

Teachers can plan for student engagement so that it's more than just decoration.

**Kristina J. Doubet
and Jessica A. Hockett**

Please, please, please try to just shake it up sometimes. Give us a variety of work and activities and don't just stick to the same type of lesson every day."

This student's plea, reported in Grant Wiggins' 2014 Annual Student Survey of Academic Experience, reflects the longing of students in classrooms everywhere. Embedded in this learner's request are the top three culprits of classroom boredom, echoed by numerous high school students in the same survey: "Our assignments are just busywork," "There's no variety in what we do from day to day," and "The teacher talks too much."

It's tempting to dismiss such comments as the predictable complaints of adolescents who are inundated with compelling

and distracting content from screens and social media. But similar themes emerged in the responses of elementary and middle school students who were surveyed with the same questions (Wiggins, 2014a, 2014b). Both common sense and research tell us that an engaged student at any grade level will invest—and therefore achieve—more than will a disengaged student (Sousa and Tomlinson, 2011; Hattie, 2012; Walkington, 2013). So instead of disregarding these students' complaints, we should use them to catapult us toward more effective planning.

How then can teachers plan lessons that address required content and standards while promoting student investment? We offer the following four practical principles that address sources of disengagement.

1. Build teacher-student and student-student relationships.

There is little doubt that student-teacher connections have a powerful correlation with student success (Hattie, 2012). That's why so many teachers administer a getting-to-know-you inventory at the beginning of the year. Yet, when presented with the statement, "My teachers really know me," only 7.3 percent of surveyed students responded that they strongly agreed (Wiggins, 2014c). This disconnect indicates that simply gathering information about students is not sufficient to build relationships. Surveys are a step in the right direction, but they matter far less than how teachers act on the information revealed.

Consider the following survey questions:

- What do you enjoy spending time on?
- What do you struggle with? Explain.
- If you could invite anyone to a dinner party, whom would you invite and why?
- What's the best story you've ever seen or heard (from a book, article, movie, TV show, friend, or family member)?

If examined carefully, the results of such an inventory can provide contexts for math story problems, writing prompts, and even fodder for instructional groupings (for instance, "dinner

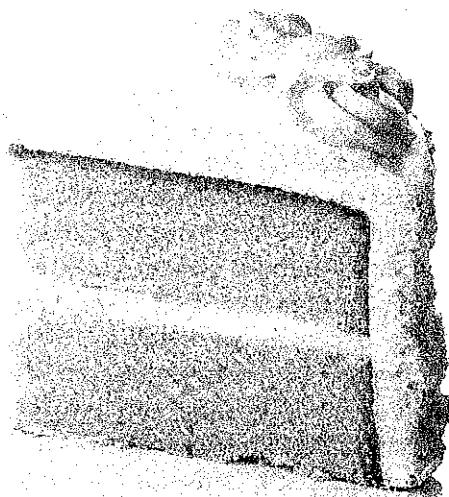
party" groups). By using survey information in this manner, teachers can connect students' personal lives to what they are learning *and* foster student-student connections.

Of course, relationships aren't built in one day at the beginning of the year, but over the course of the entire year. Teachers can integrate community-strengthening activities into normal academic routines to help a class gel, release

When students see themselves reflected in the "business" of class, they become more comfortable working with their classmates.

tension, and exercise courtesy: for instance, asking students to "fist bump" one another as they complete a task, or displaying fun questions for students to discuss once they are finished with their work, such as, "What television character is most like the protagonist in this story? How so?"

When students see themselves reflected in the "business" of class, they become more comfortable working with their classmates. The result



© OLIVIER BLONDEAU/ISTOCK

is an interactive, open atmosphere that lays a solid foundation for promoting academic success.

2. Create interest through concepts and essential questions.

Let's face it: Most students will *not* jump up and down with excitement at the mention of topics like punctuation or the Civil War. Likewise, the statement "this is in the standards" is a less-than-compelling motivator for most learners of all ages. One way teachers can create interest in curricular content is by using two lenses: concepts and essential questions.

