

Kids Speak Out on Student Engagement

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A while back, I was asked, "What engages students?" Sure, I could respond, sharing anecdotes about what I believed to be engaging, but I thought it would be so much better to lob that question to my own eighth graders. The responses I received from all 220 of them seemed to fall under 10 categories, representing reoccurring themes that appeared again and again. So, from the mouths of babes, here are my students' answers to the question: "What engages students?"

1. Working with their peers

"Middle-school students are growing learners who require and want interaction with other people to fully attain their potential."

"Teens find it most interesting and exciting when there is a little bit of talking involved. Discussions help clear the tense atmosphere in a classroom and allow students to participate in their own learning."

2. Working with technology

"I believe that when students participate in "learning by doing" it helps them focus more. Technology helps them to do that. Students will always be extremely excited when using technology."

"We have entered a digital age of video, Facebook, Twitter, etc., and they [have] become more of a daily thing for teens and students. When we use tech, it engages me more and lets me understand the concept more clearly."

3. Connecting the real world to the work we do/project-based learning

"I believe that it all boils down to relationships. Not relationships from teacher to student or relationships from student to student, but rather relations between the text and the outside world. For example, I was in a history class last year and my teacher would always explain what happens in the Medieval World and the Renaissance. And after every lesson, every essay, every assignment, he asked us, "How does this event relate to current times?" It brought me to a greater thinking, a kind of thinking where I can relate the past to the present and how closely they are bonded together."

"If you relate the topic to the students' lives, then it makes the concept easier to grasp."

"Students are most interested when the curriculum applies to more than just the textbook. The book is there -- we can read a book. If we're given projects that expand into other subjects and make us think, it'll help us understand the information."

"What I think engages a student most is interactions with real-life dilemmas and an opportunity to learn how to solve them. Also, projects that are unique and one of a kind that other schools would never think of. Also something challenging and not easy, something to test your strengths as a student and stimulate your brain, so it becomes easier to deal with similar problems when you are grown up and have a job. Something so interesting that you could never ever forget."

"I like to explore beyond the range of what normal textbooks allow us to do through hands-on techniques such as project-based learning. Whenever I do a project, I always seem to remember the material better than if I just read the information straight out of a textbook."

"I, myself, find a deeper connection when I'm able to see what I'm learning about eye-to-eye. It's more memorable and interesting to see all the contours and details of it all. To be able to understand and connect with the moment is what will make students three times more enthusiastic about learning beyond the black and white of the Times New Roman text."

4. Clearly love what you do

"Engaging students can be a challenge, and if you're stuck in a monotone, rambling on and on, that doesn't help...instead of talking like a robot, teachers should speak to us like they're really passionate about teaching. Make sure to give yourself an attitude check. If a teacher acts like this is the last thing they want to be doing, the kids will respond with the same negative energy. If you act like you want to be there, then we will too."

"I also believe that enthusiasm in the classroom really makes a student engaged in classroom discussions. Because even if you have wonderful information, if you don't sound interested, you are not going to get your students' attention. I also believe that excitement and enthusiasm is contagious."

"It isn't necessarily the subject or grades that really engage students but the teacher. When teachers are truly willing to teach students, not only because it is their job, but because they want to educate them, students benefit. It's about passion. That extra effort to show how it will apply to our own future."

5. Get me out of my seat!

"When a student is active they learn in a deeper way than sitting. For example, in my history class, we had a debate on whether SOPA and PIPA were good ideas. My teacher had us stand on either ends of the room to state whether we agree or disagree with the proposition. By doing this, I was able to listen to what all my classmates had to say."

6. Bring in visuals

"I like to see pictures because it makes my understanding on a topic clearer. It gives me an image in my head to visualize."

"I am interested when there are lots of visuals to go with the lesson. Power Points are often nice, but they get boring if there are too many bullet points. Pictures and cartoons usually are the best way to get attention."

7. Student choice

"I think having freedom in assignments, project directions, and more choices would engage students...More variety = more space for creativity."

"Giving students choices helps us use our strengths and gives us freedom to make a project the way we want it to. When we do something we like, we're more focused and enjoy school more."

"Another way is to make the curriculum flexible for students who are more/less advanced. There could be a list of project choices and student can pick from that according to their level."

8. Understand your clients -- the kids

"Encourage students to voice their opinions as you may never know what you can learn from your students."

"If the teacher shows us that they are confident in our abilities and has a welcoming and well-spirited personality towards us, we feel more capable of doing the things we couldn't do...What I'm trying to say is students are more engaged when they feel they are in a "partnership" with their teacher."

"Personally, I think that students don't really like to be treated as 'students.' Teachers can learn from us students. They need to ask for our input on how the students feel about a project, a test, etc. Most importantly, teachers need to ask themselves, "How would I feel if I were this student?" See from our point of view and embrace it."

"Students are engaged in learning when they are taught by teachers who really connect with their students and make the whole class feel like one big family. Teachers should understand how the mind of a child or teenager works and should be able to connect with their students because everyone should feel comfortable so that they are encouraged to raise their hands to ask questions or ask for help."

"Teachers should know that within every class they teach, the students are all different."

9. Mix it up!

"I don't like doing only one constant activity...a variety will keep me engaged in the topic. It's not just for work, but also for other things such as food. Eating the same foods constantly makes you not want to eat!"

"Fun experiments in science class...acting out little skits in history...if students are going to remember something, they need visuals, some auditory lessons, and some emotions."

"Also, you can't go wrong with some comedy. Everyone loves a laugh...another thing that engages me would be class or group games. In Language Arts I've played a game of "dodge ball. We throw words at each other, one at a time. If they could get the definition, the person who threw the word would be out...Students remember the ones they got wrong, and of course, the ones they already knew."

10. Be human

"Don't forget to have a little fun yourself."

I'd like to end this post with one more quote, this one from my student, Sharon: "The thing is, every student is engaged differently...but, that is okay. There is always a way to keep a student interested and lively, ready to embark on the journey of education. 'What is that way?' some teachers may ask eagerly. Now, read closely... Are you ready? That way is to ask them. Ask. Them. Get their input on how they learn. It's just as simple as that."

Go on. Try it. Ask.