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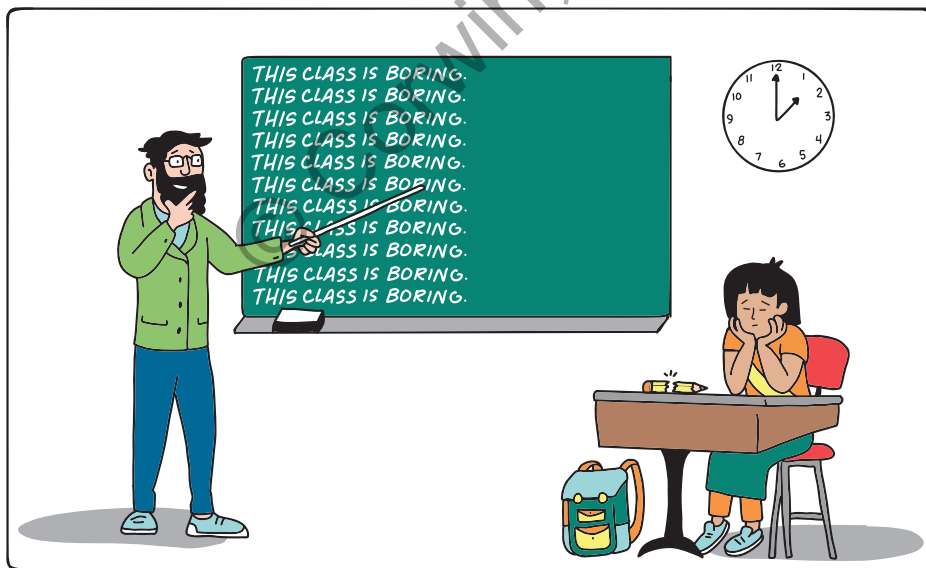
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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Seen, Heard, and Valued*.

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Engaging Classrooms

Create Environments in Which Students Are Curious, Interested, Focus, and Persist



WHEN THE BEHAVIOR CHART DIDN'T WORK TO KEEP STEPHEN ENGAGED, MR. KRAUS DETERMINED THAT HIS CLASS WAS JUST BORING.



Learning Intentions	Success Criteria
I am learning about strategies to use to “hook” students’ interest in the learning experience.	I can identify strategies I’ve used to hook students’ engagement, and how to balance participation to hear each student’s voice.
I am learning about how to use clarity, choice, and relevance to keep students engaged in learning.	I can identify strategies I’ve used and new strategies to try for maintaining students’ interest within my lessons.
I am learning about ways to balance participation so that each student’s voice is protected and heard.	I can identify specific challenges to hearing each student’s voice in lessons I’ve taught before and select or create specific strategies to use in the future.

“10% of your grade will come from your participation.” How many of us read this on a college or high school syllabus? And how was participation defined? No one needed to have it explained; it meant voluntary verbal participation in class, or “speaking up” in class. This requirement can be stressful not only to those who have social anxiety but those who are natural introverts, those who are new to the language of instruction, and those who already, because of past experiences with exclusion for any of the ways we’ve discussed, are uncomfortable using their voice in this public, verbal way.

We all know the student who speaks aloud in front of the group is not always the most engaged student. Extraversion is not the same as engagement, and engagement is what we really care about. There are many ways students can engage in the content and conversation of a class; participation isn’t “one size fits all.” Those of you reading this book span the range of intro/extroversion. Extroversion does not make one a better educator, and it doesn’t make a learner a better student. Our classroom practices and ways we measure and support engagement need to be safe for all learners, whether they are comfortable or able to participate by speaking in front of the group or not. Speaking up in class is not a proxy for engagement.

But every teacher can relate, with occasional difficulty in gaining and maintaining students’ engagement. “He just can’t sit still.” “She never has what she needs to get started with her work.” “He won’t finish anything without 20 reminders to get back to work.” “He’s off in space somewhere half of the time, not at all with the class.” When a student is having trouble engaging in the classroom, do we catch ourselves attributing the problem to the student? After all, engagement is a behavior, and behaviors are a choice, right? But what if we reframe our dilemma with engagement?

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Surely, you can remember a college lecture or two where you had trouble staying awake and on topic. As excited as we are as teachers about our content or lessons (and this energy does go a long way in garnering student interest), not all students share in our enthusiasm. We—and our students—all have topics we prefer more than others. What if we instead ask what the students' behavior says about our teaching? Sometimes, the difficulty isn't the student at all—it's that we weren't engaging enough! Our charge, then, is to find a way to deliver each lesson in a way that captures each student's curiosity and sense of wonder and show the relevance and importance to their everyday lives or interests.

WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Our students' focus, participation, and interest in the activities of their learning are what we call "engagement" (Posey, 2019). But the benefits of engagement extend far beyond what we can see in the moment. Beyond getting through a lesson or classroom routine, engagement serves a broader purpose, over time, of developing self-directed learners. This impact is lasting and can change the way they approach learning for a lifetime (Concentration/persistence/engagement: $d = .56$).



