

9 Skills for Engaging Students

Overture

Explanation and Research

Not too long ago, I took my wife and our two children to a restaurant we have been in for about 17 years. I now that, because the corner booth of that exact restaurant was where we met our builder 18 years ago to sign the contract to build our home, which we have been living in now for 17 years. Even though it had been almost two decades since I had been in that restaurant, I remembered instantly where we sat, even the position of the other people at the table. I asked my wife if she remembered, and indeed, she could recall not only the exact table, but the seating position of the party as well.

Combine that amazing contextual memory with our love of novelty, and the need to build schema through pre exposure and emotional engagement, and you have something I call the “Overture”.

Here’s how you do it

1. For the first three class sessions, you should do an “Overture” of some of the coming attractions in the class. Just like an overture is played before a musical stage production to get the audience familiar with the upcoming songs, you can give the students a preview of upcoming highlights of the class.
2. Travel to different spots in the room, and say a sentence or two that will be said later on in different class sessions. Try to pick sentences that are unique and thought-provoking. Keep it to no more than six different sentences, in six different locations around the room. This was a high gradient activity for me at first, but it made so much sense that I kept doing it until it felt natural. Feedback from students is very positive.
3. When the classes catches up to one of the sayings in the overture, there is recognition in the students, and a bit of an emotional “pop” as the open loop is closed.

Using Overture during a PowerPoint presentation

Another way to do an “Overture” is through a Power Point presentation. If you are doing a PowerPoint presentation, try having a slide that has images that capture the essence of your first four parts of your presentation, to give everyone a visual overview of what is to come. Just before each major topic, put the slide

that captures the essence of the next section up all by itself. It should spark some memories in the audience, as they have seen that slide once before at the beginning of your presentation.

Make your own

Another way to create an open loop is to have students create their own! Researchers, (Marzano, 2000), have shown that students creating (and then testing and verifying) their own hypothesis is one of the most effective teaching strategies you can try. For example, you could have them share their hypothesis the day before the science experiment and have them debate to advocate for their point of view.

Challenge:

Try this challenges to flex your emotional engagement muscle:

Go to the toy aisle or to a dollar discount store and find something to incorporate into a lesson. I was walking in the dollar store one day and found a magnetic dart board. I purchased it, not knowing what I was going to do with it. Now I use it for a review game—throw a dart, the number it lands on is the first thing we review. It's not rocket science—it's neuroscience! Doing something different and novel can increase emotional engagement

Energy

Explanation and Research

You can't give what you don't have. If you want your students to be curious, passionate, and energetic participants in their own learning, you must model that energy and enthusiasm.

Research has shown that students who are taught by a teacher with more enthusiasm have more intrinsic motivation to learn the material being taught and experience greater vitality and energy themselves (Patrick, 2000).

The recommendation is to teach with enthusiasm and energy! If you think you have plenty of energy, try recording yourself teaching. Often we think we are really out there expending energy, but to the students, it may not seem so spectacular.

To be enthusiastic and put forth energy on a daily basis, teachers must take care of themselves. They must get plenty of rest, eat right, and know how to deal with the inevitable stressful situations that will arise. The rule is: *Play to a sold-out crowd every day!*

Here's how you do it

1. To accomplish this, you must be in relatively good shape physically and mentally. You should have some level of happiness in your life to be the most effective teacher possible. To give a standard of happiness upon which to base a personal analysis, I went right to the top—to iconoclastic psychologist Carl Jung. In an interview in 1960 (Young, 1960), Jung laid out five areas that he thought were important when working on a happy life. They are as follows:

- **Good physical and mental health**

You need physical stamina and mental toughness to deal with the rigors of teaching. If you aren't getting restful sleep, then help should be sought to figure out why. Good nutrition is a must. You must have good food to fuel your engine.

- **Good personal and intimate relationships, such as those of**

marriage, the family, and friendships.

Develop and maintain positive relationships and friendships in your life. Develop a support system of trusted confidants upon whom you can rely.

- **The faculty for perceiving beauty in art and nature.**

Take time to appreciate the finer things in life. Don't be all work and no play! Make sure you take time out for yourself to enjoy a play, a symphony or a great novel.

