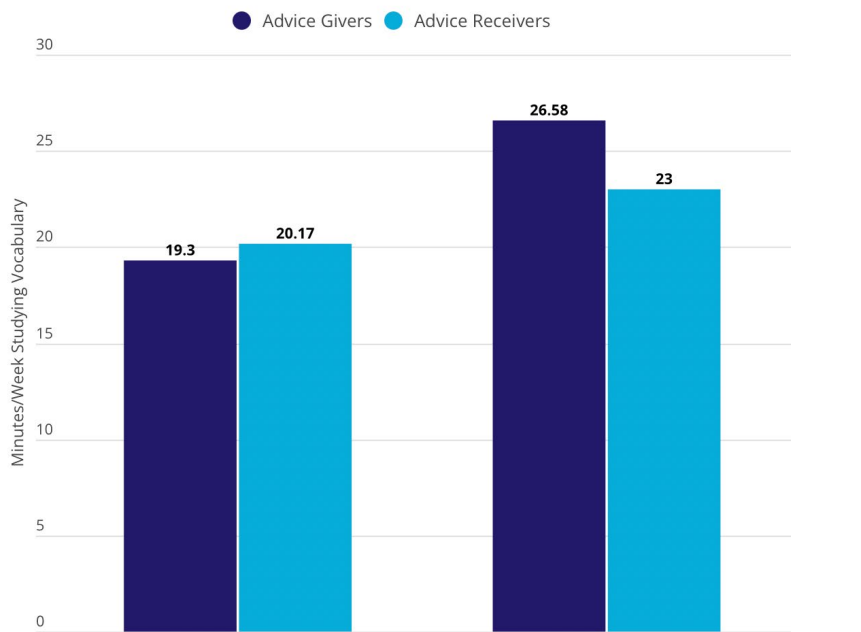
He found that while proximal goal-setting was associated with higher academic achievement for college students, there was no significant benefit seen for middle and high school students. Similarly, there was no academic effect for secondary students who tried to align their interests with an academic task to be more motivated.

By contrast, higher academic achievement was associated with students who tried to control their environment, tell themselves they had the capacity to perform well on a task and warn themselves about the consequences of not meeting their goals.

“I think an interesting point that we found was developmental differences, right?” Fong said. “Maybe with younger students the environment that they’re learning in is perhaps more structured, and because of that, it’s more dependent on the instructor. So you’re not maybe relying on too many motivation regulation strategies for younger students. But we also see that maybe postsecondary students are just perhaps more self-regulated in general and more aware of these issues.” ■

## A Word to the Wise Is Sufficient, but Only for the One Giving the Advice

In one University of Chicago study, middle school students were randomly assigned to either receive written advice from a teacher on how to study and remain motivated, or to write a letter to a younger student, giving their own advice on studying and staying motivated. While both groups of students studied longer in an online vocabulary program in the four weeks after the intervention, those who gave advice to younger peers studied longer than those who had received advice. The researchers found giving advice provided more motivation than receiving it across several other areas, such as controlling temper, saving money, or keeping healthy habits, for adults as well as children.



SOURCE: "Dear Abby, Should I Give Advice or Receive It?" Psychological Science



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## OPINION

Published January 18, 2022

# Want to Have Fun in the Classroom? Try Learning Games

By Larry Ferlazzo

*What are your favorite classroom games?*

**T**oday, Jenny Vo, Donna L. Shrum, David Seelow, Kathleen Rose McGovern, Melisa “Misha” Cahnmann-Taylor, and Ciera Walker provide their recommendations.

### ‘Students Are More Focused’

*Jenny Vo has worked with English-learners during all of her 26 years in education and is currently the Houston area EL coordinator for International Leadership of Texas. Follow her on Twitter at @JennyVo15:*

Games are great tools to engage students in their learning. There are many educational benefits to playing games in the classroom. One, games make learning fun. Two, they encourage the students to pay attention. As a result, the students are more focused when playing games. Three, students learn to collaborate and cooperate with their team members when playing on a team. They learn the social skills of communication, listening, and compromising, just to name a few. The best benefit that occurs from playing games in the classroom is that students are learning content in a fun, engaging way!

