

YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE!

When students let their minds drift off, they're losing valuable learning time. Here are ten smart ways to increase classroom participation.

Have you ever plunked yourself down in a staff meeting where some of your colleagues were, for lack of a better phrase, not paying attention? Grading homework? Having private conversations? Texting? As we know all too well, kids aren't a whole lot different than adults: If they aren't absorbed by what's going on, they'll find something else that interests them.

Getting all your students focused, eager, and on task at the beginning of class is challenging enough. Equally problematic, once you have them locked in to the lesson, is watching them zone out. There's nothing unusual about that. After all, anyone who has to sit through a long routine—including a teacher's presentation—is bound to drift off at some point. Still, unless you manage to capture and keep students' focus, whether at the beginning of or midway through class, the engine of student learning that you are trying to drive simply isn't even in gear.

From Dead Time to Active Learning

I call this lack of engagement dead time. Dead time interferes with students' learning, and it is contagious. It lures those who are on task into wondering, "Why should I pay attention if others

aren't?" I have come to feel that dead time is so pernicious that I will do everything I can to prevent even the hint of an outbreak. If you strive for maximum learning for all your students, then allowing kids to be stuck in dead time feels like a small betrayal—to yourself and to them.

Active learning and active listening—in which students are thoroughly and thoughtfully engaged with each other or the teacher—represents the opposite of dead time. In their book *Inspiring Active Learning*, Merrill Harmon and Melanie Toth present a ladder that describes four levels of student motivation. They call students at Level 4, the lowest level, the work avoiders, and on Level 3 are the halfhearted workers. Near the top are responsible students, and, finally, come the fully active learners.

As a teacher and a project-learning consultant, I've always paid close attention to these levels of student engagement. I've discovered that it's difficult to keep students focused when the lesson comes from the teacher. But it can be equally difficult when they are engaged as project-learning teams, especially when the independence demanded by project learning is new to them. Sometimes it's an individual on the team who can't seem to get involved; other times it's

the entire group. Over the years, I've come up with a range of strategies to eliminate dead time and move students up the active learning ladder.

Building Your Arsenal

Eliminating dead time starts with creating an arsenal of routines and activities. They can be general-purpose activities that apply to various subject areas or styles of teaching, or specific content-oriented activities that allow your students to learn by tapping into multiple intelligences beyond the usual listening and recalling. Some are physical activities that help kids unleash pent-up energy, while others create private thinking time that encourages reflection. Or they can be well-managed student-to-student communication to guarantee that they are all thinking about the work.

Developing these activities initially takes time, but the payoff—in terms of classroom management and overall learning—is more than worth the effort. By building a storehouse of activities to draw on, I'm rarely at a loss to implement one of them to get kids back on track. Not surprisingly, too, students get to know these strategies and look forward to them. I find they work at the beginning of class to calm kids down or any time they need an energizing way to refocus.

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ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM DUKE

10 RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

1. Start class with a mind warm-up.

A classic warm-up is to ask students to find the mistakes planted in material written on the board. (You can use this idea in any subject area.) But instead of asking them to work silently and alone, and then debrief in a classic question-and-answer session with one student at a time (while many sit inattentively), use a mix of collaboration and competition to eliminate what could potentially become dead time.

Here's how: Organize teams of three students and ask them to work together (quietly) and raise their hands when they think they have found all the mistakes. After the first team signals it's done, give a bit more time and then have teams indicate with their fingers—together on the count of three—the number of mistakes they found in the work. The team that finds the most describes its answers until another team disagrees politely or until they are finished.

3. Teach students how to collaborate before expecting success.

Doing project learning and other team-based work without prior training can lead to lots of dead time. You can nip much of it in the bud by teaching collaboration skills before projects get started. You don't need to use an activity related to your subject area to teach teamwork.

Here's how: One way is to give teams of students a pair of scissors, two sheets of paper, ten paper clips, and a 10-inch piece of tape, and ask them to build the tallest free-standing tower in 20 minutes.

Prior to the activity, create a teamwork rubric with students, which reviews descriptions of desired norms and behaviors. While half of the teams are building the towers, have the other half of the students stand around them in a circular "fishbowl" as silent observers. Debrief afterward, and train the observers to give a positive comment before a critical one: "I liked that they did (blank), and I wonder if they could have also (blank)." Switch the observers with the tower builders and see if they can do better; then debrief again.

2. Use movement to get kids focused.

Ask all students to stand behind their desks and join in simple choreographed physical movement. Because most kids find it invigorating and it's easy to monitor full participation, it may become one of your favorite ways to get kids focused and kill dead time.

For the primary grades: Teach hand-clapping patterns to accompany a chanted verse or a set of math facts. Add foot stomping or hand clapping with a partner to create variety.

