

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Ignite Their Fire: Engaging EVERY Student

Engagement. As educators, we can argue that it is an essential component to the learning process. But how do we get our students interested in content we have to teach, in ways that build their curiosity and excitement for what is to come?

The Spark

All of this starts with a spark. Believe it or not, students walk through our door with this spark, just waiting to have it ignited. What is it? It's our students' innate curiosity with the world around them. How can we ignite their spark, unleash their thinking, and get them engaged in ways that encourage a passion and fire for learning? There are so many directions we could go with this one, but let's focus on something not often talked about: uncertainty.



- **Address the Emotional Impact of Uncertainty**

Learning is full of interest, awe, and excitement. And all of those are “feel good” words. But often, we fail to note that confusion is also part of the learning process. Maybe it's because it doesn't bring about those same positive feelings. But, why not? If we can get our students to understand that confusion is a necessary and learning-forward part of the process, they can reconstruct their ideas around how important it is to be confused in order to sort out their misconceptions and problem-solve to find a solution.

- **Assign Projects that Provoke Uncertainty**

One way to get students to feel better about being confused is to put them in situations where it is unavoidable. Jamie Holmes, the author of *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* states, “The best assignments should make students make mistakes, be confused and feel uncertain.”

- **Encourage Exploration, Challenge, and Revision**

Do you remember having “that teacher” who just had a magical way of making learning fun and interesting? Teachers who instruct with curiosity, a sense of humanity, and a willingness to let their students get messy, are more apt to engage their students in learning. Teaching is about facilitating the learning process as opposed to imparting wisdom for the sake of knowing information. We want our students to confront and connect with the content to form their own pathways to learning.

- **Show How the Process of Discovery is Often Messy and Mistake-heavy**

It is important for students to see, first-hand, that learning IS messy. Discoveries are almost always made through trial and error. Mistakes are a must. It is the process of finding solutions by going down paths of uncertainty that makes learning exhilarating.

“The best assignments should make students make mistakes, be confused and feel uncertain.”

—Jamie Holmes

The Kindling

The small stuff we can do to get the fire started.

Thousands of strategies exist out there that promote and encourage student engagement. Here are several of them that promote mystery, anticipation, excitement, and a bit of uncertainty!

- **The Mystery Box:** Start your class by having the students ask yes/no questions to figure out what is in the box, or include objects in the box that loosely connect to the content and have students draw the connection.
- **Zoom Out:** Take a photo or screenshot of something that students will be learning about. Zoom in on that image and throughout the lesson, zoom out until you reveal the object. With each action, have students guess what the object is.
- **Reveal It!:** Start with a picture and reveal different pieces of it throughout the lesson. [Check out this video](#). I made for a school on how to create one.
- **Impossible is Nothing!** Pin a twenty-dollar bill to the wall. Then, offer to give it to the first student who solves a particular challenge. Here's the twist: make sure the challenge is impossible. For example, have students build a perpetual motion machine or a two-sided polygon. Students learn to become fascinated by poking and prodding at problems. Make sure to praise them for persevering!
- **Taboo Tactics:** There's nothing more tempting than forbidden fruit—so use the Top Secret strategy to make knowledge a mouthwatering apple. Before you teach new content, close the door. Tell them you don't want anyone to find out that you're teaching them this idea. Take advantage of the fact that people are fascinated by the illicit.
- **Choice Boards:** Increase student ownership by providing students with a bingo board filled with intellectually rich activities. Allow students to choose which activities to complete in order to construct bingo.
- **Share What Success Looks Like:** Many behavior problems stem from students simply not knowing what is expected of them. So, make this very clear and visible from the start. Identify the learning targets and post them for all to see. Then, use rubrics that incorporate these learning targets and pair this with examples of student work that fit within each category or ranking on the rubric.

The Firewood

The bigger stuff we can do that keeps the fire burning.

Let's set the scene. It's a beautiful night – the perfect night to have a bonfire and enjoy the great outdoors. You get the kindling placed just right and light the fire to get it going. It's rolling and you're ready for the next step. You look around for the perfect pieces of firewood to keep this fire burning long into the night. When it comes to learning, what are those essential pieces of firewood that will make this fire last?

