

3 Effective Ways to Engage Students

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Without question, a major classroom challenge facing today's educators is getting their students to put down their phones and pick up their level of engagement. While a generation ago educators might find their students getting sidetracked by an attractive classmate, an enchanting daydream or passing notes about an upcoming tailgate party, today's smartphones present educators with a whole new array of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

According to the 2011 article "The Use and Abuse of Cell Phones and Text Messaging in the Classroom: A Survey of College Students," published in *College Teaching*, after surveying "269 college students from 21 academic majors at a small Northeastern university," authors Deborah R. Tindall and Robert W. Bohlander found that "95 percent of students bring their phones to class every day, 92 percent use their phones to text message during class time and 10 percent admit they have texted during an exam on at least one occasion."

After much trial and error, I have come to the conclusion that engaging my students is best accomplished by making them feel a bit anxious while keeping them in relatively close proximity to their comfort zone. I've had a great deal of success simply by rearranging the chairs in my classroom, making my students give pop oral reports on the previous night's reading assignment and, when assigning collaborative writing assignments, pairing up two students who are exceedingly different from each other. Although these three pedagogical methods are far from foolproof, they have generally proven effective.

The Circle of Debate

In a majority of the classrooms at the university where I teach, the desks are set up in neat rows of five. With that type of configuration, four out of five students are forced to stare at the back of the student in front of them. This classic arrangement lends itself to typical inattentive behaviors: students furtively checking their phones, halfheartedly crouching behind the person in front of them or casually wondering about the upcoming Sigma Alpha Epsilon formal. An effective cure for these classroom maladies is to randomly rearrange the rows of desks into one large circle.

As soon as my students walk into their newly reconfigured classroom, their reactions run the gamut, from mild shrugs of the shoulders to mouths agape. From the first day of the course until the last, my students feel an obligation to sit in the same self-assigned seat for each and every class; according to this unwritten rule, everyone must sit in the exact same seat for the duration of the term. Forced to select a seat in the circle, they are confronted with the uncomfortable reality that for the next 75 minutes, they will not have any protective cover.

As my mostly first-year students try to adjust to their new surroundings, I insouciantly write some questions on the board. Smiling at the whiteboard, Expo marker in hand, I pretend not to hear my students' audible, utterly gratifying consternations: "I didn't read, did *you*?" "I can't believe this dude is making us do this" and "WTF?" After taking attendance, I ask each student to comment on the previous night's reading assignments, but I add one admonishment: "Here's the rub, guys -- you can't repeat an observation that has been previously made by a classmate."

We make our way around the circle, the students offering their insights on "[The Case for Reparations](#)" by Ta-Nehisi Coates. When we reach the former longtime residents of the back row, Natalie reluctantly confesses that she did not read it, James fallaciously claims that the bookstore is still out of the book and Ayesha blurts out that she did not do the assignment "because I had a lab report due in my chemistry class and this huge test in my forensics class."

As for their classmates, they relish the chance to debate, denounce or support Coates's claims. With each comment, I play a slightly obstreperous, Socratic-style devil's advocate. My classroom, once silent, somnolent and devoid of energy, is now filled with the soothing sounds of richly boisterous assertions, counterclaims and counter-counter

claims. In the following class, Natalie, James and Ayesha come loaded with answers to my questions.

At the start of the subsequent classes, in an attempt to preserve the energy created by the circle of debate, I encourage as my students as they enter the room to take a seat next to a classmate whom they have not met.

Pop Oral Reports

When the momentum from the circle of debate begins to cool, another valuable way to heat up my classroom is to give pop oral reports. After imploring my students to have James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" read by the following Monday, I spend part of my Sunday afternoon making a list of questions dealing with Baldwin's heart-wrenching piece. On Monday, I arrive a few minutes early and place a hackneyed wooden podium on the large desk in the front of the room. As my students enter, I take a seat along the wall and assign each a question, telling them that they have 10 minutes to prepare a three-minute oral report. As I lower my head, I hear my favorite lament: "I did the reading every single night but last night."

Regret is evident on the faces of a few students. Others simply open their books and begin searching for quotations. I've found that if I have a course with 20 students and 18 show up for class, about five or six of the students, when called upon to give their oral reports, will sheepishly admit that they did not do the reading; the remaining students shake off their nerves and earn some easy points. On a rare occasion, a student will come to the podium and try to answer a question about an assignment that he or she clearly did not read.