For the middle grades: Create a rhythm with finger snapping and hand clapping, which you model and they echo back. Vary the rhythm and pattern in intervals of 15–20 seconds to challenge them to pay attention and join in.

For any grade, including high school: Offer a seventh-inning stretch, or the cross crawl. To do the cross crawl, stand up and begin marching in place, raising the knees really high. As you raise the left knee, reach across your body with your right hand and touch the left knee. Then do the same for the left hand on the right knee. Continue this pattern for a minute or more. (You can also vary it by, say, having kids clap their hands over their heads between each set of knee touches.)

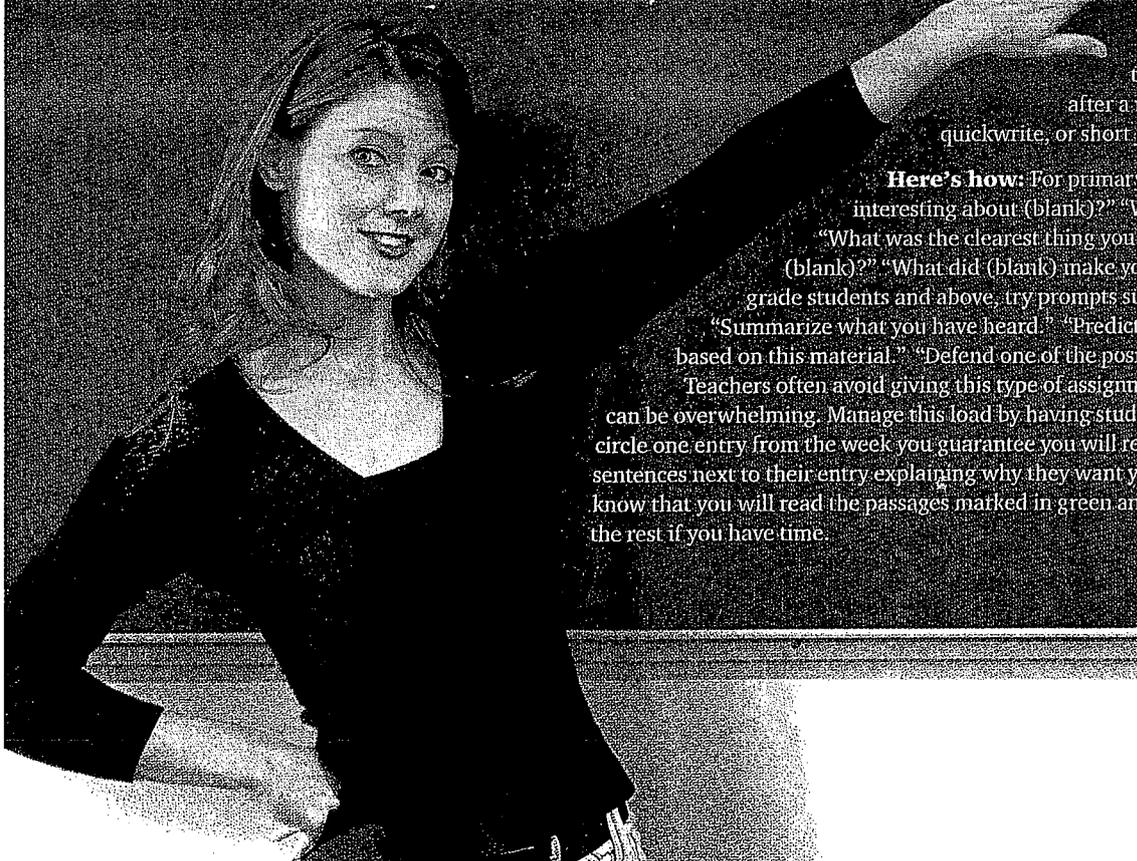
4. Use quickwrites when you want quiet time and student reflection.

When interest is waning in your presentations, or you want to settle students down after a noisy teamwork activity, ask them to do a quickwrite, or short journal-writing assignment.

Here's how: For primary-grade students, ask, "What was most interesting about (blank)?" "What was confusing about (blank)?"

"What was the clearest thing you understood?" "What was boring about (blank)?" "What did (blank) make you think of in your life?" For intermediate-grade students and above, try prompts such as the following, or develop your own: "Summarize what you have heard." "Predict an exam or quiz question I could ask based on this material." "Defend one of the positions taken during the prior discussion."

Teachers often avoid giving this type of assignment because assessing them regularly can be overwhelming. Manage this load by having students use a green (or other color) pen to circle one entry from the week you guarantee you will read. Occasionally, have them write a few sentences next to their entry explaining why they want you to read that particular one. Let them know that you will read the passages marked in green and that, time permitting, you might read the rest if you have time.



