

4 Powerful Ways to Engage Students THIS School Year

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on [October 11, 2020 8:00 AM](#)



Today's guest blog is written by Dr. Nathan Lang-Raad, a speaker, author, and educator, and Herbie Raad, an author and singer.

Regardless if we are teaching in a blended, fully virtual setting or face-to-face setting, we're always looking for ways to improve our teaching practice and for strategies to support higher levels of student engagement. It's important to connect with educators (in our teaching teams or in our social-media PLNs), to see examples of success and hear about their challenges.

When seeking support, resources, and tools for the classroom, it's important to remember the most important resource: you. Your experiences. Your stories. Your strengths and talents. While we may think we need all these tools or resources, the truth is that we have what we need inside us. After years of enduring education plans and fixes, I decided to develop my own personal teaching manifesto.

1. Be fun and funny, smile, and laugh.

Smiles impact our interactions with others and our life experience as social beings. Smiles and laughter create an inviting tone, an essential warmth, and students learn best in these welcoming environments of inclusivity. Dolan (2001) shows that humor systematically activates the brain's dopamine reward system, and Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez and Liu (2011) concluded that humor can be an effective intervention to improve learning retention in students. Finding humor in the everyday is not only a tool for a more fulfilling life but a powerful act of creativity as teachers and students.

Those who find the "small joys" in everyday moments of life are the ones that smile often and laugh frequently. If you're having trouble finding these bright spots, just look around and be

present. Find a bird, a cloud, or a tree, or simply take two minutes, walk away from your desk, and look up at the sky. There's always something somewhere that has the power to give us the gift of joy, if we are open and present to experience it. You will begin to find the nuances of the everyday. Gradually, and without even being conscious of it, you will start to notice the many small wonders surrounding you.

2. Create experiences, not activities.

In my third year of teaching, I thought I'd found my groove. I had finally built up a repertoire of lessons and activities that students seemed engaged with. After all, I was a science teacher and thought I had the biggest opportunity to get students interested in learning. One day that bubble popped, when a student walked in and said, "This class is boring." That hurt. I said, "What do you want to do today?" The student answered, "I want to go outside." I said, "All right, let's go outside."

Thinking quickly on my feet about how the lesson planned for the day would work outside, I realized I now had to throw out my plans. I had recently become certified to test water quality and already had outdoor kits organized. That day, I took my students down to the nearby bayou, and we tested it for E. coli, phosphates, nitrates, algae, etc. The students had a blast and could finally see connections to what they were doing in the lab.

That day changed the course of teaching for me. Not only was I determined that students would never be bored again, but every day would be an opportunity to actively learn in meaningful and fun ways. I grew up that day. I wasn't going to succumb to what was easiest or what the masses were doing. I remembered why I had become an educator: to make a difference. Activities just aren't enough in the classroom. They don't stick with students, and they're not what's best for learning. Experiences, rather than activities, transform how students view the world and how they think about their own thinking.

3. Be visibly invisible. It's about them, not you.

During an instructional round one day, I heard about this phenomenal teacher I was going to visit at a school. I couldn't wait to observe their classroom. When I walked into the classroom, at first I couldn't find the teacher. It took me a few seconds of scanning until I spotted her. She was hunched over listening closely to a group of students having academic discourse about a math task they were working through. As I walked around the room, I noticed students piloting the conversation themselves.

The teacher only guided from the periphery of the conversation. Her students defended and justified their answers to each other, with little prompting from the teacher. Her students believed that they were the leaders of the classroom and that they could help shape the thinking of other students. This was happening in supportive, collaborative ways: "I like the way you solved this

problem." "I wonder if my answer would have been different if I had used your strategy." The teacher was visibly invisible in that the students knew she structured and planned the learning experiences but felt they were in charge of their own learning. This is also backed by research as Hattie (2012), in his meta-analysis, found student discussions to increase learning outcomes.

4. Treat every lesson as if you only get one chance.

Imagine that you're in your second, or 42nd, year of teaching and you're getting ready to teach a concept that you've already taught before. Or imagine you need to put together a remote learning lesson and you think, "Oh, I'll just recycle that lesson I've used before and have them do it at home."

It's easier and maybe more efficient to use what we've done before or in years past. Think about how you would feel in your role as a learner in a professional-development session you're being asked to attend. What if the facilitator, speaker, or presenter used the exact same slide deck, activities, and strategies they'd used in the district in the next state, without any regard for your needs, the subject or grade you teach, the school goals and norms you have in place, or the learning environment you're teaching in (blended, fully online, or brick-and-mortar).

The same is true for those students in your class. Every group of students we have the pleasure, and honor, of teaching possesses different interests, backgrounds, experiences, and skill gaps, and therefore, we must create experiences that connect to their intrinsic motivation. Yes, it's good practice to look at previous planning, but that should not be a starting point.

Begin with the students in mind. What do they want to learn about, what do they need to know and be able to do in their ever-changing world, and how can you best support their individual needs? Then access your toolkit to see what tools will best accomplish this mission. Additionally, teaching a lesson as if it were your one and only chance increases your enthusiasm, energy, and urgency, so that every moment becomes an opportunity to make learning exciting and meaningful, as if it were your very first class, on your very first day of school, every day!

What is your teaching manifesto? If you need some guidance on developing one, start with your "why" and your purpose. Why did you choose to pursue teaching? Do you currently feel bound by restrictions or circumstances? Consider, as you reflect on your purpose, the circumstances or attitudes you've needed to change to free yourself. Which influences have given you the courage and inspiration to make necessary changes? What kind of support do you need to help you rediscover your heart for teaching and learning?

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