27 Proven Student Engagement Hacks To Try In Your Classroom

A Crowdsourced Anthology of Strategies from Real Education Professionals
A Word From the Editors

Educators hold student engagement on a much deserved pedestal. It’s the veritable Holy Grail of learning. Engaged students are more satisfied with school, more confident and successful, and even more likely to approach tasks with persistence in the face of difficulty.

Students want to be engaged in learning. Not only is it more enjoyable, but they feel a greater sense of responsibility for their education. Students crave learning experiences that pique their attention and inspire their passions. But how do we accomplish genuine student engagement when it seems there’s always the looming elements of distraction and disinterest?

This eBook was created to shine a light on many different ways educators can engage their students. It’s a compilation of crowdsourced responses from real education professionals around the country. In it, they share twenty-seven of their best student engagement hacks for you to try in your classroom.

Try one or try them all. Your students will thank you.

… But first, a brief word on the importance of student engagement.
The State of Student Engagement?

Student engagement is described as being behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively involved in academic activities. Learning isn’t meant to be a spectator sport. Students should be motivated, active, and—most importantly—involved. Motivation and engagement play a major role in students’ interest and enjoyment of school and, consequently, in student achievement.

Despite all of the research supporting student engagement, many institutions simply don’t provide students with learning environments that foster it. Unfortunately for these students, they’re not only missing out on increased opportunities for academic success, but opportunities for social and personal development, as well.

Luckily, many educators have managed to develop institutions and classrooms that encourage and support student engagement—thanks, in part, to technology. By meaningfully integrating technology in the classroom, doors of opportunity open for increased engagement. In fact, our Global State of Digital Learning survey found that of the nearly 3,000 schools who participated, those that actively use a learning management system (LMS) report the highest levels of student engagement—a difference of more than 12%.

While the ultimate goal of student engagement is academic success, the versatility and flexibility of the process gives you the freedom to do what works best for your students. Teachers all over the world are engaging students using student choice, blended learning, and all types of strategies and approaches in between.

It’s important to note that all the strategies featured in this ebook incorporate technology into the process. But regardless of your level of technology use, we think you’ll find them helpful and inspiring.
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Ensuring Meaningful Student Interaction

When thinking about how to engage students, there are a couple of key ideas that come to mind.

**Is the activity or lesson meaningful?** Students know when they are given busy work or time fillers. Help students relate to a topic so it is not just an abstract idea.

**What will this mean to them or what can they relate it to now?** If it is truly abstract, technology is a great tool to bring those ideas to life (ie, virtual reality). Also include your students in the lesson.

As educators we can no longer follow the “sit and get” model. Students need to interact while learning. It does not have to be digitally, but in some way interact with them as you are teaching.

**Student Apprentices**

Be present. In online, face-to-face, and blended courses, you as the instructor have to model what the learners are to do. Discussions need your voice—show them your assignment (that you wrote), present something in Flipgrid or a third-party tool before they do. It’s powerful.

This modeling process and level of engagement shows them that the tools are real and that they’re worth using. In essence, you’re showing them that learning is practical, the tools we use in the classroom are used by professionals, and that they can learn to think on the level that you do.

I’d associate these ideas with elements of *Cognitive Apprenticeship* by Collins, Brown, and Holum. We need to apprentice our thinkers like the smithies and haberdasheries of old!
Meeting Students Where They Are

Active participation is the key to student engagement. If the students are passive learners, they will not retain as much. If they take a stake in their learning—an ownership—they will more than likely retain more.

In a course I created, students get to know computers, the internet, and online safety and etiquette. I have them using real life examples as they learn the content. For example, they have to respond to a safety issue by thinking and explaining what they would personally do. It is all about meeting them in their place, using what they know to engage them.

Creating a Points and Rewards System

I like using and recommending a point value system that allows students to exchange for rewards, such as a treasure chest with stickers, pencils, toys, free homework passes, etc.