Games can be used anytime during your

lesson. You can use them to assess students’ background knowledge about a certain topic before you begin a unit. You can also use games to build background knowledge before you actually introduce your lesson/topic. There are some great games to practice and review vocabulary. Other games are perfect for whole-group or individual reviews before an assessment. Below are some of my favorite classroom-learning games.

Charades, Pictionary, and Pyramid are great games to use for vocabulary review. **Charades** is a word guessing game. Students can be paired with partners or in teams. One member will act out a word or phrase without talking or making noises. Along the same vein, **Pictionary** requires a team member to draw pictures, and the rest of the team guesses what the word or phrase is based on the pictures. **Pyramid** is a two-person game and relies on words only. The objective is to guess the mystery word using only words or phrases given by the teammate. I love using these three games because they require the students to pay attention to each other, collaborate with each other, and study/learn the vocabulary beforehand so their team can do well.

Another game that my students love to play is Kahoot!, a game-based learning platform. It is made up of quizzes that the students can play in class and at home. Teachers can access a database of ready-made games or create the games themselves.

I used Kahoot! in a variety of ways—to build background knowledge, as vocabulary practice, and to review before an assessment. Students are not only competing against each other but also a time limit (adjustable by the teacher). With online learning during the pandemic, I relied on Kahoot! a lot for both in-person and virtual classes. The students loved the competitive aspect of the game and worked hard to see their names on the Kahoot! virtual podiums at the end.

The third kind of game that my students love to play in class is the old-fashioned board game. This may be surprising considering the technology-advanced world we live in, but my students LOVE rolling the dice and moving the game pieces around the game board! One year, when I was given extra money by my department, I bought a bunch of board games that focused on reviewing reading-comprehension skills such as main idea, details, inference, context clues, etc. Each year after that, whenever I would be given extra money, I would add to my collection with games from other subjects—math, science, and social studies. We had so much fun playing them, and the students asked to play them so much that we designated Friday as our game day. I chose the Friday game based on the skill we were working on that week. I think the students knew we were doing schoolwork, but they didn’t mind because we were also having fun, not sitting at our desks and doing worksheets.

### Adding ‘Snap, Crackle, and Pop’

*After teaching English for over 20 years, Donna L. Shrum is now teaching ancient history to freshmen in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. She remains active in the Shenandoah Valley Writing Project and freelance writing for education and history magazines:*

When students play a game, their brains reward them with dopamine. Incredibly, your curriculum alone doesn’t always provide that same brain rush for your students, so mixing games into your curriculum can add some snap, crackle, and pop. In fact, some teachers are completely gamifying their courses, structuring their curriculum as an ongoing game. But that is a discussion for another day.

While teaching with Zoom, I struggled to find ways to adapt the active games I’d used in my physical classroom. One success was playing tag: Someone in Zoomland was “it” and tagged someone of whom I asked a question. Answer the question wrong, and you’re “it”; get it right, and the tagger had to

try again with another student.

This year, while teaching 8th grade civics, I used some of the review games I'd used for years to introduce material. I discovered that creating a Kahoot about current events was a fun way for the students to see if they could predict the correct answer and then I'd briefly fill in the details of the event once they saw the answer. I used Kahoot as an anticipation guide in the same way, creating brief "What Do You Already Know?" Kahoots before teaching a topic. At the end of the lesson, students could play again to see what they had learned.

I sometimes use Quizizz for variety, but this year, I have fallen in love with Quizizz Lessons. Instead of introducing material on Google Slides, I could put it into a Quizizz slide, then follow with a formative-assessment slide as a poll, open-ended answer, or multiple-choice question. Video slides are part of the paid package. Lessons still gave a score at the end, and I was surprised students viewed Lessons as a competitive game. It was a wonderful tool for Zoom, because providing the code allowed them to see the game on their computers (a feature Kahoot also introduced this year) without relying on a possibly unsteady Zoom screen share.

I've had the paid version of Gimkit for three years now, and in that time, an increasing number of other teachers have found out about this treasure, which offers a high level of competition as well as multiple game modes. As the school year drew to a close, I used the Drawing mode for short curriculum breaks. Drawing didn't work well with my existing Kits, so I created ones just for drawing in which I entered words and phrases and then simply put a period as all the answers. In the future, I plan to create drawing Kits related to the classes I teach.