- **Reasonable standards of living and satisfactory work.**

You must know how you personally deal with stress. What do you do when you are stressed? Have a good workout? Go to dinner and a movie? Do you mediate? Hang out at a book store? Go to counseling? You should know some healthy ways to deal with your own stress to avoid being a candidate for burn out

- **A philosophic or religious point of view capable of coping**

successfully with the vicissitudes of life. (McGuire, 1977).

This does not necessarily mean organized religion, but you should have some spiritual way of getting comfort during difficult times.

According to Jung, those five components make a strong foundation upon which to build a happy life. For a more modern, and very practical guide to happiness, there are many books from which you may choose to peruse. Chief among them for this topic is “The Happiness Project” by Gretchen Rubin (2011).

Have Fun!

Explanation and Research

Perhaps you are bored and/or are boring. The class is boring. You don't like teaching anymore. The students don't like being in your class anymore. You can't remember why you got into teaching in the first place.

Appropriate use of humor can be very beneficial to both you and the students. Using humor includes being spontaneous, being in the moment, having fun, and being playful. Humor can even help with recall and learning (Schmidt, 1994).

Don't be tendentious

Research supports the positive effects of your intentional use of positive humor, with one caveat. The use of tendentious humor had a negative effect. What is tendentious humor you may ask? It is humor that is one-sided, biased and has a victim. Basically, making fun of someone. Not cool. Don't do it. I'm telling you, and so is research (Gorham, 1990).

The serious side of laughter

So, have fun! That's an order! This is the serious side of laughter. Teacher burn-out is consistently one of the prevalent reasons new teachers drop out of the profession in the first five years. This job isn't getting any easier. We must learn to fill ourselves up with joy and laughter, so that we can give that gift to our students. It's difficult, maybe even impossible to give what you don't have!

If more evidence is needed, one must only consider all of the psychological and physiological benefits to laughter. For example, our brains run on empty. It doesn't store any energy or oxygen. The brain needs a steady supply of nutrient-rich, oxygen rich blood to keep running. When we laugh, more oxygen goes into our blood stream and helps to wake our brains up. Also, chemicals that make us feel good are released when we laugh. Psychologically, as we get more cultural diversity in our schools, the more things we can find in common, the better for building a classroom community. Laughter is universal.

Here's how you do it

1. If you don't think you are personally funny, try some of the following to get humor into the classroom.
 - a. Random objects. I love this one. In the middle of a lecture, show a random object that you have, and pass it around for kids to see. One time I had a chocolate ant farm, another time it was stuffed Puffin toy. Whatever! The weirder the better.
 - b. Have a "joke of the day". Students take turns reading a joke each day.
 - c. Have cartoons sprinkled throughout the classroom, or randomly inserted into the lecture or PowerPoint presentation.

Notes:

Fun challenge

To flex your fun muscle, try this challenge: Try to do one new thing every day for two weeks. This could be related to the classroom, like trying a new state change, a new way to grab student attention, a new project, etc. Or it could be something in your personal life. Maybe you could watch a new television show, take a new way to work, or start brushing your teeth at a different tooth!! Try a new food, read a book you ordinarily wouldn't read, try a fashion risk—do it! Bring leg warmers back!—it doesn't matter as long as you don't repeat yourself for two weeks.

For more information, check out the International Society for Humor Studies website (www.hnu.edu/ishs) for many resources, including the multi-dimensional sense of humor scale, and many resources for cartoons, video clips, websites, research and much more.

Laughter clubs

If you are serious about laughter, you could also go out on a limb and find a laughter club near you. Laughter clubs were started by Dr. Madan Kataria whose book and DVD *Laugh for No Reason*, delves into what he calls laughter yoga, and some of the theory and science behind it. For example, in one recent study, laughter therapy (which involves invoking laughter intentionally with a therapeutic purpose) has been shown to lift depression, increase cognition and help with sleep disorders (Ko, 2011).