To keep track of points, I use a program called, Class Dojo. In it you can assign the kind of points that the students will earn, but you can also assign Needs Works Points which subtracts from the Positive side. I recommend using it more for positive than negative reinforcement so that all students can participate. You can even post an update or announcement with your 5 top high scorers for that specific week. It’s like my own Hogwarts!
Incorporating Teamwork and Games

The Breakout EDU games require players to use teamwork and critical thinking to solve a series of challenging puzzles in order to open the locked boxes. Each box students unlock helps them solve the answer to a problem that was posed before the game began.

I love seeing student excitement and engagement when we play. BreakOut EDU games help students develop grit and perseverance skills while completing various challenges to solve the puzzle within a time limit.

Getting Everyone Involved

Some students can easily “fly under the radar” during instruction, especially if the teacher is only calling on students one at a time. I love leveraging technology to ensure I know what every student does or does not understand so I can ensure my instruction is not only addressing misunderstandings, but also that each student is intellectually engaged.

I can use something like Nearpod or Kahoot if each student has a device or, because we are a BYOD district, I use Plickers because then I’m the only one who needs a device.
Randomly Scheduling Rewards

I like to periodically reward students for liking/commenting on my updates or materials located within Schoology's LMS. In my Psychology class, we learn that the best way to get someone to learn to do something on their own is by rewarding behavior at randomly scheduled times. Therefore, to get students to check and engage with Schoology, I randomly offer students candy, extra credit, or shout-outs for liking or commenting on my Schoology posts and updates.

For example, at the end of a post, I might say: “Like this post and see me after class for a reward!” Word of mouth spreads like crazy and you soon have most of your students with increased engagement!

Providing Play Spaces

PLAY—plain and simple. Create opportunities for “play space” in your classroom. Whether this is through an adapted version of an established word game, like Balderdash, or through digital tool, like Kahoot. This can be achieved through creating possibility spaces in your classroom, designed around a core play dynamic such as survival, spatial reasoning, race to the end, or prediction.

Whatever the task, play is often the most engaging and sensitive way to approach the topic. Play is a natural instinct within humans, it allows character to come to the surface and failure to be part of the overall success. Without play, my classroom would be stagnant and prescriptive. If I let my students play, I can sit back, watch, and assess.
Individualizing Expectations

When reading in a traditional ELA classroom, many teachers struggle with assessing understanding when they provide students the chance to read self-selected pieces. Digital resources can transform student assessment during independent, self-selected novel studies.

Use G Suite and Apple apps such as Pages, Keynote, Clips, and iMovie to challenge students to create projects that highlight components of their novels and stories. By individualizing the expectations so that students can demonstrate comprehension and analysis of their own accord, you’ll find that student learning is elevated and they’ll take an interest and ownership over the materials they’re developing.

Making Sure Everyone Does Everything

Classroom motto: Everyone Does Everything! Whether it is providing verbal or physical choral responses, discussing tough questions, or solving problems, setting the expectation that everyone is responsible for their learning is essential.

Using quick win strategies like Think-Pair-Share or Give One, Get One helps keep students active, social, and engaged. Using personal white boards (DIY: use a sheet protector and white sheet of paper) gives each student an opportunity to do, prompted by a check and share with a partner. Another favorite adage is “whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning,” so give students opportunities to learn!
Connecting Learning with the Real World

I work with students who are consistently disengaged in the traditional school system. My non-profit charter school network develops curriculum that has real world applications in all subject areas to ensure students understand why they are learning what they are learning. Providing choice with projects also allows students to take ownership of their learning and create products that have real meaning for them.

Allowing Students to Explore on Their Own

I try to find as many ways as possible for the students to discover information on their own. For example, in my class on Office Applications, when I teach about good PowerPoint design, I don’t give the students a list of tips. Instead, I have them go online and develop their own list.

