

## FINDING THAT “SWEET SPOT” FOR ENGAGING LEARNERS IN CLASS: HOW TO KEEP LEARNERS ENGAGED AND INTERESTED IN A LESSON

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**SUMMARY:** Every now and then—no matter what they do—teachers often get a class that just cannot seem to keep interested in what they teach.

A traditional classroom setting, where the teacher is standing in the front of the classroom lecturing to learners as they take notes, is boring. So, teachers who want their learners to be interested in what they are teaching them, make lessons relevant and interesting.

Following are six techniques how teachers in schools that work find the “sweet spot” for engaging all learners in a lesson to make them passionate about a rather dull or boring subject and kindle their interest:

- 🕒 Making a subject meaningful
- 🕒 Starting a lesson with concrete examples
- 🕒 Using localised real-word problems
- 🕒 Using technology to do the drudge work
- 🕒 Encouraging learners through creativity
- 🕒 Making a lesson interactive

### INTRODUCTION

If learners are not paying attention and their minds are wandering, then they are not absorbing any of the information that teachers are giving them. Often learners’ minds wander when they find the lesson uninteresting or boring.

The opinions learners form on some subjects which they find boring can be due to various reasons, including that teachers do not make lessons interesting and relevant.

One of the most pressing challenges confronting teachers on a daily basis in their classes is finding ways to keep learners engaged and interested in their lessons. Teachers often grapple with two pertinent questions in their classes:

- 🕒 How do I keep my learners interested in what I teach?
- 🕒 Do I simply go through all of the topics to complete the syllabus but leave my learners confused, bored and unmotivated, or do I spend some time getting them excited about my lesson?

This policy brief illustrates how teachers in schools that work<sup>1</sup> are addressing these questions successfully.

### FINDING THE “SWEET SPOT” OF LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Teacher effectiveness is vital in determining whether learners learn in the classroom. Barkley, an expert in performance learning systems, suggests that, as illustrated below,

<sup>1</sup> In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: [www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx](http://www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx) NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231



the manner in which learners engage in a lesson can be placed or located on a continuum that begins with “fear” and ends with “bored.”



Barkley argues that because learning is minimised at both ends of the scale, it is important for teachers to find the “sweet spot” for engaging all learners in learning. Effective learning and teaching, he maintains, occur when teachers locate this ideal and magical learning spot, the sweet spot, which lies between “fear” and “attention.”

Effective teachers in schools that work:



- ☞ Plan their lessons carefully to make sure that they keep their classes interested and engaged during the lesson
- ☞ Monitor learners’ behaviour during a lesson constantly to sense when learners are moving from the sweet spot of attention to the comfort sport or bored spot



When effective teachers realise that learners are moving away from the sweet spot, they (teachers) use the following strategies to bring them (learners) back to the high side of attention and keep them interested and engaged:



Each approach is discussed further.

## MAKING A SUBJECT MEANINGFUL

Often when learners cannot see the relevance of what they have to learn in their daily lives, in frustration they ask questions such as: “Why do we have to learn this?” To respond to this reasonable question, some teachers usually use expressions such as, “It’s in the exam,” “Because the government says so;” or worse still, “Because it’s good for you.”

In contrast, teachers in schools that work present their lessons in a manner that does not give learners reasons to ask, “But why do we have to learn this?” In their efforts to make their subjects meaningful, these teachers are pro-active in planning and preparing their lessons so that learners could see the relevance of what they were learning in every lesson. Amongst other things, they use highly engaging teaching techniques that their learners find more relevant and meaningful. These include the following:

### No 1

#### •Cross-curricula linkages (subject integration)

Teachers consistently research where and how learners would use or apply each topic they teach, particularly in more abstract subjects. For example, Mathematics teachers use actual examples from other subjects to show learners how mathematical concepts can be applied. That is, through subject integration, teachers show learners how a concept in Mathematics can find application when solving a problem in Physical Science, Geography, Economics, etc.

### No 2

#### •Hands-on or practical approach

To help learners find meaning in what they are learning at school, teachers go to extreme lengths to make learners interact with the content they are learning. For example, history teachers would ask learners to dress as crusaders to interest them in world history or bring in research and artifacts to make learning interesting.



## STARTING A LESSON WITH CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Sciences are largely about abstraction. So, when teachers say “imagine....,” learners often find it hard to imagine what teachers are talking about due to lack of concrete experience with that concept. Effective teachers in top-performing schools use the following strategies:

### No 1

#### •Moving from concrete to abstract

Instead of starting each concept with a formula, Mathematics teachers, for example, start with concrete examples of the problems that can be solved using that concept.

### No 2

#### •Choosing images over words

Teachers use visual reminders such as diagrams, images, arrows, colour coding to help learners to connect ideas or concepts being taught. Effective teachers find that it is a lot easier to remember a picture than a paragraph.