Dr. Kataria started laughter clubs in 1995, and it has since become an international phenomenon. Basically, practitioners get together and... laugh! With certain techniques such as alternating syllables when you laugh (Ha Ha Ha, alternating with Ho Ho Ho), the laughter, at first forced and mechanical, becomes real and contagious. Challenge yourself! Go to laughteryoga.org, and find a club in your area. Regardless of the country in which you are reading this, chances are excellent there is a laughter club near you!

Lighting

Explanation and Research

Researchers believe that emotions are indelibly linked to long-term memory formation. How can educators create an atmosphere in the classroom that is charged with positive emotions like curiosity, surprise, and mystery? Lighting holds one answer. The brain loves novelty. Human brains are hard-wired to monitor incoming information, always vigilant for threats or treats, to see if the information coming in is harmful or helpful to survival.

Here's how you do it

Try some ideas for using lighting in the following two categories: Contrast, and Novelty and Fun.

Use lighting for contrast

One way to make an important element of a presentation or lesson stand out is by using contrast. The presenter can have elements stand out to the class by contrasting different aspects, such as by size, shape, location, color or light. There is a lesson I teach that has a small wooden box as the “aha” of the lesson. I could just bring the box out and say “Here is the box that I was talking about”. That would probably work alright, but if, as a teacher, I want more than just “alright”, I can try to make this object that is important to the lesson more emotionally compelling.

One way I have done this is through the use of light. This is simple, but in my experience very effective. As the students walk in, I have the classroom lights turned off. I take my clamp-on light I use in my garage, and clamp it onto a desk. The light is on, and the box is directly underneath, being brightly illuminated by the light. Because of the contrast between light and dark, the box is the single most important object in the room.

I usually just ask how many students noticed the box, and then proceed with the lesson without explaining the purpose of the box, trying to let anticipation and curiosity build. Doing little things like this is so much fun, and so much more effective than just saying “here is the box that I was talking about”. Try it!

Use lighting for novelty and fun

- I have used different color light bulbs for different seasons (i.e. red light bulbs for Valentine 's Day, Green for St. Patrick's day).
- I shut off the lights and held a flashlight under my chin, like I am telling a ghost story at summer camp, to introduce a lesson or tell a story.
- I have shut off the lights and used a flashlight to facilitate a question and answer session by shining the light on the person who is talking.
- Use lighting to help set a mood. Perhaps have just candles burning and all the lights shut off and window shades down when students come in or off of a break.

Magic

Explanation and Research

One of the best ways I have found to capture the attention and engage students of any age is a magic trick. I know several, and the one thread running through all of them is that they are *easy*!

Here's how you do it

1. I have learned some from a book I picked up at the bookstore.
2. I have purchased some on vacation in novelty shops.
3. I have also explored a magic store near me. Magic stores are great. You can get countless free demonstrations from the magician on duty, and get an idea what the trick should look like, along with invaluable free training on the trick.
4. You could also simply check the World Wide Web and search for magic tricks. Many times, you can even watch videos of the tricks being performed to help you make a decision on what to invest in. I have found no faster way to get students of all ages engaged than a well-rehearsed, fun magic trick.

Modeling

Explanation and Research

Emotions really are contagious (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2000). Thanks to special brain cells called mirror neurons, we pick up emotions from other people. This process is called attunement. We are born being able to express a handful of emotions that appeared to be hard-wired into our brains. They are joy, fear, surprise, disgust, anger, and sadness (Ekman, 1992).

Attunement

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of other emotional responses that we learn from interacting with others. These include such emotions as gratitude, appreciation, and enthusiasm. That's where attunement comes into play. Attunement means to become "in tune" with another person. When you smile at a child, they smile back. That's how attunement works. The concept of attunement and children learning during interaction with adults is vitally important to children's normal development. This is so important that there is some research to suggest that children who have a delay in their cognitive development may not have received the frequency of exposure they need from adult and child interactions (Ramey & Ramey, 2000).

Here's how you do it

1. If you are genuinely enthusiastic, curious, and passionate about the lesson, the students will pick up on those emotions and emulate them.

