

Douglas Reeves' Five Top Tips to Improve Student Engagement

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One of the most frequently asked questions I have from audiences around the country and from schools of every demographic characteristic is this:

"How can I get my students more engaged? I know that they can do the work, but they often seem distracted, bored, and disinterested. It's a drag on the entire class when I have to spend time getting students to participate and engage in the activities of the class."

Here are five ideas for improved student engagement from teachers, research, and my personal experiences with students:

1) Choice - A recurring theme of the research on motivation is choice. This does not mean that students have the choice of *whether* to engage in the assigned work, but it does mean that effective teachers can provide choices of *how* students engage in the work. Every time students engage in a choice, they are making a wager that they are choosing wisely, and nobody likes to lose a bet. All of the remaining parts of this "Top Five" list are variations on the theme of choice.

2) Homework Menus - Fresh from a class on "differentiated instruction," the teacher walks to the board and assigns all students to complete the odd-numbered problems from 1-30. We're all committed to the concept of fairness and equity, but these principles do not mean that every student does identical work. Rather, it means that every student has the same opportunity to learn. Some students will prove that they have mastered a concept in the first five problems and, growing bored, will stop work on the rest. These students frequently earn low grades despite high levels of proficiency. Other students struggle with the homework not because they are unable to master the subject, but because they have difficulty reading the material or focusing on the work. A Homework Menu creates a series of choices for students that will provide opportunities for proficiency for all students, while providing opportunities for challenge for those who are bored, and reinforcement and practice for students who are struggling. Some teachers create their Homework Menu in several columns, and students choose one or two problems (writing prompts, math problems, and so on) from each column. Not only does this strategy

help to engage students, but it also provides valuable feedback for teachers based on the accuracy of the student work and the choices that students made.

3) Electronic Games - Using Macromedia Flash Professional 8 (free trial versions available at www.Adobe.com), one of Mr. Kane's 8th grade history students created his own electronic game. Built around the theme of freedom during Revolutionary times, the student-produced game first provided pictures and quotations from Founders, and then asked questions about this period of history. Players received immediate feedback, including the opportunity to learn more and change their answers. While many students also chose essays, posters, dramas, and other creative methods of completing the assignment, there's something about 8th grade boys and electronic games that seems to click.

4) Student-Generated Rubrics - Larry Ainsworth, author of *Power Standards* and many other publications, wrote [*Student Generated Rubrics*](#), a book in which he demonstrates the power of students creating with clear and student-accessible language their expectations for performance. If you have ever had playground duty, you might have overheard students explaining the rules of a game to other students. In this context, students can be remarkably precise: You can go *here*, but you can't go *there*. You can do *this* but you can't do *that*. Equipped with such clear expectations, new students quickly learn the game. Why not capitalize on the ability of students to articulate expectations in the classroom? How much more clear might our rubrics and other expectations be if we took the time to have students express those expectations in a format and language that is clear to them? They might even use a combination of words, symbols, and pictures, knowing intuitively that not all of their classmates learn in the same way.

5) Engaging Scenarios - In the book and seminar series *Making Standards Work*, the first step of creating an effective standards-based classroom assessment is the creation of an engaging scenario. For example, before we assign a challenge to our students, we ask, "Why would anyone really need to know this? What real-life roles might our students play if they were using this information?" Science teachers in Alaska, for example, use simulations of the Exxon Valdez environmental disaster to help students develop language, math, science, and speaking skills as they engage in a court battle to represent the interests of Native Nations, local governments, tourist business owners, and many other stakeholders. Math teachers in

Denver put students in the pilot's seat as they use real-world navigation problems to hone their rate/time/distance skills and their understanding of geometry. Speech teachers throughout the nation are using compelling scenarios ranging from domestic violence (the current Lincoln-Douglas debate topic) to concerns over the college early admissions process (the current Public Forum debate topic) in order to help students practice research, writing, and communication skills.

Dr. Douglas Reeves is CEO and founder of the [Center for Performance Assessment](#), an international organization dedicated to improving student achievement and educational equity. Through its long-term relationships with school systems, the Center helps educators and school leaders to improve student achievement through practical and constructive approaches to standards, assessment, and accountability.