In an engaging classroom, we intentionally build student interest in culturally responsive ways and build self-regulation skills within our students to engage and persist. Our goal is that by providing these *external* means to secure and maintain their engagement, over time, students will develop their own *internal* curiosities in content that interests them and be driven to engage independently in learning, with no external supports.

The reasons for engaging students are not simply to keep a student involved in a lesson. Our long-term goal is for students to gain the skills of curiosity, focus, persistence, and self-regulation. Self-directed learners focus their attention in order to reach a goal, and they do so, not for a grade, but solely for

the desire to learn. The four steps of progression toward self-directed learning (adapted from Hidi & Renninger, 2006) are

1. Initial interest, prompted by a teacher,
2. Sustained engagement, prompted by a teacher,
3. Internally driven engagement, and
4. Long-term, internally driven reengagement.

Teaching students to be self-directed is probably more important than the specifics of the last lesson any of us taught (self-directed learning: $d = .67$), and so our efforts to engage students matter.



REMOVING BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

There are countless reasons students may not be engaged, and those reasons are contextual. At any given point in time, a student in your class may find the work to be too far beyond their current skills, and they don't have the confidence they can do it. Another student's relationships with friends and loneliness may be weighing heavily on their mind. One may not feel a sense of belonging because they are excluded by their classmates because of their race. Another one may be bullied by others in the class because of their gender identity. Another may have experienced a traumatic event at home last night. A student could have depression or anxiety that is interrupting the ability to interact with others in the class. Another may be new to the language of instruction and is having difficulty just grasping the task. A student may not have the tools or strategies to cope and persist when the content feels too hard.

Unfortunately, we have a history of using grades as rewards and punishments in order to shape students into compliance.

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But compliance isn't even the goal! We aim to develop our students to be the movers and shakers, and the risk takers—the opposite of a default of compliance. Engagement is not as simple as “some students are engaged and others aren't.” Engagement is fluid, differing by student, by day, by week, by content area, class composition, and even by teacher.



REFLECTION

When you think about the students in your classroom, how do you know when they are engaged? For those students who have difficulty with engagement at one point or another in their day, what are some of the reasons “behind the scenes” that you think are contributing?

To engage each student, we have to presume variability in students' interest and plan our engagement strategies with the least engaged student in mind. The student who finds history boring is on our mind as we think about how we will engage in our next history lesson. We prepare to engage students in the math lesson with the student in mind who is afraid of math and says he's “bad at math.” The student who hates school is exactly who we are planning to engage as we design our next

language arts lesson. If we can garner *these* students' interest and support them to feel confident in these lessons, we've probably engaged all of the students in the class.

The "Hook": Securing Interest



REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on a favorite lesson from your childhood; a lesson that immediately got your attention and has stuck with you all of these years. Describe this lesson.

In your reflection, perhaps the content was something with which you had a strong emotional connection. Other teachers have shared stories of fascinating materials, very difficult challenges that they were finally able to conquer, teachers doing things that were silly or unusual that grabbed their attention. What no one ever mentions in these lessons is sitting and listening to a lecture, watching the teacher solve a problem on the board, or reading a piece of text and answering questions on a worksheet. Our teachers immediately hooked us by getting

our attention in some way. If you ever have trouble gaining enough interest to get anywhere with your students, return to the trifecta of novelty, enthusiasm, and relevance.



REFLECTION

Think about the most engaging teacher you ever had in school. Now think about their verbal and nonverbal language that made them engaging. What are 10 words or phrases you'd use to describe this teacher?

I'll bet most of you used words like these: warm, funny, kind, gave eye contact, cared, enthusiastic, unpredictable, practical.

Enthusiasm isn't the whole picture, but it sure is important! Do you remember the 1980s movie, *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*? If you've seen it, you no doubt remember the boring economics teacher played by Ben Stein. "Anyone? Anyone? Beuller?" Find a video online if you haven't seen it. It's easy to put our finger on a boring lecture! The lesson: even if you aren't feeling totally energetic about a lesson or on a particular day, you have to "fake it 'til you make it!" Don't curb your enthusiasm! It's the animated nonverbals, bright eyes, the movement around the room, removing the barrier of a desk or podium, the intonation in our voice, and making warm eye contact with our students. It's our positive energy! This isn't to imply we all have to find our inner Lucile Ball, but that we definitely don't want to drift into the lane of the boring economics teacher, either.

Novelty is also an important part of that "hook" (Palmer et al., 2016). When our students are curious, their learning explodes (curiosity: $d = .90$). I remember a lesson in eighth grade that really "hooked" our class. This was the now popular lesson for

teaching skills of expanding our written language with details by interpreting literally students' directions to do something. In this lesson, my eighth grade teacher used peanut butter sandwich making as the task. She stood in front of the class with a jar of peanut butter, knife, bags of bread, and a plate. And we all know how this goes, right? Some of the directions led her to put the jar of peanut butter on top of the bag of bread. Others caused her to put the knife in the jar and then use it to roll the jar around on a slice of bread. The class roared with laughter, was curious about what was happening, and worked collaboratively to think about language and revise the directions to achieve the desired result—a recognizable peanut butter sandwich. The lesson included novel materials, was funny, and was definitely unexpected! And our teacher was completely energetic about it. Novelty and humor are two sure-fire ways to “hook” our students. Humor alone isn't going to have an impact on student learning, but any time we can choose something a student is already interested in or something silly or novel, we are more likely to spark their curiosity and it's easier to lead them down the path of learning.