Novelty

Explanation and Research

Find some ways to do the ordinary, in an extraordinary way

There is a biological imperative that happens automatically when a new stimulus is introduced to the environment. The stimulus could be a new, different or unusual sound, sight, or physical stimulus. We instantly pay close, focused attention to the novel stimuli. We can't help it because of our brain's main job, which is to help us to survive. It has done this wonderfully well for millennia by constantly monitoring all incoming information in the environment. We monitor the vast majority of this information at a sub-conscious level, constantly monitoring to see if the incoming information is helpful or harmful to us. Routine stimuli stay below the conscious level. For example, if I was consciously aware of every time my clothing brushed against my skin, that might drive me a little crazy. A novel stimulus however, gets promoted to some level of conscious awareness, so we can make instant judgments on the relative threat of the stimulus. Educators can take advantage of this biological imperative to get students attention and to engage them.

Here's how you do it

1. Novelty means doing something random, unexpected, fun and totally new to the classroom environment.
 - For example, I know a great teacher who was teaching with small cubes for a math lesson. She had over one thousand small cubes in this container. The students were trying to grasp a particular math concept that had to do with the cubes. You were not getting through and starting to lose her students attention. So she did something novel, unexpected and fun. She dumped all thousand or so cubes on the floor to help her make her point. Those students will never forget the day you dumped the cubes on the floor!
 - I have a particular lesson where I announce casually that we will be taking a field trip during class. A little while later, I announce the field trip is in the building. Lastly, I announce that there is a campfire burning in the building right now, and shortly we will go to it for part of our lesson.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, we line up and leave the classroom. They do not know that I have a small electric fire that has colored piece of cloth that are blown about by a fan and lit by red and orange lights that looks like a real flame. I have that turned on in a corner of an empty classroom with the lights turned off.

We all get a good laugh as they realize the truth, then I continue with my lesson as my students are gathered around the "fire".

- Some novel activities are spontaneous such as the dumping cube example. Some are pre-planned, like the fire example. Either way, what a great state for your students to be in—curiosity, engagement, fun. All brought about by your intrepid use of novelty.

One tip from the research: If you are about to do something new and different and novel, never tell the students what you are about to do! This greatly lessens the impact of the novelty (Kuhn, 2008).

Quintessence

Explanation and Research

I believe the cliché that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught. Teachers have thousands of hours of apprenticeship as students in classrooms. That experience as students is the template that is used when teachers get their own classrooms, rather than their own teacher training that lasted a mere four years,

When looking back over all of the teachers one has in one's educational career, there are inevitably some teachers that stand out. For some reason, certain teachers are able to connect with their students, influencing their lives, and lighting a passion for their subject, and maybe even for living life to the fullest. How do some teachers do that? I believe I am a very good teacher, and I have had many students I have connected with, some I daresay I have even lighted that passion for the subject matter. I have also had students that I didn't connect with to that depth.

So what is it that makes some teachers extra-special? The ancient Greeks believed everything in the universe was made up of five elements. The ones most familiar are earth, air, fire and water. There was a fifth element they called Quintessence. Quintessence was the stuff of which the heavens were made. This quintessence couldn't be touched, couldn't be manufacture, but it could be observed in the actions of the gods, in viewing the heavens and nature in all of its glory.

I call what makes a teacher special *quintessence* as well. It is that indefinable, ineffable quality that makes that special spark between teacher and student. I believe that every teacher who still has their passion; every teacher that still remembers why they became a teacher; every teacher that still truly enjoys working with students and gets a thrill when the student has an "aha!" moment, has this quintessence in them.

For some teachers though, it may have become buried or tarnished through years of complaining parents, demanding teaching loads and changing students. Some teachers may have potential for quintessence in them, but haven't been able to light their spark.

Can you teach quintessence?

I don't believe you can teach quintessence to someone. Either they are a special teacher, or they are not. The good news is, I believe most if not all teachers have the potential for exhibiting quintessence in abundance, and become life-changing, force-of-nature teacher. I don't believe you can teach this to someone, but I do believe you can help uncover what is already there. The essence of quintessence that is in every true teacher can be stimulated, uncovered, brought back to life. That is not to say that each teacher will be the same and exhibit quintessence in identical ways. Indeed, what a boring world it would be if everyone were the same.

