

K-12 TEACHERS

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

IGNITE, ENGAGE, EMPOWER UNLEASHING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

CREATING CLASSROOMS
WHERE CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY,
AND CRITICAL THINKING THRIVE!



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When you think of education, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

For some, it might be a pile of homework or a stack of books that need reading. Others may recall the flashcards they used to memorize specific formulas or expand their vocabulary. All these examples have a place in the learning ecosystem, but true education should be about so much more. Student learning should involve curiosity, discovery, and the opportunity to experiment with a variety of different solutions. To put it more simply: true education requires student engagement ... and that starts with igniting and fostering curiosity in our classrooms.

According to cognitive scientist and researcher Elizabeth Bonawitz, curiosity is innate in all humans — a sensation much like hunger or thirst. “Curiosity acts as a kind of filter you put over the world to help the mind decide what information to attend to,” she says. “It’s a physiological response that helps drive action and decision-making to support learning.” (Elizabeth Bonawitz, *A Curious Mind*) Tapping into student curiosity is the first step to sparking student engagement. Giving them the opportunity to grapple with uncertainty and explore the unknown is an ideal strategy for getting them to invest in their own education.

Once student curiosity has been sparked, teachers should focus on cultivating critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For instance, [Ted Ed](#) has a series of math riddles that can help students think flexibly and creatively, while also challenging them to persevere through mathematical difficulty.

Each puzzle includes a story that sets up the problem, and then a solution. Most of the solutions come in pieces and the problems involve multiple steps to solve them. This is just one example, though. Problem-solving can be done in a variety of different ways and frequently depends on the character of the class and the preferences of the teacher.

Finally, educators must empower students to embrace their own voices and choices. Doing so makes learning personal to students. They are not merely gaining new information. They are expressing themselves and pursuing their interests. This is where engagement at a deeper level begins. Students become intrinsically motivated to play an active role in their learning.



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– Elizabeth Bonawitz, *A Curious Mind*





To better ignite student curiosity and interest, consider **trying one of these strategies** to help make student engagement second nature:

Mystery Box

Start your class by bringing in a mystery box with something hidden inside. Then, have students ask yes or no questions to figure out what is in the box. To ensure this activity stays relevant, it helps to have objects in the box that loosely tie to the content and have students draw the connection. For instance, an old horseshoe could be used in a lesson about the Pony Express, or a piece of amber for a unit on fossils.

Taboo Tactics

There's nothing more tempting than forbidden fruit — so use this strategy to make knowledge a mouthwatering apple. Before you teach new content, close the door. Tell students you don't want anyone to find out that you're teaching them this idea. The content should never actually be controversial, but adding an element of secrecy is enough to hold student interest.

Make a Mascot

Invite students to build a character that represents something they're studying. Add constraints to ensure they think critically and creatively throughout the design process. For example, you could ask students to build a mascot that represents one way humans impact their environment. You could limit them to five specific materials. Have students explain the symbolism behind their construction when they're done.

Build an Intellectually Safe Culture

Create a culture where students feel free to offer ideas and are encouraged to make mistakes. A simple change in the wording of a question can open up a comfortable space for students to offer solutions. Instead of asking, *"What is the answer?"* pose the question as *"What is an answer?"* This allows students to recognize that many solutions are possible.

Engage in Project-Based Learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects that — in ways both big and small — make the world a better place. Consider exploring [Blue Apple projects](#), which cover everything from environmental sustainability to responsible money management.

At its heart, student engagement is about pairing students' natural curiosity with an environment where it will be allowed to flourish. Educators can create these conditions by making their classroom a place where student curiosity is welcomed, mistakes and questions are encouraged, and students know that their thoughts and wonderings matter. Not only does this make for better student engagement, but it also ensures that learning is memorable, meaningful, and fun. Simply providing criteria and constraints allows students to test the boundaries of their knowledge and explore different solutions to any problems they may encounter — both in life and in the classroom.



VAI Education Can Help!

This may be the one topic that will have the most impact on how you teach — and how your students learn! As a nonprofit, we rely on teachers like you to share our mission with other educators. And, if possible, please share with your peers and your administrator. In return, we'd like to offer you and your school a **20% discount on select products and services*** from VAI Education. To access this discount and details, go to www.vaei.org/thankyou2024 or contact your educational specialist via phone at 616.234.5528 or e-mail information@vaei.org.

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