Balancing Novelty With Routine

Although novelty is a useful tool to capture students' interest, when everything is novel, the day can feel chaotic and overwhelming. Classroom routines and protocols are a simple way we can reduce cognitive load for students to engage. Imagine going to work each day and not being sure in which classroom you'll be in that day, what the schedule is for the day, and how the classroom space will be arranged and equipped when you arrive. You'd probably get through it, but you'd have to exert a lot of energy just thinking about how to organize yourself, your teaching, and the environment all day. What an unnecessary distraction this would be!

Established routines of the classroom or task support students by taking away the need to learn a new approach each time and

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can instead focus on the more cognitively complex parts of the task. The routines established in the protocols of a workshop model of writing are an example of this. Each time the teacher moves the class into a writing activity, the students already have experience with the flow of the work. Because students are not distracted by having to think about where they will go, how the prompts will look, or what the expected responses will be, they can focus on the writing task in front of them.

Provide Relevance

Most of you have probably at some point tried to persuade a young child to eat a vegetable they don't like (or think they don't like). It can be monumentally difficult to entice that first bite. So, what do we do to make the veggies more appealing? Exhausted families everywhere have learned that when we pair the vegetable with cheese, or ranch dressing, or "sneak" the veggie in a dish they do like, they are much more likely to have a taker. In some ways, engagement is like the ranch dressing. The learning intention is still there, but our goal is to drench it in so much delicious "dressing," that no one could resist. Just as this is more difficult with some foods than others, making certain lessons interesting is easier than it is for others. But when we can find ways to attach the learning experiences we plan to students' existing interests or goals they've set for themselves, we have built relevance and are well on our way to meaningful engagement.

How often have we heard a student ask, "Why do we have to know this?" or say, "We'll never need this again." Sometimes students feel like they just have to get through the lessons, units, or course. Sometimes *we* feel like they just have to get through it (insert your least favorite outcome or standard to teach). How can we find the value and relevance to help students see this? Connecting the learning experience to something that has meaning for students is important to securing their interest. By connecting to students' prior experiences or offering provocations, students see the relevance of content they may not normally see the need to learn.

Often, relevance starts with asking students to reflect on a memory. “What are some of your family holiday traditions?” We build on this relevance by posing provocations for students to reflect upon. “Think back to a time you were afraid. How did you get through that experience?” “What was something that was very hard for you to learn but now you are really good at? What strategies did you use to accomplish the goal? How might those strategies apply to something you are learning now?” Asking students to recall a memory and then applying that connection to new content not only gains engagement but serves as a mnemonic to make information more accessible. Connecting learning to students’ prior knowledge makes a difference in their learning (integrate prior knowledge: $d = .93$).



Teachers can also show relevance through creating an engaging, shared experience to build upon. This could be accomplished by showing a video, using field experience, or allowing exploration within the classroom. We can all recall a lesson that stuck with us because of the relevance we saw to our lives. One of my colleagues, Nicole, described a lesson from when she was in school that caused her deep reflection. This was an activity in which the class used surveying equipment with the guidance of their teachers to lay out the form of slave trading ships and then were asked to lie down in the amount of space listed in ship logs in the way that slaves would have been loaded. They lay like sardines, crammed in for only a few minutes, but it was enough to begin to imagine the horrors of the passage across the ocean. Their teachers asked them to imagine that they couldn’t speak the language of their captors, the person next to them passing away on the journey, hearing a loved one crying and being unable to see or get to them. The lesson built relevance through a shared experience and provocations, and its impact has never left Nicole. Let’s consider how creating a shared experience could look at multiple grade divisions.

GRADE	LEARNING INTENTION	LEARNING EXPERIENCE
High school	I am learning about the differences between modern and historical language in the arts.	After reading <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , the teacher shows her class a film that is a modern-day adaptation of the play. Students create their own modern adaptations of another of Shakespeare's works.
Middle school	I am learning about the concepts of kinetic and potential energy.	Students explore energy with blocks, toy cars ramps, marbles, dominoes, and simple pulleys. They use a Rube Goldberg machine.
Elementary school	I am learning about the states of matter.	Combining colored water and cornstarch to make a strange new substance that is semisolid. Students create illustrations or models and explanations, either written or verbal.
Preschool	I am learning to use lots of words to describe things, to sort based on size, and to cooperate with my friends.	Using pumpkins the class chose at the pumpkin patch, as well as pictures that the students took, students move between stations, sorting pumpkins and describing them.

In all cases, a shared experience of something novel sparks student interest for a new challenge. Yes, each of these skills could have been approached with a traditional reading and classroom lecture or discussion but, now, the students are more invested. With their interest piqued, teachers are able to provide them with a challenge or series of challenges creating a shared goal for them to reach individually or in groups.