I comb online sites to find new game ideas, and these are the most popular with my students and links explaining how to play:

- **The Unfair Game:** While I sometimes played whole class, I usually let them partner up and keep their own scores while they played on one computer between them.
- **Grudgeball:** For some reason, honors classes play Grudgeball the most intensely.
- **Motor Mouth:** Use Google Draw to create playing cards. On each, put 4-6 terms you'd like students to learn. Print

on card stock and laminate. Create enough sets for students to play in pairs. The game is like Password: The students split the cards, then take turns trying to get the other person to correctly guess the term. The partners who finish first win.

### Games for all Ages

*David Seelow currently teaches at the College of Saint Rose in Albany, N.Y., writes the Revolutionary Learning blog, and consults on game-based learning, online education, interdisciplinary instruction, and comics in the classroom. He is the editor of two collections of essays on innovative teaching: Teaching in the Game-Based Classroom: Practical Lessons for Grades 6-12, a Routledge, Eye on Education book, and Lessons Drawn: Essays on the Pedagogy of Comics and Graphic Novels:*

I have several favorite games for different grades levels. For the elementary grades, *Dragon Box Algebra 5+* is wonderful. It introduces algebra through fun, engaging activities that transition seamlessly into algebra without students even realizing they are solving mathematical equations. *Minecraft* remains a favorite. Students can build entire worlds and work either individually or as part of a team.

*Pokémon Go* takes the class out of the school building into the world where students can explore famous geographical and historical landmarks by visiting Pokestops. In keeping with a geography theme, the board game *Trekking: The National Parks* allows students to experience an outdoor adventure indoors, learn valuable information about the country's national parks, and cultivate the value of conservation, while enjoying magnificent photography of our natural wonders. *KidCitizen* uses primary documents in an interactive experience pertaining to democracy. The KidCitizen Editor gives teachers the tool to create their own episodes tailored to their class. *Castle Panic* provides children with a rich fantasy world to capture their imagination while also requiring cooperation to be successful in the game. Learning how to work in teams at an early age will be indispensable throughout a child's education.

For the middle school age group, *Biome Builder-Card Game* has students build food chains in a race to help one of four biomes (the American Prairie, Pacific Ocean, Amazon Rain Forest, Sahara Desert) survive. Before leaving the middle grades, I want to

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Some teachers are completely gamifying their courses, structuring their curriculum as an ongoing game.”

**DONNA SHRUM**

History Teacher,  
Shenandoah Valley, VA

recommend the online game *Kind Words*; students learn the value of being kind and helping others by responding anonymously to requests for help. The game promotes the best in social and emotional learning and can have a transformative impact on students' approach to life.

*Kind Words* also reminds me to point out that many games can be played across grades levels. *Biome Builder*, mentioned above, has curricular alignment with elementary, middle, and high school students. *Portal 1* and *2* can be applied to learning missions ranging from using statistics in 6th grade all the way up to AP Physics. *iCivics* has a suite of 30-minute games exploring all aspects of the U.S.'s three branches of government. Every student will benefit from playing these games in class.

Finally, for the high school age, making ethical decisions should be an essential skill, and no game teaches this better than *Papers, Please*. In the game, you play an immigration officer making life-changing decisions about who can or cannot cross the border of a totalitarian country. The board game *Pandemic* has immediate relevance for students living through COVID-19. Importantly, this game requires cooperative learning to win. The game effectively simulates the need to cure, cope with, and prevent a pandemic in 60 minutes play time.

Language arts/English are well served



by two narrative-based games: *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*. In both games, players explore a family home in the Pacific Northwest. In the former, as protagonist Kate, you learn about family secrets including a nuanced depiction of an LGBTQ+ relationship. In the latter game, you explore a haunted ancestral house in a brilliantly executed story reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe and perfect for teaching literary elements. Finally, encouraging students to slow down and appreciate both the wonders of the natural world and the marvels of language will prove invaluable to their future lives. Students need to step outside their screen-dependent world to reflect on their surroundings and their own life, and, paradoxically, *Walden, a Game* helps them do just that.

Oh, before I go, *Jeopardy!* is still a great game for the classroom; just have students design the answers.

### Building a 'Trusting Community'

*Kathleen Rose McGovern is a TESOL specialist with the U.S. Department of State and a lecturer in applied linguistics at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She's authored several publications at the intersections of drama, language teaching, and immigration theories, including Enlivening Instruction with Drama and Improv.*

One of my favorite games to play with intermediate learners involves an extension of the popular language-teaching (and party) game: 2 Truths & 1 Lie.