A concept is a broad, abstract idea—usually one or two words—that is universal and timeless (Erickson, 2002). Concepts can be discipline-specific (*chronology* in history/social studies or

Essential questions pique even the most reluctant learner's curiosity, begging to be discussed, debated, and explored.

composition in visual arts) or general (*perspective, change, patterns, conflict*). Teachers can probe the conceptual connections by considering what a particular topic is "a study in." For instance, punctuation could be "a study in the conventional and unconventional." Framing the content in this manner provides connections to students' lives and to the real role and purpose of punctuation. Additional examples include the following:

- Cells: A study in systems.
- Story: A study in power.
- Fractions: A study in relationships.
- The Civil War: A study in gain and loss.

Each of these examples provides an entry point into the content from students' lives and experiences. All students are part of multiple systems (family, school, peers); they understand what it's like to have and to lack power; they have experienced how relationships shape their identities; and they can connect with the idea that most good things come with a cost.

Teachers can use essential questions to propel

students from conceptual connections to investigation and study. Essential questions are provocative, ongoing, recursive inquiries that drive the study of a discipline, topic, or idea (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013). They reflect what the learner really would wonder under optimal conditions. An essential question for "punctuation, a study in the conventional and unconventional" might be, "What choices do writers have with 'the rules'? Who or what decides?"

A rich essential question has potential for engaging the youngest child and the expert alike. For example, "How do living things stay alive?" might focus a primary-grades science unit on the basic needs of living things. Such questions pique even the most reluctant learner's curiosity, begging to be discussed, debated, and explored.

3. Gauge and respond to student progress frequently.

As students wrestle with complex ideas, they will inevitably progress at different rates and encounter "road bumps" along the way. To keep students engaged in worthwhile work, teachers must gather evidence about how students are grasping content and where they are getting stuck. However, like responses from student surveys, this formative assessment evidence must be used in order to have instructional power.

Therefore, when planning lessons, teachers may consider reserving time—perhaps the first 15 minutes of class—to revisit issues arising from the previous lesson's formative assessment results. This might mean answering a few intriguing questions, addressing a common misconception, or giving students different tasks for practice or reinforcement that address needs revealed in the assessments.

As a routine, this habit has several positive outcomes that influence student engagement. First, when students see that the teacher has taken time to read and address what they have written, they are more likely to invest in giving honest responses. Second, students who see their teachers using their responses to drive instruction become more comfortable with the reality that everyone has different learning needs.

Teachers are often reticent to acknowledge students' different learning trajectories, fearing

that students will “feel bad” if their classmates know they “don’t get it.” But in classrooms where teachers respond to formative assessment evidence regularly, questions become the rule rather than the exception. In fact, surveyed students at all grade levels remarked that receiving extra teacher assistance, when needed, facilitated their learning because “every student learns at [his/her] own pace” (Wiggins, 2014a).

4. Offer choice.

There are inevitably spots in the curriculum—or even times of the year or day—that bring out the reluctance to learn in many (if not all) students. After repeated failed efforts to engage students at these points, a teacher might conclude, “Some kids just aren’t motivated.” But *all* human beings have passions, kinships, and areas of intrigue that motivate them to learn.

Few things motivate learners of all ages more than choice. Choice not only satisfies the innate human desire for autonomy and ownership, but can also increase student engagement in a task. Teachers can offer choice by appealing to two kinds of interests: personal and situational (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001).

Personal interests are those that the student brings to the classroom. Students “own” personal interests and develop them over time. Examples include playing video games, shooting hoops, and cartooning. One of many ways that teachers can proactively uncover personal interests is by asking students to make a pie chart representing their personal interests proportionally as different “slices.”

Harnessing students’ personal interests may be as simple as allowing students to listen to podcasts on the topic of their choice with the purpose of examining organizational structure. Alternatively, when students practice math skills by calculating discounts and sales tax, a teacher might provide them with ads for products

FIGURE 1. Examples of Assignment Options



Math

Use the angles (or shapes) we studied today to design one of the following.

1. Superhero movie set
2. Cupcake display
3. Stage for the Kids’ Choice Awards show



Language Arts

You will be provided with actual claims and terms from two documents: a phone company’s insurance policy, and an AppleCare agreement for extended warranty and support. Determine what each one promises. Then, write a blog post informing your followers which option provides better coverage of a new phone and why.