They then create a PowerPoint which illustrates those tips—one slide showing the “right” way and a second slide illustrating the “wrong” way. I find that this gives the students more buy-in with their learning.

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Creating the Ultimate Incentive:
The Golden Badge

In my self-paced courses, I use Schoology to provide students with game rules and a roadmap of the unit. Students see what goals they are striving to reach. There are no tricks, everything is laid out for the students in the game rules.

At the bottom of every roadmap, it shows students the possible badges they can earn within the unit. These badges are created with the badges template in public resources. If students earn the highest point total in their grade level, they will earn a special gold version of the unit badge. Everybody wants the GOLDEN badge!

My favorite trick on getting student engagement stems from my 15 years teaching 8th grade Social Studies. I realized early on, that moving, active students produced higher quality work. I would often have them get out of their seats and do “music mingles.”

Similar to Musical Chairs, my students would move around the room to music (some danced). When the music stopped, I would have a prompt for them to answer with a partner. I had procedures in place that kept conversations on topic, while also pushing students slightly out of their comfort zone.

I also had students do activities such as acting out historical events, taping them (Newscasts from the Past), and then watching them as reviews for upcoming assessments.

Lastly, even my room and lessons were set up for movement. Students would rotate around my room in stations: a collaborative, an independent, and a direct instruction station.

Creating Movement and Activity
Debating Quotes as an Icebreaker

To get students involved at the start of class, I like to use quotations that relate to the topic we are about to explore. It’s ideal to find two opposing quotes. Students need to work in pairs to explain the meaning of each quote, and then discuss which one they agree with.

Next, I invite volunteers to share with the whole class. When students see two sides and have to justify their choice, they are immediately engaged, and we often have some interesting debates.

After the initial discussion, I ask for ideas on how the quotes might relate to our studies. I have found this to be a great way to begin class.

Giving Students the Freedom to Explore

My best tip for student engagement would be to allow students the freedom to explore or create as they choose, rather than hand-holding them through a strict process and expecting them to submit an exact duplicate of your instruction.

By allowing students to interpret the activity, they can buy into the importance of the material as well as why they should want to gain mastery of it. Granted, this is much easier to do with some curriculum and activities than others, but student choice should be provided as much as possible.
I like incorporating web-based activities like GoFormative, Kahoot, and Quizlet Live to increase student engagement. GoFormative is a web-based tool that I use to check for student understanding in real time. Instructors can upload questions or digital worksheets to this site. As students respond to these questions the instructor can view and/or display the answers and address misconceptions.

The instructor can also choose to setup an auto-scoring feature for each question. This feature provides instant feedback to the students.

I got interested in Discipline Without Stress, Punishments, or Rewards many years ago. I was then introduced to Marzano’s research-backed Classroom Instruction That Works. Using these frameworks plus my own online research, my students and I developed a description of effort levels.

We came up with four levels that somewhat corresponded with the levels of maturity in Discipline Without Stress, Punishments, or Rewards. I teach students to consciously plan what level of effort they want to be at, to evaluate what level they are on, and at the end, to identify what level they actually obtained.

Here’s a copy of our Effort Rubric!
Leveraging the Value of Video

Every possible assignment comes with a video, either one I have created or one I have sourced from someplace else. These can provide hooks, additional information, reassurance, or just an extension for students.

Using a video creating tool such as Flipgrid and embedding it into Schoology's LMS is AMAZING. It allows me to provide an exit ticket for students to share what they know in a fun environment.

Gamifying Learning with Badges

My best hack for increasing student engagement is gamification and distributing badges. My student assignment completion rate went from between 50–70% to nearly 100% completion and the grades were higher due to additional effort put in to the course.

Students loved earning badges by scoring at a certain level on quizzes and assignments. They also were more eager to participate in discussions and other digital activities. Students also liked the physical rewards that accompanied some of the badges, including a “free late pass” for one assignment and a “choose your own partner” that allowed them to work with a person of their choice on a group assignment rather than an assigned partner.