Basically, it involves inviting students to share three personal stories (not statements, but stories with a beginning, middle, and end). Then, after each person has told their stories, and classmates have guessed the lie, I divide students into groups and guide them through an improvisational process in which they perform one another's stories.

I find that students are typically very engaged because they are sharing stories that are important to them with their classmates and negotiating the language involved in putting together a scene (e.g., "come in from the right and stand by that table"). This also offers opportunities for literacy practice as students can write out their stories or even draft scripts from their improvisations. This activity was the backbone for my work devising plays with my intermediate ESOL students at a nonprofit language school for immigrant learners in Massachusetts. But I have used it in nonperformative contexts as



These games introduce or review target language words and phrases that help students understand an important communicative lesson: It's both *what* you say, and *how* you say it!"

### MELISA CAHNMANN-TAYLOR

Professor of Language and Literacy Education,  
University of Georgia

well. It's a wonderful way to collaboratively explore language relevant to the students' interests and build a trusting community at the same time.

### Improv Games

*Melisa "Misha" Cahnmann-Taylor, a professor of language and literacy education at the University of Georgia, is the author of five books addressing intersections between language education and the literary, visual, and performing arts including her newest co-authored book, Enlivening Instruction with Drama and Improv: A Guide for Second and World Language Teachers (Routledge, 2021):*

"Getting to know you" games can be terrific for any time you want a group to learn more information about each "player" in the class, including and going beyond learning one another's names.

By using it at the beginning of any class or semester, teachers gather a great deal of information about who is in the room, including how comfortable and familiar each student is with performance as well as information about any limitations or concerns students may bring to these embodied practices. The information garnered from these games, including students' individual needs, strengths, and limitations, will assure greater trust and success in play and language learning throughout your group's time together.

One of my favorites that I use with any group is the Poetry in Names Game. Even if a group already knows one another, it can be a fun and lyrical challenge to create a class poem for which each student uses alliteration and/or rhyme to describe themselves in their person. First, show students how to play by saying your name and something you like in the following formula: [Name], he/she likes \_\_\_\_\_. E.g.: "Misha, she likes marshmallows." While you say this, make an exaggerated movement (e.g., mime eating lots of marshmallows). Advanced learners may consider things that have the same first-letter sound (alliteration), consonance sounds, assonance (vowel) sounds, or rhyme (exact or slant). Here's a video of a group of TESOL educators playing this game.

Many theater and improv games can and should be played repeatedly. By changing the prompt, teachers can change the target language of the game—from vocabulary acquisition to specific grammatical forms or pronunciation features such as intonation and stress. Just as the same game can be played differently, the same words can be communicated differently depending on how they are said, where, to whom, by whom, and for what ends. These games introduce or review target language words and phrases that help students understand an important communicative lesson: It's both *what* you say, and *how* you say it!

A wonderful example of this is the game, "The house is on fire, let's...". One person in the pair begins, saying, "The house is on fire, let's \_\_\_\_\_," filling in the end of the sentence with ANY suggestion not connected to the actual scenario of a house on fire. (For example, "Let's buy a canoe"; "Let's eat some candy"; "Let's study math"; "Let's braid our hair.") This game exercises students' fluency, creativity, sense of humor, and ability to laugh in light of making L2 (second language) errors. See this video to watch how hilarity ensues and fluency is developed!

### 'Running Dictation'

*Ciera Walker is a seventh-year systemwide elementary school ELL teacher in east Tennessee:*

At the beginning of the school year, my students set academic goals based on their WIDA Access scores from the previous year. While goals always vary, this year, many students had a goal to improve their speaking scores. I set out to intentionally create differentiated lessons for my students

that involved multiple opportunities to speak. Each week, students use Flipgrid with rubrics and personalized feedback to practice and improve speaking. Additionally, I utilized a learning game I read about in *39 No-Prep/Low-Prep ESL Speaking Activities for Kids* written by Jackie Bolen and Jennifer Booker Smith called Running Dictation. This game was a favorite among my students this year. Below is a list of materials needed for the game, a description of my interpretation of the game and how I used it in my classroom, some benefits of the game, and suggested improvements to the game to fit my students' needs in the future.