Mr. Archer and Mr. Bo

I remember many of my teachers who had an impact on me. One of them, my seventh grade science teacher, Mr. Bo, somehow made science seem fascinating, fun, and within my intellectual grasp. Mr. Bo was a very soft-spoken man, who always wore a white lab coat, even if we weren't doing and experiment that day. Another unique thing that Mr. Bo did was speak through a red plastic megaphone he kept on his desk at the front of the room. I never remember him speaking much above a whisper, yet he had no problems holding the attention of us squirrely seventh graders.

Across the hall was my Social Studies teacher Mr. Archer. We all loved coming to Mr. Archer's class. He was the kind of teacher who would stand on tables, pound his fist, or jump up and down to make a point. To teach us about the movement of power around the globe, he taught us to play the board game Risk, then related that to current events in our lives.

Mr. Archer and Mr. Bo. Two very amazing gentlemen, both filled with the quintessence that made me remember them vividly, fondly and gratefully over 30 years later, yet both were on opposite ends of the style spectrum. They didn't need to be the same; they didn't need to be different. They just needed to be themselves: their *authentic* selves.

It is my belief, and my experience, that there are some specific things a teacher can do for himself to uncover the quintessence inside of him. There are also things a guide on the side, like a trusted friend, mentor, colleague, or administrator could do to help you discover your own unique quintessence, your own unique voice.

Soldiering

Finding your own voice can be difficult for many reasons, not the least of which may be your teaching colleagues. Workmates placing covert or even overt pressure on colleagues to keep in line, to not work too hard, to not do anything different or new, is a documented phenomenon over 100 years old. This is the phenomenon called "soldiering". This goes back to the work of Frederick Taylor who was famous for the time and motion studies at the beginning of the 20th century during the move from an agrarian-based society to an industrial base.

A professor of mine once told me a story of soldiering. As a young college student, he went to work in a metal stamping plant during the summer. He was working side by side with men who had made a career out of what he was hired to do for only three months over the summer. He went at the job with youthful zeal and energy, easily outstripping the older, more experienced workers in productivity and quality. After a week or so, one of the older men pulled him aside and said "Look Larry, you are going to be gone in 12 weeks, but have to stay here for our lifetimes. Keep that in mind when you try to outperform us. You will be gone soon, but the damage you may cause, and the extra work you will make for us could last for years. So, slow down young man."

That was a great example of soldiering, of getting in line, which had a relatively benign ending. Sometimes the stories of the experienced workers keeping the rookies in line have a much harsher ending. What we have as our greatest curse and perhaps a slight advantage in this area anyway, is our isolation. Educators are, by and large, isolated, doing their work behind closed doors with very little supervision or evaluation. As long as not too many kids are sent to the office, not too many parent complaints come in, and scores stay high, perhaps soldiering will not be too much of a problem.

That means it is up to each individual teacher to find what makes them unique, valuable, different. If it is passion, a sense of humor, a love of randomness or a special place in your heart for the underdog, find that, and celebrate that gift. Each teacher needs to discover and uncover their unique potential, style and rhythm.

Rituals

Explanation and Research

Research from many disciplines have indicated that cognitive functions can be sabotages by feelings of helplessness, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed and stressed (LeDoux 1996, Deci & Ryan 1987, Sapolsky, 1998). These feelings can make it difficult or impossible to access the areas of the brain needed for higher order thinking, rational thinking, long-range planning and a host of other functions (LeDoux, 1996).

Can you be proactive and intentionally create the conditions in the classroom that allows students to mentally and physiological relax, so that the brain can access the areas needed for learning? The answer is a resounding yes! One of the most impactful things to do to relax students is to get a sense of predictability in the classroom.

A great place to start with predictability is to have specific rituals and routines in the classroom. Every teacher, every classroom, has rituals and routines. Something I have observed over the years is that sometimes, the teacher is the only person in the classroom that is certain of these routines. Ideally, every ritual should be thought out and planned, and every routine thought out and explicitly taught to the students beginning on the first day of class.

Ritual and Routine — what's the difference?

A *ritual* doesn't happen very often (usually at the beginning or the end of events) and doesn't change much. Examples of a ritual may include a celebration ritual at the end of a unit, and welcome back ritual after a vacation, or a ritual when a new student is added to the class, or someone is leaving before the end of the year.

