

DARE TO BE INNOVATIVE: TECHNIQUES FOR BEING MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY ENGAGING WHEN TEACHING LARGER CLASSES

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Why Engage Students—Physically and Mentally?

Students *cannot* sit and learn for 50, 75 or 150 minutes without some sort of physically and mentally engaging break. In reality, most students cannot focus for more than 10 to 15 minutes before needing to move, and some students may need to move more frequently (Bunce, Flens, & Neiles, 2010). With movement and interaction/interactivity directly connected to class content (versus stand up and stretch) students may learn/remember more, become more engaged with the class material in general and stay awake! In my classes, when I regularly intersperse movement combined with mental engagement in the class content, I create a warmer classroom climate that facilitates teaching and learning partly through enhancing dyadic, small group, and class discussions. Further, physical and mental engagement in the class generally helps with student concentration, student attendance and participation in class, and possibly deeper and more critical reflection of the material covered (Jensen, 2005).

In this short paper, I share seven “methods of engagement” I use in my first and fourth year classes. My first year class ranges from 120 to 150 students, while my fourth year classes have between 50 and 80 students.

Methods of Engagement

ABCs: For this experience, I create a one-page handout with the ABCs listed on it. I ask my students to work with a partner (or in 3s or 4s) to fill in a word related to the identified topic for every letter of the alphabet. This exercise helps students recognize what they already know about a particular topic. For example, identify supports (or barriers) to physical activity or words Shakespeare uses regularly. When done, I ask the students to do their “happy dance” and share their responses with the class. Prizes for the first team done are optional.

Stand up, turn around, sit down: For this experience, I use a PowerPoint slide with four distinct pictures of a person standing, turning, talking and sitting. Above these pictures is text similar to “stand up, turn around, share an example of XXX, sit down.” This technique is easy to use and students quickly become accustomed to it and importantly learn ‘when’ to sit down. I use this idea sometimes more than once in a class to generate ideas, clarify understanding, provide examples, talk about what XXX means, etc. Because they have already shared responses with one another, it can be easier to share their responses with the larger class.

Living Likert scale: For this technique, I pose a question or series of related questions with a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = completely agree and 5 = completely disagree. I give my students a few

moments to determine their response, then ask them to stand to indicate their level of agreement for each question. Sometimes the students are asked to move to a part of the classroom to show their agreement or disagreement. Either way, I encourage discussion about their response choices including the information they considered in making their decision. My questions or statements are intentionally vague to facilitate further discussion. When possible, I ask students to discuss with someone who responded differently.

Individual/pair/share: There are many ways to use this technique as many readers will know. I use those that add movement. I ask students to find a person, not sitting next to them, wearing the same colour, to share with. Next I might ask this pair to find another pair to share their collective responses. Sometimes, I pass out chalk and get one person from each group to write an idea on the board. Other times I ask the person whose birthday is closest (or tallest, most siblings, slept the most, etc.) to provide a response verbally from the group. Either way, the class hears/sees many responses.

Carousel: For this method I use large poster papers or 3M poster-size sticky notes posted around the classroom with pre-established questions and students divided into smaller groups (3 to 6 students). Each group has a different colour pen/marker and starts at a particular question (I usually have 5 or 6 questions) and provides as many responses as they can in the allotted time (3-4 minutes). They then move to the next and each subsequent question for 2-3 minutes to add ideas or a checkmark if they agree with what is already listed. Students finish with their original question, highlight the three (or more) most relevant points and share with class. Given my class sizes, I create two carousels with the same 5-6 questions. The groups with the same question meet to determine what will be shared with the class.

Cue card activity: Each student is given a cue card and asked to write down X number of examples. I then ask the students to find someone wearing the same colour and share their responses. I repeat several times using wearing a different colour, same height, different height, etc. Students add to their own card with each conversation. After 4-6 exchanges, I ask students to share an idea from their card with the class. I suggest students keep these cards for future studying. This method can also be used to review students' understanding of a topic.

Ball toss: Sometimes I bring a soft, squishy, medium-sized ball to class to use when asking students to share ideas about a particular topic. I toss the ball the first time, then after that student responds he/she tosses it to another student, and we repeat. I establish rules of engagement such as keep your eyes up, no dodging, if you do not have a response, pass the ball along quickly like a "hot potato." "Ball toss" is useful for idea generation, example giving, or anything else that involves a quick, couple word response.

These seven techniques interspersed in my classes have helped me in keeping my classes "alive" and engaged. I generally use one method in each class, sometimes two. I use the carousel only once per term, the Living Likert scale once or twice each term and the others more frequently.

References

Bunce, D. M., Flens, E. A., & Neiles, K. Y. (2010). How long can students pay attention in class? A study of student attention decline using clickers. *Journal of Chemical Education*, *87*, 1438-1443.

Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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