#### Materials:

- Printed phrases, sentences, or paragraphs from a text that students are reading (I typed out sentences from passages or novels that we were reading in class.)
- Paper
- Pencil

#### Description/How to Play:

- Students will partner up. One student is the “runner” while the other student is the “writer.”
- Designate two areas in the room, one for the sentences to be posted (out of sight for the writer) and the other for writers to transcribe what they hear.

#### Go over rules for runners and writers:

- Runners must be careful not to run into each other!
- Runners need to be very intentional when they tell the writer what to write.
- Runners can spell words or tell the writer where to place punctuation, but they cannot touch the paper or the pencil (or they are automatically out).
- Runners must keep their volume low when they are sharing information with the writer (so the other groups don't hear).
- Writers must communicate to the runner when they need something repeated or need help spelling words.

- The phrase, sentence, or paragraph must be exactly the same as what is on the printed-out sheet.
- Have the runner stand next to the writer to set up the game.
- The runner will run to the area where sentences are and then run back to relay what is on the paper to the writer. They will run back and forth until the entire message is correctly written.
- When a team is done writing the entire message, they raise their hand.
- The teacher comes by and checks the sentence (other groups continue working in case the first team done isn't correct).
- If the sentence is incorrect, the teacher will let them know, but the runner and writer must work together to figure out what is incorrect.
- If the sentence is correct, the team wins!

#### Benefits:

- Students are constantly communicating very specific information.
- Students are engaged in using punctuation and spelling patterns.
- Students must be able to verbalize when they need more information or are confused.
- Students are actively engaged in grammar while writing.
- Students are practicing speaking, listening, reading, and writing all in one game.
- Cross-curricular connections can be made in various subjects such as language arts, science, or social studies.

#### Implications for the Future:

- I hope to use Flipgrid captions in combination with the running-dictation game to show students that what they say isn't always interpreted or heard correctly. This will help emphasize the

importance of speaking clearly.

- For higher English-proficient students, I might use a paragraph, and once the paragraph is written, have students put it in order (as suggested by Bolen and Booker Smith).
- Have students use the original text to answer questions about what they wrote during the running-dictation game.
- Have students interpret and discuss the paragraph.
- Use a paragraph that students haven't read yet to introduce a new unit/topic/vocabulary.

The game is a wonderful and fun way to get students reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Additionally, I would recommend the book *39 No-Prep/Low-Prep ESL Speaking Activities for Kids* for anyone looking to enhance engagement in the ESL classroom. ■

## OPINION

Published January 27, 2021

## Increasing Engagement With Student Choice

By Larry Ferlazzo

*Some research suggests that as students get older, their engagement with school tends to decrease. How can schools combat this trend?*

**T**oday, Scott Bayer, Amanda Lescas, Ryan Huels, and Joy Hamm share their thoughts.

## Three 'choices'

Scott Bayer is an English teacher in Montgomery County, Md. He is a co-founder of #THEBOOKCHAT and can be found on Twitter @Lyricalwordz:

As students get older, their engagement with school tends to decrease. This happens for several reasons, and let's be honest, we cause most of them.

Maybe not as individuals, but we are part of a system that causes students to disengage. Some reasons student engagement decreases as students get older: We make learning unfun; we take away curiosity and shift toward compliance; we make all the decisions for kids. As students gain more autonomy in their lives, we become just another system that forces them to conform—and for many students of color, there is a cumulative impact of navigating an oppressive educational system year after year. Let's look at one way to combat disengagement: student choice.

**Choice of Content:** Sometimes, kids all need to learn the same thing, and sometimes they don't. When we focus on standards—which often center on cognitive skills or neurodiverse tasks—there is a lot of room to provide choice.

If your math students are trying to master one of the Functions Standards, for example, “Build a function that models a relationship between two quantities,” you as the teacher could name the function, and there could be a singular correct answer. But students could select the type of function they want to build, determine what the two quantities are, and demonstrate their own unique relationship. Providing this type of choice honors student interests. When students are interested in

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It is incredible the types of feedback students provide if you simply make the time (usually no more than 20-30 minutes) for their voice to be heard.”

## RYAN HUELS

Assistant Principal,  
Oregon, Ill.

the work at hand, they are more likely to be engaged.

**Choice of Process:** Here's a simple way to help students process information. Set up two stations: One is “Write First, Talk Second,” and the other is “Talk First, Write Second.” By doing this, we honor the ways in which people work through new information.