A *routine* is something that happens often, possibly several times a day, and can change frequently. Examples of routines are how class is started, how completed papers are turned in, or how supplies are passed out.

Here's how you do it

Two common places to have routines are at the beginning of class, and at the end of class. Below are some examples.

Beginning Rituals

- **The Power of Seven** – In Skill 1.6 *Visual, Kinesthetic Cue*, there is an activity described called *The Power of Seven*. I will not repeat the instructions here, but this makes an excellent opening ritual because it gets all students doing the activity at the same time, which can build community. Also, it is repetitive movement of gross motor muscles which, as we know, equals more dopamine! Remember, dopamine is the hormone of positive expectations. When dopamine is in your system, you feel more positive and hopeful.

Ending Rituals

Some of these could be used at the end of each school day, but most are designed to bring closure to the end of a class at the end of a semester or year.

- **String Toss** – All students sit in a circle. One by one, each student gets tossed a ball of string. Whoever is holding the string gets to be complimented by anyone else in the group. When finished, the student who just received the compliments holds onto part of the string, and then tosses the ball of string to someone else, and so on.
- **Circle Close** – Students and instructor form a standing circle in the classroom. I like to shut some lights off and have soft music playing to add to the emotion of the moment. The game is played by anyone stepping into the circle and telling the group a memory, a message to the group, or perhaps something special that they have learned or will take away from the class.
- **Trials and Triumphs, Highs and lows, Gems and Ops or Roses and Thorns** – Students and instructor sit in a circle. Students go around and one at a time, talk about the best part of the class (Triumphs, or Roses) and the challenges they had to overcome (Trials or Thorns).

Routines

A common misconception is that classroom management equals student discipline. Discipline is actually a very small part of classroom management. Classroom management also includes how you get students into groups, how you pass out supplies, how you line up, how you work throughout the day, and so on.

To help create a predictable environment in the classroom, you should consider designing routines for activities that happen daily in the classroom.

Routines happen daily. They are usually short, are not complicated, and can change in an instant for the sake of novelty. For example, one of my routines is that when students are done discussing something with a partner, they give an acknowledgement. Usually a high five and they say “Thank you very much” to their partner. The rule is: You can’t break a routine until you have a routine. Once that routine of giving a high five and saying “Thank you very much” to their partner is firmly established and has become a habit, then, and only then, the facilitator should try to play with that a little bit to keep things fresh and novel. The routine must be firmly established before you should start changing it or being creative with the routine. For example, once the routine of giving an acknowledgement when done with an activity is firmly established after a couple of days or weeks, then you can begin to change *which* acknowledgement (high five, high two, left-handed pinkie shake, the “knuckle” etc.) is given. Also, once the routine is firmly established, *what* is said to the partner can change (“Thank you very much”, “great job”, “you’re a genius”, etc.).

This is how you do it

To get started:

1. Write down the step-by-step directions for your daily routines. If you can’t because they are not fully formed in your mind yet, then think them through and create them.

2. If you already have routines for each of these situations, first make sure that you have explicitly taught students these routines. Once you have firmly established these routines in your classroom, then and only then, can you start to find ways to introduce novelty into the routine.

- Starting class
- Ending class
- Taking a break
- Getting into groups
- Getting out of groups
- Getting supplies
- Getting resources passed out
- Taking attendance
- Passing papers in and out
- Acknowledgements
- Getting attention
- State changes

Notes:

What do you do if you have a routine that isn't working? Change it! I see teachers hang on to ineffective routines with the explanation that they will change it next year. Ahh! Change it now! Today! Why wait! The rule is "Stop doing ineffective things. If something isn't working, tell your students that this isn't working, and that you are going to make some tweaks. That's it—don't wait until the next school year to start!

Those are some ideas to get you started with rituals and routines. Rituals and routines can help create predictability in your classroom. With predictability comes the calm feeling in the classroom when students are relaxed, but alert. Step one in engaging students—accomplished! Creating routines in the classroom and -explicitly teaching the students is an excellent classroom management strategy as well.