

Design Question 5
What will I do to engage students?

Cognitive, Affective and Social Interaction Strategies For Promoting Student Engagement

This design question encourages teachers to think about and plan for ways to engage students with the content of instruction. This should not be viewed as a need to entertain students, but as a way to capture their attention in ways that keep them involved in the learning. When students are active participants in the learning, engagement and retention increase. This requires a multi-faceted approach that focuses on the five factors associated with high levels of student engagement:

- High energy
- Missing information
- The self-system (the system that controls what we attend to)
- Mild pressure
- Mild controversy and competition

In this self-guided activity, we focus on cognitive, affective and social interaction strategies that promote student engagement. These include:

- Demonstrating Intensity and Enthusiasm for Content
- Engaging Students in Friendly Controversy
- Providing Opportunities for Students to Talk About Themselves
- Presenting Unusual Information

Demonstrating Intensity and Enthusiasm for Content

Dale Carnegie once said, “Enthusiasm is Contagious – and so is the lack of it.” This quote can be applied to the correlation between teacher enthusiasm about the content and levels of student engagement with the content. In situations where the material is critical for learning to occur, teacher intensity and enthusiasm should be clearly evident. However, when used too frequently, the effects could be diminished. Intensity and enthusiasm do not necessitate that teachers must act in ways that are unnatural for them, only that the teacher’s tone and mannerisms communicate to students that the content is important and they should pay close attention. Behaviors that communicate this include:

- Directly stating why they are expected to learn the content
- Making connections to the personal interests of students and the world beyond the classroom
- Using a variety of verbal and nonverbal signals (i.e., gestures, vocal inflections, eye contact, pacing) to reinforce learning
- Using nonlinguistic representations to help students make connections
- Making direct statements about the relevance and importance of the content
- Describing personal stories and connections about the content

Engaging Students in Friendly Controversy

Many opportunities arise in the classroom to take advantage of differing student opinions as a way to enhance student engagement. The most important aspect of this topic, however, is the emphasis on the word friendly. The goal is to keep students focused on the content rather than becoming frustrated by a debate that becomes too heated. For this reason, teachers should use caution when selecting classroom issues around which to engage students in friendly controversy. In addition, it is important that as many students as possible are involved in the discussion to keep levels of engagement high. Below are some sample strategies that can be used to involve students in friendly controversy.

1. **Debating:** Students can be taught the basics of formal debating, such as supporting evidence and assuming a position related to an idea or assertion.
2. **O-P-V:** Students are asked to defend the “opposite point of view” from the one they agree with or support.
3. **Seminars:** Students are placed into groups of three to five members where they examine a resource (i.e., text, video) that expresses a debatable perspective related to the content being studied. Students are assigned roles such as moderator, recorder, timekeeper and reporter.
4. **Varying Perspectives:** Topics that lend themselves to a range of viewpoints on the same issue, event or process are used to give students an opportunity to take a stand and defend their position. Students can choose or be assigned a position to assume and whole group debriefing can be used to compare the various perspectives.
5. **Expert Opinions:** This strategy involves having students research the opinions of experts who have conflicting viewpoints about the issue or topic being studied. Small groups can debate the merits of the perspectives and evidence to support that expert’s position.

Something to ponder...

Why do you think friendly controversy has the effect of enhancing engagement? How have you used it in the past? What are some new ideas you have?

Providing Opportunities for Students to Talk About Themselves

One of the five factors for engagement supported in the research is that of the self-system. When teachers tap into students' desires to share their interests and experiences with others, motivation and engagement will increase. The key is to tie opportunities for students to talk about themselves with the content of the lesson to facilitate a sense of ownership for their own learning. Making connections between their own lives and the learning facilitates a personal investment. Here are some formal strategies that can assist you in facilitating these ties.

1. Use interest surveys throughout the year to gather feedback on aspects of the curriculum students want to explore. The results gathered can be used to build student interests into lesson plans.
2. Involve students in formal or informal learning profiles to enable them to understand how and when they learn best. Building student choice into activities that allow them to match their preferences builds ownership.
3. Provide an opportunity at relevant points in the learning for students to share their personal observations and connections regarding the content. Personal experiences and interests can be woven into the processing of content through the use of metaphors, graphic organizers or other nonlinguistic representations.

Something to ponder...

What other situations can you think of for providing students with opportunities to talk about themselves in relation to your content?

Presenting Unusual Information

Unusual information and little-known facts can engage the imagination and attention of students. When fun and intriguing facts are shared about the content it helps to bring the learning alive for students. Teachers and students can both be involved in finding appealing facts through activities built into the lessons.

1. *WebQuests*: Provide opportunities for students to do electronic research on topics that would yield interesting information. The most unusual finds can be shared through a "one-minute headline" or other fast-paced forum.
2. *"Ripley's Believe It or Not"*: Students can compile a running database of little-known information about classroom content. The information can be added to and revised from year to year.
3. *History Files*: Some topics lend themselves to varying views and perspectives based on the historical era in which they are studied. Allowing students to investigate how a topic was perceived in another time can be enlightening and amusing.
4. *Guest Speakers*: Individuals who can share a personal experience related to the lesson content communicate a real-world perspective that complements the classroom learning. Encourage your speakers to share details that students would be unable to learn from traditional resources.

Action Planning for Promoting Student Engagement Through Cognitive, Affective and Social Strategies

Action Step 1: Reflecting on Use of Intensity and Enthusiasm for Content

How well do you think you show enthusiasm in the classroom? What are your strengths and/or weaknesses in this area?

To what extent do students pick up on and internalize your enthusiasm?

What strategies can you use to increase your effectiveness in demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm? What benefits do you expect to see in student engagement?

Action Step 2: Friendly Controversy

When have you engaged students in friendly controversy? What was the activity?

What new ideas do you have about using this strategy with your content?

Action Step 3: Providing Opportunities for Students to Talk About Themselves

Design a simple survey for students regarding the content of an upcoming unit. Gather feedback on topics they find particularly interesting, connections they have to the content OR learning activities they would prefer to complete.

Using feedback from the survey, incorporate what you learned about students into the planning of your lesson activities and assignments.

What did you learn about your students' preferences?

What did you notice about students' engagement with the content when using this approach?

Action Step 4: Presenting Unusual Information

What types of unusual information do you know related to your subject matter?

How do you use interesting facts or unusual information in your teaching? Can you identify additional ways now?

What are some ways you might use the strategies described in this self-guided activity for presenting unusual information?