I know that I, for example, like to write things down to really get to the heart of what I think before I open my mouth and share anything publicly. Writing helps shape and deepen my thinking and gives me more confidence as a public speaker. One of my colleagues, though, always wants to “talk things through” before writing anything down. For him, talking is a way of getting feedback on his ideas, which helps him shape and organize his ideas before writing. A simple choice of process like this, set up physically by splitting the room in half (or several small stations) can really jump-start students. Those that normally don't like to talk feel much more prepared and therefore comfortable once they have time to write; those that don't normally know what to write

have a lot of ideas to work with once they've participated in the discourse.

**Helping Students Make Good Choices:**

Offering students choice is challenging because they aren't accustomed to driving their own educational experiences. When I ask teachers if they let students choose their partners or groups, I often hear concerns about students only picking their friends. In a recent unit, I offered students three choices: a novel, a thematic lens to study the text, and at least one peer to work with. Before letting them choose, they previewed each of the texts and themes and then wrote three reflections. The reflection prompts were:

- “The advantages or disadvantages of choosing a theme first are...”
- “The advantages or disadvantages of choosing a novel first are...”
- “The advantages or disadvantages of choosing a partner first are...”

We discussed their ideas, and I opened up the floor to questions. Then I shared a Google Form that said: “Based on my reflection, I think I should first choose a...” Not one student selected “partner” from the drop-down menu. Only after they had chosen a theme and a novel did they find other students who had decided to work on the same things.

As teachers, we make a lot of decisions. But must we make them all? No. Student choice is rooted in equity. Student choice is rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy. Students deserve to choose content, process, pace, and product—to drive their own educational experiences. We want to make the best decisions we can for students, but if we let go of some of our power, we can create a co-constructed classroom with students. And classrooms like this see highly engaged students.

**Five ways to promote engagement**

Amanda Lescas is an ESOL instructional specialist with the Palm Beach County school



*district in Florida. Amanda works with teachers and students in grade K-12 and is passionate about finding ways to make instruction engaging, equitable, and accessible for all:*

I spent the first 10 years of my career as an elementary teacher before I moved up to the high school level. My first day as a high school teacher was terrifying. The students were taller than I, they rolled their eyes at my “jokes,” and I got lost on the way back from the teacher work room (seriously).

Looking back on that first week, I don’t know how I made it. It took awhile for me to get students engaged in my class. You see, by the time students are in high school, they are experts at “playing school.” The trick is to move the students from compliance to engagement. As the years went on, I learned what I feel are the keys to student engagement at the secondary level.

- **Community above everything else.**

We have to create a safe place for our students to take risks and feel empowered to learn. This happens by creating a safe community. Get to know your students by taking a few minutes at the beginning of class to talk with them. Share your life with them. Have them get to know one another. Your classroom should feel like a home. Important: This has to be authentic. If you are genuinely interested in connecting with your students, a community will be created organically.

- **All means all.** In order for students to be engaged, teachers must expect 100 percent participation at all times. This is not punitive. Instead, this sends a message to your students that every voice matters, that every student has something to add to each lesson. You should seek input from your students frequently, and every student should participate, every day. Get in the habit of randomly calling on students, let go of hand raising, and allow for classroom conversations. (Note: This only works once you have established a safe community.)

- **Provide support.** Every student should feel safe to take risks, but we must provide the scaffolds needed to take these risks. Add sentence frames on your board to help students in their oral or written response. Display a word wall in your classroom with key vocabulary terms. Allow your students

to use their notes or textbooks. Let students seek help from a classmate. Learning is a fluid process, and setting students up for success will help ensure that all are engaged and participate.

- **Provide choice.** Is there more than one way for a student to show mastery of a standard? What would happen if you opened up an activity and allowed students to choose how they wanted to complete it? Using a choice menu or giving students the freedom to come up with their own project can vastly increase engagement. Can classwork be done in groups or with partners? What if we gave the students that choice? Trust your students to own their learning. They will surprise you.
- **Be vulnerable.** Admit your mistakes. Seek feedback from your students and be open to changing your instruction to meet their needs. What do they want to learn about? What makes them excited to come to your class every day? Ask them! Consider creating an anonymous survey through Google forms and giving it to your students. Remember, it is their classroom, too. If you truly want them engaged in your content, you must seek honest feedback.

