

## VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

### Keep Kids Weird: Using Student Strangeness for Good Instead of Evil

Diversity is one of our greatest strengths — as a society, a school, and a class. Diversity allows us to think differently about the challenges we face, to consider different viewpoints, and lead richer, more creative lives.

But the world is often hostile toward people and perspectives that are different from the norm; there's a reason the word "weird" is most frequently used as an insult.

How can we reclaim the power of weirdness, help our students share their unique personalities, and allow diversity to flourish in our classrooms? Here are a few ideas!

#### Get Innovative

When you encourage open-ended thinking, you create a culture where ideas that are "different" can thrive. Use these teacher-tested resources and strategies to cultivate a culture of creativity!

- **What Else?** — Playing games that encourage students to think of unique answers can put them in an innovator's mindset. [What Else?](#) is a simple, free example!
- **Weirdness of the Week** — Share your oddity with the world by collecting a "weirdness of the week" and sharing it with the world. For instance, if you come across [this strange poem](#) or this delightfully [bizarre music video](#), you could include them on the board.
- **Analogy a Day/Square Pegs** — Want weird answers? You need some weird questions. Use the [Analogy a Day Generator](#) or the [Square Peg Generator](#) to create bizarre wonderings for your students to wonder.



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## Get Authentic

One of the most important reasons to create a culture of weirdness is that it allows students to really express themselves. Help your students feel comfortable being authentic in your classroom with ideas that let them embrace their own wonderful weirdness.

- **Nicknames of Greatness** — Find out what your students love and give them corresponding nicknames. Your student who loves space can be called Astronaut Sam if their name is Sam. Your student who loves sea life can become The Shark. A kid who loves music can be called Carnegie. Reaffirm your belief that they can do great things if they work hard and follow their passions.
- **Open Their Gifts** — Show your students that you see their talents and that you value them and save yourself some time and energy while you're at it. For each student, identify a few of their gifts, and then think of ways you can put that gift to work in the classroom. The [Gifts Organizer](#) will help you get started!
- **What YOU Wonder** — Uncovering what someone wonders is a wonderful way to discover their weirdness. Create space for students to share their own wonderings with an Ask-It Basket and allocate some time to follow up on these curiosities. For randomized fun, put the questions on a [Wonder Wheel](#) and spin it to see what curiosity you'll follow!
- **F is for Fantastic Failure** — Students CANNOT be their authentic selves if they're not free to fail. So, celebrate failure by building a culture where students know that if they never fail they never grow. This is a classic way to build a growth mindset in your students, and to create a culture where weirdos know that it's okay to try new stuff, even if it flops.

## Expand Your Toolkit

If you really want to inspire diverse thinking and unique approaches in your students, you need to have a diverse set of teaching tools yourself. That way, you can model the variety and novelty you want your students to emulate.

These [Strategy Explorations resources](#) are an incredible way for you to expand your professional toolkit so you can get a little bit weirder in ways that work well for you and your students!

## Get DEEP

No one remembers boring content. By injecting a little peculiarity in your learning, you leverage the power of weirdness to supercharge student understanding and retention.

- **The Baboon Effect** — Take a normal, ordinary, boring task and inject a little levity by adding a baboon, a weasel, a poodle, some mayonnaise, or a super villain named Fred. Little tweaks and twists like this make things more fun and keep your students in that weird frame of mind.
- **Mystery** — Here are a few outside-the-box ideas (and one “inside-the-box” idea) to activate curiosity in your students.
  - **Mystery Box** — Put something related to your content in a box. Have students try to guess what it is by reaching in and feeling (if it's slimy or furry or it moves), by playing Twenty Questions, or by giving them a series of ascending clues. They'll raise their hands and be really excited, [like this](#).
  - **Mystery Zoom** — Find a picture connecting to your content and then zoom way in on it, and just show students this zoomed in view. Gradually show views that are less and less zoomed in and have them update their guesses as they get more information. Taking a different perspective on something is the essence of weirdness!
  - **Mystery Reveal** — This also starts with a picture connecting to your content. Cover the thing up with boxes and let students guess what it might be as you reveal more and more boxes. Another great way to build mystery for any content area!

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# Project-Based Learning that Lets Student Weirdness SHINE



Want to be that teacher who stands out? The one students remember forever? Check out [Take a Stand!](#) Students get a chance to take a respectful stand about a topic THEY feel passionately about, then to share their unique perspective with the world. The project integrates standards from ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and culminates when students present an inspirational podcast on the topic of their choice!

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson-by-lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 Content Standard Connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).



## Conclusion

Your students are wonderfully weird, delightfully daffy, and excellently eccentric. When you create a classroom where oddness is an asset instead of a liability, you let your students be more innovative and more authentic — and you help them to learn in ways that are more profound. So, fire up a little weirdness in your class today!

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:  
[Keep Kids Weird: Using Student Strangeness for Good Instead of Evil.](#)**

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