Make sure to have a way to create, distribute, and record badges and achievements. Schoology played an integral part of it, because that was the system used for this.
Utilizing Peer Review via Digital Discussion Boards

I utilize discussions in all of my classes, but found them most helpful in my career planning class and web design classes. For the career class, I have students post their mock job interview video to the discussion. Their peers will then provide feedback on the interview. This helps students see other interviews and take the role of a hiring manager that’s looking at potential candidates.

For my web class, I have a discussion where students can post issues with their code. If a student’s HTML code is not working correctly on an assignment or project, they will share the code and provide a brief summary of the issue. The rest of the class will have the opportunity to debug the code.

Piquing Student Interests with Visuals

Make it visually appealing. When presenting a new lesson in my middle school classroom, I attach a picture related to the topic we’re learning. It could be a key term, a person, or a tool that was used in ancient civilizations. This way the first thing my students see is a picture—it gets them interested and then ready to learn.

There are often times I then connect the picture to a discussion or poll that the students can answer. It’s engagement at its finest, using my LMS!
Embedding Relevant Videos in the Learning Environment

I love embedding videos and images in assignments, quizzes, and updates! Schoology’s LMS makes it easy to include these things, and the students enjoy seeing them. I love including related memes in a daily update, mini lessons or topic reviews in the form of YouTube videos, or graphics and charts in my assessments.

It’s even better when I can find examples of our learning in the “real world” and incorporate those images and clips in my materials. It’s also a fun way for me to keep my materials current and up to date with new information and ideas.

Creating “Paperslide” Videos

Students are very engaged when we do a “Paperslide” video. First, students watch a flipped lesson via our LMS. When they come to class, they’re put into groups and they must make a Paperslide video that demonstrates their learning. They then post their videos to a media album and then comment on other groups. Kids love it!
Cutting Out Extra Steps

As a 1:1 district with Chromebooks, and as a district who authenticates via Google, we have set our student homepage to Schoology’s LMS. When a student opens a Chromebook and signs in they are looking at their hub of learning.

This makes it easy for teachers to know students can find their course and links without a lot of typing and searching. It also helps because the building and teachers know the students are seeing the ‘updates’ posted to the buildings, courses, and groups every time a student opens their device.

Flipping the Classroom

I use the flipped classroom model. To encourage my students to watch the lecture videos, I put them into the unit assignment folder and use Schoology’s “completion rules” so that they have to watch a video to get access to their assignment. This ensures students have the background for in-class activities.

I also like to make my course visual for my students by adding images to folders which makes them easier to open for students with fine motor skill issues. I create interactive homepages for each unit with an embedded Google doc, calendar, and images that are linked to assignments and resources. Students like to engage with the visual pages more than lists of folders.
Integrating Student Choice and Voice

I love to give students “voice” and “choice” in my classroom. I allow them the flexibility of how they learn by using Educational Playlists, which gives different options for how they learn the content. Some options could include reading an article, watching a short video, or studying a map, etc. All of the options provide the same information, but just in different formats.

I also allow students to choose how they are going to create their final “product” to demonstrate their understanding of the material they learned. By doing this, students take ownership in their learning and are empowered to be self-directed learners.

Conclusion

Thanks to our access to technological resources and raw human ingenuity, the possibilities for engaging students in learning are virtually limitless. And since all students have their own preferences, interests, and skills, different hacks and strategies will work for different learning environments. The key is knowing your students well enough to know what sparks their interests, what challenges them, and what will inspire them to put in the effort to succeed.

If you’re struggling to keep students engaged, give one of these hacks a try, put your own spin on a combination of a few, or come up with your own. Make sure you share your hacks with your network—as we’ve done here—because the more educators we have focused on student engagement, the higher the levels of achievement will be for all students.

Want to see an LMS with everything you need to meet your educational goals? Explore our platform in a fun, self-guided tour.