5. Run a tight ship when giving instructions.

Preventing dead time is especially important when giving instructions. There are a lot of great ways to ask for your students' attention, but many succeed or fail based on how demanding you are of the final outcome. Whichever method you use, before you begin speaking, it is critical to require (1) total silence, (2) complete attention, and (3) all five eyeballs on you (two eyes on their face, two eyes on their knees, and the eyeball on their heart). I've done this approach with every class I've ever taught, and it makes a big difference. Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) middle schools include detailed SSLANT expectations: Smile, Sit up, Listen, Ask, Nod when you understand, and Track the speaker.

Here's how: When you introduce this routine to students, do it five times in a row: Announce that in a moment, you will briefly let them talk among themselves, and then you'll give them a signal (you can count out loud from one to three, ring a bell, and so on) and wait until they are perfectly ready for you to speak. In the first two weeks after starting this routine, remind students often what's expected. To hold everyone accountable for listening the entire time, make it clear that you will never repeat your instructions after you have finished going over them.

7. Use signaling to allow everyone to answer your question.

To help ensure that all students are actively thinking, regularly ask questions to which everyone must prepare at least one answer—letting them know you expect an answer. Then wait for all students to signal they are ready.

Here's how: For example, in math, you could ask, "How many ways can you figure out $54 - 17$ in your head? (Subtract 10 and then 7, subtract 20 and then add 3, and so on.) Or, to review a presentation, ask, "How many key points of this presentation are you prepared to describe?" By asking questions that allow for multiple answers or explanations, you are differentiating instruction: everyone is expected to come up with at least one answer, but some may come up with more.

To convey the number of answers, students can use sign language, such as holding a hand to the chest (so their hands aren't visible to their neighbors) and displaying one or more fingers to represent how many answers they have. This technique precludes students from bragging about how many ideas they thought of or how quickly they are ready. You can then call on volunteers who want to share their answers with the rest of the class.

8. Use minimal supervision tasks to squeeze dead time out of regular routines.

Tasks that require minimal supervision add purposeful activity during moments that might normally revert to dead time. They come in handy when passing out papers, working with a small group of students, handling an unforeseen interruption, addressing students who didn't do their homework, or providing work to those who have finished an assignment before others.

Here's how: While you pass out papers, ask students to do a quickwrite (see #4) or to pair up and quiz each other on vocabulary words. Also, train students to fess up if they didn't do their homework. That way, during class homework review, these students won't automatically be in dead time. Instead, they'll immediately move to these prearranged minimal supervision tasks. For example, you can ask them to study a review sheet, summarize a reading passage, read the day's assignment ahead of time, or create and study vocabulary words or other content. You might find students suddenly doing their homework more often rather than face this extra work.

ONLINE VIDEO

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Teachers weigh in on their favorite classroom-management techniques in five video clips at edutopia.org/classroom-management-video



6. Use a fairness cup to keep students thinking.

The more you can manage your classroom to be a supportive environment, where students are encouraged to take risks without fear of being put down or teased, the easier it will be to use your fairness cup regularly, without feeling that you are setting students up for failure.

Here's how: Write each student's name on a Popsicle stick and put the sticks in a cup. To keep students on their toes, pull a random stick to choose someone to speak or answer a question. Important: When you begin using your fairness cup, prepare a range of questions, some of which all your students can successfully answer. This strategy allows the bottom third of your class to get involved and answer questions without being put on the spot.

9. Mix up your teaching styles.

To keep students involved and on their toes, try to move from teacher-centered learning to student-centered active learning, and vice versa.

Here's how: Introduce a presentation by having students pair up, talk to each other about their prior knowledge of the presentation, and generate a list of four questions for which they'll want to know the answers. Make quick rounds to remind all students to stay on task. To encourage active listening, provide students with a list of important questions in advance. Interrupt the presentation with a quickwrite (see #4) and then have students "pair-share" by asking them to compare their entries with a neighbor. Pull sticks from your fairness cup (see #6) to choose pairs of students to present their thoughts to the class.

10. Create teamwork tactics that emphasize accountability.

By insisting that students "ask three before me," you make it clear that they are expected to seek assistance from all members of their team before they turn to you.

Here's how: To reinforce this rule, when a student on a team wants to ask you a question, you, the teacher, always ask another person on the team whether she knows what the question is. If she doesn't, politely walk away, and the team will quickly understand what you expect.

Another way to emphasize accountability might be to say, "When you think your team is done with the task, find me within 30 seconds and tell me." This strategy shifts the accountability to the team for being on task.

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