Social Studies

Your job is to use accurate information to provide a clear, reasoned, and supported opinion about whether we should retain the Electoral College. You may share your argument through one of the following products:

- Lawyer’s opening remarks (defending or critiquing the system to an uninformed jury).
- Analogy—written or visual—that illustrates the process and your stance on the process.
- Speech to the public explaining the system and persuading them to adopt your viewpoint.



Science

After an introduction to cells, choose an organelle to study. Examine Khan Academy videos on your organelle and make a “dating profile,” listing what your organelle has to offer the cell and what it will need from the cell in return.

corresponding to their personal interests.

Although not all personal interests relate directly to curricular topics and skills, teachers can find and use patterns among interests—like technology, sports, music, and animals—to form interest-based groupings, design tasks, and make connections among school, learning, and real life.

In contrast, situational interests arise from a situation, such as those created by teacher-designed lessons and tasks. They are more spontaneous and “in the moment.” Teachers can

uncover students' situational interests before or during a unit by providing straightforward prompts such as the following:

■ Here are some things we will be learning about. Which three topics sound most interesting to you? Explain why you chose each one.

■ On a scale of 0 to 5 (0 = not interesting at all, 5 = super interesting), how interesting do you find what we're working on right now? Explain your rating.

Surveys serve as a step in the right direction, but they matter far less than how teachers act on the information revealed.

■ What might make you more interested in the topic we're studying?

Research suggests that situational interest in a text or task actually increases with choice, even when personal interest is low (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001). Teachers can harness and create situational interest simply by providing students with options for how they will express their learning. Strategies like learning menus and jigsaw tasks promote choice in processing activities and assessments. Even asking, "Given a choice tomorrow, would you rather learn about this topic by watching a

video, reading about it, or listening to a podcast?" can pique students' interest and heighten engagement.

Teachers can also design tasks with simple variations that allow students to wrestle with the same learning goals in slightly different contexts. Figure 1 (p. 19) provides several examples of such assignment options.

Choices like these motivate students to focus on important, required content while giving them a say in how they accomplish the learning

goals. They meet the high standard of one 8th grader who said, "The work has to be fun, but also get the point across" (Wiggins, 2014b).

Not Just an "Extra"

These four principles offer practical ways to forge connections and infuse interest into the school day. It's easy to think of student engagement as an extra, or something to consider after getting the real unit or lesson in order. But students of all ages long to enjoy what they are doing and connect to what they are studying, to their teacher, and to their classmates.

Planning with student engagement in mind helps teachers meet students' real, human needs, without sacrificing their academic growth. It's not the icing on the cake; it's the cake itself. ■

References

- Erickson, H. L. (2002). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction: Teaching beyond the facts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for*

teachers: Maximizing impact on learning. New York: Routledge.

McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2013).

Essential questions: Opening doors to understanding. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Schraw, G., Flowerday, T., & Lehman, S. (2001). Increasing situational interest in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(3), 211–224.

Sousa, D. A., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2011). *Differentiation and the brain: How neuroscience supports the learner-friendly classroom*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Walkington, C. A. (2013). Using adaptive learning technologies to personalize instruction: The impact of relevant contexts on performance and learning outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(4), 932–945.

Wiggins, G. (2014a, November 14). 5th graders speak out—survey results [blog post]. Retrieved from *Granted, and... Thoughts on education by Grant Wiggins* at www.grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/11/14/5th-graders-speak-out-survey-results

Wiggins, G. (2014b, June 22). Middle school students survey responses: Most interesting work last year [blog post]. Retrieved from *Granted, and... Thoughts on education by Grant Wiggins* at www.grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/middle-school-students-survey-responses-most-interesting-work-last-year

Wiggins, G. (2014c, May 24). The typical HS—student survey, part 2 [blog post]. Retrieved from *Granted, and... Thoughts on education by Grant Wiggins* at www.grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/05/24/the-typical-hs-student-survey-part-2

EL Online

For more ideas on how to improve lesson plans, see the online article "8 Questions for Better Lessons" by Otis Kriegel at www.ascd.org/el1016kriegel.

Kristina J. Doubet (doubetj@jmu.edu) is a professor in the department of middle, secondary, and mathematics education at James Madison University and ASCD faculty member. **Jessica A. Hockett** (jessicahockett@me.com) is an education consultant, author, and ASCD faculty member. They are coauthors of *Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* (ASCD, 2015).