After watching such a student stumble and mumble through the report, I slyly ask the crimson-faced presenter how Sonny deals with his grandmother's heroin addiction. When the student responds by telling me that Sonny feels "totally devastated by her addiction," I call the next name on my list. As dispiriting as this sort of attempt may be, I also have heard inspiring answers from students who compare Sonny's battles with addiction to their own or those of a loved one. When all of the students have completed their reports, I stand up and offer a heartfelt thanks to those who shared their deeply personal stories before spending a few minutes correcting any misinformation that might have been disseminated. Lastly, I remind my students about the importance of completing all of the reading assignments.

The circle of debate and pop oral reports are not intended to be punitive. Rather, my goal is to have my students wondering what we're going to be doing in class as they walk from their dormitories, the student center or the commuter parking lot. If I wait and try to get my charges engaged after they have taken their seats, then I've already lost a great deal of ground in the pedagogical battle. On the contrary, if they are speculating as to whether or not they are going to walk into the room and have to participate in a circle of debate or give a pop oral report on the previous night's assignment, then my students are on the path to engagement. When they enter my classroom using their thumbs to flip through the pages of their course texts instead of pinching their smartphone screens, I know that my practices have -- at least, for the next 75 minutes -- halted the pernicious spread of distracted learning in its well-worn tracks.

Crossover Pairings

Eventually the fear of having to do a pop oral report dissipates, and students fall back into their old habits. The best way to overcome this gradual onslaught of complacency, especially as it gets later in the semester, is with a collaborative assignment. As part of the process, I purposefully pair two students from different backgrounds, political views and seat locations with each other.

Last semester I paired an all-star defensive end on the football team from the gritty north end of Hartford, Conn., with an aspiring marine biologist from tony West Hartford. Similarly, I paired the son of a university janitor with the daughter of a man who once served on the university's Board of Governors, as well as a churlish resident of South Boston who always forgets to bring his books to class with an ebullient resident of the South Bronx whose book edge is lined with an uneven assortment of multihued mini Post-it notes.

Shortly after announcing whom they will be working with for the last two weeks of the term, I display the following assignment on the overhead.

Assume the identity of Stephen Crane, Amy Tan, Tobias Wolff, James Baldwin, T. C. Boyle, Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce, John Updike or Bruce Shapiro. Next, assume that you have just won \$10 million in a unique Powerball lottery. As a condition of winning this lottery, you are legally obligated to donate \$9.5 million to schools, colleges, universities or other charitable organizations. Since you are compelled to donate most of the money, you will not incur any tax liabilities. You must donate to at least four different nonprofit organizations. The remaining funds (half a million dollars) can be used for your own personal expenses and growth.

In order to succeed with this writing assignment, you must thoroughly research the personal life of your author, his or her published work (s), and the charitable foundations to which you believe the author would plausibly donate a portion of his or her winnings. The organizations must be legitimate and should be free from scandal and financial malfeasance (i.e., they cannot be crooks). By federal law, all 501(c)3 charitable organizations must make their annual financial reports available to the public; in many cases, you will find these documents listed on the organization's website.

In your essay you and your partner will need to explain why the two of you believe your selected author would choose certain charities over others. In order to bolster these assertions, partners will need to provide evidence from either the author's past charitable giving, personal history or passages from his or her published works. Two of the most persuasive arguments will be the connection to the author's personal history and the connection to his or her published works. Your in-depth reasoning and research are the crux of this persuasive assignment.

All or most of my students suffer from what Professor Sherry Turkle at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology describes as being "alone together." For example, before my class starts, my students will be texting with their friends from high school instead of bantering with the person seated next to them. The nature of the pairings, combined with the complex topic of the assignment, forces my students to meet and work with someone from a vastly different peer group and thus escape from this insidious ostracizing malaise. While it would be easier for me to let my students choose whom they wanted to work with on this assignment, watching these inscrutable duos collaborate on a complex research question makes this assignment very rewarding -- at least, to me.

Although sometimes the circle of debate fails to produce valuable discourse, the pop oral reports cause my students to question my fairness and the crossover pairings result in students opting to write the essay themselves, more often than not, I have found that these three strategies can change the energy in my classroom from disengagement to engagement without my ever touching the thermostat. And when all else fails, and there are two to three weeks left in the semester, I surprise my charges by having pizza delivered to my classroom -- ideally during the middle of class. There is nothing like a few slices of piping-cold pepperoni pizza to ignite a heated debate.