Teaching high school students has been, without a doubt, the most rewarding part of my career. These students are smart, clever, and have so much to offer to the world. They are eager to create connections with you and thrive on engaging, exciting curriculum. Open up your classroom to them and you will create a community of engaged learners!

### Listening to students

*Ryan Huels is currently an assistant principal at Oregon Elementary School in Oregon, Ill., after an extended tenure as an early-elementary classroom teacher. Ryan is an advocate for creating a more student-focused learning environment centered around the principles of positive relationships, restorative practices, and family engagement:*

Schools can tackle the issue of declining student engagement as they get older by working to increase student ownership in the learning process.

As students reach middle school, they have gotten accustomed to a tried and true learning experience, and it is our job as educators to provide a more meaningful

experience and connect their learning to the world around them.

Our elementary school has worked to develop various leadership opportunities for students to engage them in the learning process. We have students lead assemblies, greet visitors, plan service projects, and assist in younger classrooms. Not only does this increase their engagement to their school, but it helps them develop a sense of pride as an individual and realize the greater good that can occur when they take on a leadership role.

Another way our school has been able to captivate students as they get older is to meet them where they are by creating authentic learning experiences about the content they are discovering. Our social studies classes have created “Wax Museums” that bring content alive and allow students to present their knowledge in an authentic manner to their peers.

As a building leader, I have made an effort to increase student engagement by giving students an opportunity for their voice to be heard. Too often, we go through school improvement efforts or changes without consulting our most important stakeholders—kids! I have made it a priority to hold student-advisory meetings in which I meet with a cross-section of upper-elementary students and ask them the following three questions:

What do you love about our school?

What do you not enjoy about our school?

What changes would you make to our school?

It is incredible the types of feedback students provide if you simply make the time (usually no more than 20-30 minutes) for their voice to be heard. Some of my favorite emails I get are from students attempting to persuade me to make a certain schedule change, add more recess, or adjust a lunch menu. I always attempt to make it a point to follow up with that student for a few minutes to hear more about their suggestion and either explain what went into a particular decision or work with them to come up with a better solution!

If a student provides feedback or asks a question that you may not have a good reason as to why we are doing something, then that may be an invitation to re-evaluate a particular program. We cannot fret about declining student engagement if we do not give students the opportunity to be heard.

### Make sure students feel ‘seen’

*Joy Hamm has taught 11 years in a variety of English-language settings, ranging from*

*kindergarten to adult learners. The last few years working with middle and high school Newcomers and completing her M.Ed. in TESOL have fostered stronger advocacy in her district and beyond. She loves living in other countries and being a language-learner herself:*

Disinterested students generally haven't fit into academic school norms, which often results in years of perceived failure and increased disengagement. One strategy schools can utilize to combat this trend is through the individual impact of a teacher, counselor, custodian, or another adult who is willing to invest a few minutes each day using the approach, "You are seen, you are respected, and you have something to offer the world."

**You are seen:** Find out what the student enjoys outside of school. What hobbies, jobs, sports, or musical interests can you relate to and discuss with this high schooler? Whom can you talk to in his/her family to better understand family assets or responsibilities? Recognize high schoolers by being a listener as they voice their opinions or share their experiences.

**You are respected:** A brief pause in our hectic days to greet students at the classroom door, to look at each of our students in the eye, and to shake hands or share a fist bump goes a long way. Also, increasing cultural appreciation by valuing our students' diverse backgrounds and providing opportunities for students to be the expert speaks volumes to those who may otherwise feel marginalized.

**You have something to offer the world:**

If you can't discover what motivates a disengaged student, start creating leadership opportunities that turn the annoyance/weakness you observe into a strength. For instance, a student who is always on her phone or distracting others in the class might be a perfect candidate to lead a short lesson or class discussion. Or give the silent stonewaller a journal to write or draw connections to the lesson and display appropriate pages on the classroom walls. When students have something meaningful to offer, they are more likely to invest themselves in the endeavor.

In conclusion, as a current remedial teacher and foster parent, the teens in my life emphasize that the newest classroom tech tool or most creative lesson will quickly be forgotten. These older students continue showing up at school every day because of an adult (often a teacher) who persevered past their angst and made them feel valued. ■

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