

# 7 Ways to Spark Engagement

Strengthening students' sense of connectedness to their learning is a worthwhile goal, and there are some simple ways to do it.

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## Student Engagement



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Student engagement is the Mega Millions of education: When you hear about it, it seems so easy to win—and then you read about the odds. The good news is that there are effective strategies for boosting student engagement, and they're considerably more likely to pay off than playing the lottery.

A growing body of research in education and the social sciences suggests that students' curiosity can be stimulated in ways that strengthen their connectedness to lessons, interactions with each other, and willingness to commit to learning goals. There are simple techniques that teachers can use during a lesson to boost curiosity, and thus engagement, among students—especially older ones, who are at greater risk for losing interest.

## **Boosting Student Engagement**

**1. Harness the power of mystery and puzzles:** As storytellers from Scheherazade to the writers of *Stranger Things* have known, humans have a compulsive need to find out what happens next. We love solving puzzles and finding sequences and patterns. So introduce your next new unit with a mystery.

Try posing a broad question to groups of three or four students, such as: “What would happen if a butterfly’s habitat was suffering a severe drought during the pupa stage?” or “What if Tupac had lived?” Let the groups discuss and present their justifications to the class. The realization students need to come to: Conjecture is a legitimate starting point for learning.

**2. Pause after asking a question—and again after getting an answer:** Rushing through questions and answers doesn’t help most students. We all process information differently, and taking an answer from the first student whose hand shoots up means others may abandon the question before they’ve truly processed it.

Pause with purpose after every question, and again after every answer. That second pause helps other students reconsider the question and reflect on the first answer.

Remember, too, that choral responses aren’t just for younger students: When everyone repeats and responds at the same time, the risk that they’re not actively involved in the content is reduced. While we’d all like to

see education become as individualized as possible, there's something affirming about being part of the group every now and then, even for older students.

**3. Craft fewer—but deeper—questions:** One or two thoughtfully phrased questions can lead to a deep discussion. Try using questions that begin with “What if” or “How might,” and aim for questions that don't have an undisputed yes or no answer and that don't rely on simple recalling of facts. The goal should be to foster mature thought and collaborative discussion.

**4. Introduce controversy:** Debating an issue and trying to persuade others are great ways to become invested in a topic. This is true not only in current affairs, but in literary and historical analysis. You might pose questions such as, “Why do you think the character responded as she did?” or “What do you suppose happened to John Smith when the crew accused him of mutiny?” You'll have to be prepared to step in if the exchange of views threatens to deteriorate into an overly emotional argument.

**5. Mine the gap:** The knowledge gap, that is. A certain amount of background knowledge needs to be delivered by direct instruction; then a combination of guidance, self-direction, and curiosity can propel learning indefinitely. If you can lead a student to recognize that she knows something about a subject, and that she'll be better off if she pushes herself to learn a little more about it, curiosity will kick in and motivate her to make that extra effort.

Ask students what they know about a topic, and then ask what they think they don't know about it. Ask which of the “don't know” items they think are most important for them to learn. Do they seem to be guessing? That's all right—you're asking them to comment on something they've already conceded they don't know. Examining their knowledge and capacity to learn is the whole point.

**6. Give students a WIIFM (what's in it for me?):** A student who asks, “Why should I know this?” is pointing toward a promising teaching tactic. Students must see why content is important to them. How will they use it later in life? How do people use it in the real world? For instance, you might know how a given subject relates to students’ families’ quality of life right now. We can give students relevant projects through which to apply and show what they know.

**7. Encourage dynamic collaboration:** With the right guidance, collaborative small-group work leads students to build social skills while also obtaining knowledge. They learn how individual and group success are mutually dependent, and how to fill gaps in peers’ knowledge—and they do this in an environment that’s engaging because it’s social. Teachers can consistently build in short, informal collaboration techniques such as [Mix](#), [Freeze](#), [Pair](#).

Virtually all teachers already use these techniques to some degree. But they become much more powerful when we view them as part of a coordinated, intentional strategy to boost student curiosity.