

Survey Question

10. This teacher makes what we are learning interesting.

Australian Professional Standard

Professional Knowledge Domain

Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it

Focus areas:

- 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
- 2.2 Content selection and organisation
- 3.5 Use effective classroom communication

What does this sound like in the classroom?

"I love what we learn about in this class. It's the only subject I talk about when my parents ask me: 'What did you do at school today?'"

Why is this important?

Interesting. Dynamic. Engaging. Whatever adjective you choose, the core focus must still be allowing your students to develop as learners. Learning does not always have to be "fun" because some aspects of the curriculum will never be seen as entertaining, however, it is our responsibility to deliver them creatively to ensure that children learn - and learn well.

Csikszentmihályi's (1990, cited in DECS, 2010, p. 1) view of engagement as 'being in the flow' became a focal point as the project progressed. He sees optimal engagement as 'a state of total involvement where one is completely immersed in what one is doing... Sometime students note they are in a zone'.

Danielson (2013) states that educators must determine how best to sequence instruction in a way that will advance student learning through the required content. Furthermore, such planning requires the thoughtful construction of lessons that contain cognitively engaging learning activities, the incorporation of appropriate resources and materials, and the intentional grouping of students (Danielson, 2013). So, much of what makes a lesson 'interesting' sits with adequate planning and thoughtful sequencing of the curriculum.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System developed by Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008) considers 'classroom climate (positive and negative) – warmth, respect, enjoyment, enthusiasm' and 'instructional learning formats – activities that maximise engagement' to be key drivers of making lessons *interesting*.

Evidence from cognitive psychology research also weighs in to the argument, whereby it is recommended that educators vary the conditions of practice. Varying the learning context, types of task or practice, rather than keeping them constant and predictable, improves later retention, even though it makes learning harder in the short term (Bjork and Bjork, 2011).

Other studies have considered the impact of ensuring all pupils were being challenged and stretched, not just those who were more able (Askew, et al 1997). Differentiation within the classroom remains an extremely important component of effective instructional practice, with significant benefits in terms of student outcomes (Hattie, 2009).

**What strategies
have been
shown to work
in the
classroom?**

Student engagement in learning activities is the nexus between being open to learning by demonstrating good behaviour (behavioural engagement), positive feelings (emotional engagement), and, most importantly, deep thinking (cognitive engagement) (Fredricks, 2014). Consider using the following areas for strategic focus (as cited in James, 2014):

- Students perceive activities as being meaningful in order to find them engaging. Research has shown that if students do not consider a learning activity worthy of their time and effort, they might not engage in a satisfactory way, or even disengage in response (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Paris, 2004). Connect to prior experience or knowledge, make relevant links and show how the information is important to each individual.
- Students must be able to feel that they can achieve in a subject in order to engage. Researchers have argued that effectively performing an activity can positively impact subsequent engagement (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).
- Nurturing the students' sense of control over their own behaviours and goals. When teachers promote an internal locus of control rather than compliance with directives and commands, student engagement levels increase as a result (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004).
- Collaborative learning is a fantastic force of engagement in learning. When students work effectively with others, their engagement is consequently amplified (Wentzel, 2009), mostly due to experiencing a sense of connection to others during the activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Key to this is setting up effective grouping, and providing strong protocols for them to engage with each other and pursue their learning goals.
- High-quality teacher-student relationships are a key factor in determining student engagement (Fredricks, 2014). When students form close and caring relationships with their teachers, they are fulfilling their developmental need for a connection to others and a sense of belonging in society (Scales, 1991).
- When students pursue an activity because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than simply to please (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). Frame success in terms of learning (e.g. criterion-referenced) rather than performing

(e.g. obtaining a good grade).

- There are a range of presentation skills that can be employed to increase student engagement and keep them 'interested'. Can you recall the teacher from 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off'? Try to vary the intonation of your voice. It is vital to maintain eye contact with all the students in your class, not just a few. Use physical gestures to emphasise key points. If appropriate for your students (consider those with auditory processing issues), move around the room and note which eyes are/aren't following. Maintain a conversational tone and where appropriate, use humour, since students are more motivated when they're having fun.

What three things can I try in my classroom tomorrow?

1. Variety is the spice of life. Take in a new starter, a video, a song or something to spark student interest.
2. Rather than taking a deficit approach (what makes students disengaged), try to focus on a strengths-based approach (what works to keep students engaged). Can you identify when you have the students 'in the zone'? Can you expand 'the zone's' duration?
3. Reach out to a student who appears to be 'uninterested' and ask them what would help them find the lesson more dynamic, fun and engaging. Act on it.

What opportunities are there for collaboration with my colleagues?

Think of a topic or unit you have found difficult to make 'engaging' in the past, and ask a colleague how they've tackled it. Some fresh eyes on the situation will help in generating some fresh ideas. Negotiate an opportunity to observe an expert colleague in action. Identify a teacher with which you have rapport to experiment with a team-teaching/co-teaching opportunity to explore an 'interesting' lesson plan.

Where can I find out more?

Video

- Teaching Channel: Kick Me activity
- Vocabulary paint chips
- Anita Archer's Explicit Instruction website
- Teaching Channel: Extending Understanding – Vocabulary Development
- Teaching Channel: Learning Difficult Vocabulary

Referenced articles, books and other great reads:

- Danielson, C. (2013) The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument. Accessed 1 November 2015
- James, N. (2014) Golden rules for engaging students. Edutopia. December 8, 2014. Accessed 1 November 2015
- Gershon, M. (2013) How to stretch and challenge your students. TES, 18/6/2013. Accessed 16 May 2015.
- La Paro, K. M., Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2012). Classroom assessment scoring system (CLASS) Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- As cited in Coe, R. et al (2014) What makes great teaching? The Sutton Trust.
 - Bjork, E. L., & Bjork, R. A. (2011). Making things hard on yourself, but in a good way: Creating desirable difficulties to enhance learning. In M.A. Gernsbacher, et al (Ed) Psychology and the real world: Essays illustrating fundamental

contributions to society, New York: Worth Publishers (p56-64). [Avaliable at http://bjorklab.psych.ucla.edu/pubs/EBjork_RBjork_2011.pdf

- James, M. and Pollard, A. (2011) TLRP's ten principles for effective pedagogy: rationale, development, evidence, argument and impact. *Research Papers in Education*, 26 (3).