- **Authenticity:** What is it? In teaching, authenticity is a wide variety of educational and instructional techniques focused on connecting what students are taught in school to real-world issues, problems, and applications. One of the best ways to do this is through project-based learning. PBL is an incredibly powerful way to incorporate authenticity into your classroom. Students are doing work that is real to them - it is authentic to their lives- and their efforts have a direct impact on or use in the real world. When students engage in authentic work through PBL:
 1. Learners are given an experientially-based answer to “Why do I have to learn this?”
 2. Content is no longer “siloe”, as it exists and unfolds within the context of the project.
 3. Collaboration is established and becomes a natural part of the learning process.
 4. Iteration and revision become essential components of success.
 5. The focus is on the learners learning rather than the teacher teaching – which is what students need in order to become independent problem-solvers in the world outside of our classroom walls.

- **Inquiry:** What is it? In the context of learning, inquiry is the process of augmenting knowledge, resolving doubt, or solving a problem. As teachers, we can create inquiry learning experiences with the **Four Pillars of Inquiry**. When we can off-load the thinking and work onto our students, deeper, more meaningful work is the result. And isn't that what learning is all about, anyway? These big ideas can be the small shifts that you can implement in your classroom to make that happen:
 1. **Students don't know exactly what they're supposed to do:** Instead of step-by-step instructions or a "how to" map of instructions, turn the process of figuring it out over to the students. Give them the big ideas and learning targets and let them figure it out for themselves.
 2. **Students can choose their path of discovery:** As educators, we know that every student has a different way of thinking about a topic and working toward a solution. Set up situations that play into this. Give students problems that are open-ended with multiple solutions.
 3. **Students must articulate their understanding:** The best way to confirm deep learning is to have our students articulate their understanding. This can be done through discussion, mind-mapping, and journaling to name a few. Be sure to present opportunities to your students that let them demonstrate their understanding in different ways, and in all content areas.
 4. **Students are working as hard as possible, and no harder:** If ever a chance to offload the work and thinking onto our students, it is almost always best to do so. Learning is messy, and if we present learning as a clean clear-cut process, we will be sending them out into the world beyond our walls, misinformed and without the tools to think through any problem they are presented with. Let them get messy and do the heavy lifting to figure things out. This is their job.
 - **Rapport:** What is it? With our students, it's learning who they are, accepting and celebrating their uniqueness, and really listening to them and connecting with them. You do this every day! By being intentional about building a supportive classroom culture, our students will flourish. Establish rapport by building a supportive classroom culture that is:
 1. **Emotionally-Safe:** Validate their thoughts and ideas and make space to share all of those "non-academic" happenings. When students feel validated, it comes with many other "safe" feelings as well, like feeling heard, understood, hopeful, connected, and accepted.
 2. **Intellectually-Safe:** It can be challenging to make all of our students feel like they are "making the grade" academically. If we can find space in our day to put forth tasks that almost all of our students can tackle independently, our students will feel confident in their learning endeavors and take risks that lead to greater outcomes.
 3. **Curiosity-Driven:** If you have ever encountered a five-year-old for any period of time, you were probably inundated with numerous questions and wonderings. The "whys" and "whats" and "hows" are an innate response to the ways in which they learn the world around them. They are curious and inquisitive. This is exactly what we want to foster and nurture in our classrooms. Give students opportunities to ask lots of questions and seek out answers to these inquiries. Ask lots of questions to your students, and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, let's find out!" Humility and a sense of wonder are the foundation to a curious classroom.
- Looking to incorporate authenticity, inquiry, and rapport in your classroom? Check out these [Blue Apple projects](#) — PBL that engage students, teach content, and make the world a better place!

Project-Based Learning



Project-based learning is an incredible way to connect, grow, and contribute to a greater purpose, all while teaching the content you need to teach.

If you'd like to try a project-based learning unit that will REALLY fire up the learning in your classroom, check out the Blue Apple project, [High Energy](#), where students learn about energy — and how we can save it. The project includes lesson plans and project supplies, saving you time so that you can focus on what you do best: teaching!

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [book list](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of memories and connections.
- Check out [K-8 content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).



Conclusion

There is one person in every classroom that has the power to get their fire started – the match that ignites it all. It's you. You hold the energy and the passion, and your students hold the potential. By implementing strategies and practices to excite and engage your students, you create the fire that makes learning happen

[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:
Ignite Their Fire: Engaging EVERY Child

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