### No 3

#### •Using classroom games

Teachers find that games are a great way to keep learners engaged. Learners do not even feel like they are learning anything because they are so into the game. Life sciences teachers, for example, use games to teach definition of different concepts or functions of certain things. History teachers also use games to help learners remember specific dates rather than forcing them to memorise those dates.

## USING LOCALISED REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

Good teachers strongly believe that when they create a localised real-world connection to what learners are learning, “it will give learners a greater understanding of why they need to learn a concept.” (Teacher, **School WJ**-Quintile 4)

To connect real life to the content being taught in order to get emotional engagement that draws learners to the lesson, teachers use the following strategies:

### No 1

#### •Piquing curiosity with localised examples

Different subject teachers describe how in their lesson introduction they pique curiosity with a news clipping, photograph, a short video, etc. They find that this trigger outlines an interesting problem in their local area so learners can relate to it better.

### No 2

#### •Using real-life case studies

Instead of going through all the boring rules and examples, teachers use case studies to make learners familiar with real-world challenges and give them information which is impossible to gather through studying textbooks.

### No 3

#### •Opening with a hook

Teachers start their lessons with real-world examples, an interesting problem, or a novel way of looking at a familiar situation. “In Economics, the first thing I do when I get to class is ask learners to tell me about the current affairs that are affecting our economy” (Teacher, **School KJ**-Quintile 4).

## USING TECHNOLOGY TO DO THE DRUDGE WORK

In schools where teachers have access to technology, they use it as an assistive device to help learners understand concepts better but as one teacher observes “the best technology in the world in the hands of an incompetent teacher is useless” (Teacher, **School KV**-Quintile 2). This corroborates Albert Einstein’s assertion that:

*Computers are incredibly fast, accurate, and stupid. Human beings are incredibly slow, inaccurate, and brilliant. Together they are powerful beyond imagination.*

In schools where teachers use technology effectively, it increases learner engagement, enhances rigor and provides more opportunities for learners to become independent. The teacher’s role becomes more of a coach, guide or facilitator:

### No 1

#### •Avoiding the lecture approach

Lecturing is no longer the preferred form of teaching. Today’s generations of learners, in particular, have no interest in absorbing information presented that way. Instead of



lecturing and having learners take notes, effective teachers use a smartboard, for example, and have students come up to the board and interact.

#### No 2

##### •Increasing learner engagement

Teachers encourage learners to use technology to research, write, solve problems, communicate and learn in a way that makes sense to them. The teacher is the one responsible to trigger engagement through interactive lessons and projects.

### ENGAGING LEARNERS THROUGH CREATIVITY

A good classroom environment always has some elements of creativity which makes the lessons more interesting and interactive. The right mix of creativity along with curriculum helps learners to be innovative and also encourages them to learn new things. Teachers in top-performing schools use different ways to nurture creativity in the classroom in an era of rapid technological change:

#### No 1

##### •Giving learners individualised assignments

Teachers give learners individualised assignments to get them thinking about the bigger picture and to address their specific challenges. This generates feelings of ownership than the normal mass-produced assignment.

#### No 2

##### •Introducing unconventional learning materials

Textbooks and timeless lesson plans are important, but effective teachers introduce more unconventional learning materials such as educational podcasts to help learners think outside the box and engage more deeply with the lesson.

#### No 3

##### •Making room for visual reflection

Reflective activities provide learners with an opportunity to absorb information more deeply—enhancing their creative and contextual understanding of the content. In schools that work, best learners' work is displayed visually in the classroom. This work is beneficial not only to those learners who shared the work, but to every learner in class.

#### No 4

##### •Keeping classroom layout flexible

Learners work between work in groups, completing solo assessments, listening to presentations as well as many other activities. In order to keep the creativity flowing between these learning set-ups, effective teachers keep their classroom layout adaptable and allow it to be easily reorganised.

### MAKING A LESSON INTERACTIVE

Teachers in schools that work have long realised that active learning, not passive learning, makes it impossible for learners to sleep through a class. These teachers' mantra is: "Talk less, involve them more, and they will not switch-off!" Following are some of the strategies that effective teachers use to live up to this mantra:

#### No 1

##### •Integrating more hands-on learning

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as having said: "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." Effective teachers use hands-on learning to apply a creative twist to subject content and engage learners on a deeper level.

#### No 2

##### •Pairing struggling learners with those who excel

Empowering creativity through leadership is an extremely effective learning strategy. Good teachers task learners who have mastered the content with teaching a peer who is struggling. This encourages learners who do the teaching to come up with creative ways to reframe the content or develop new ways to present the material (see Policy Brief No. N-09 for details).

### CONCLUSION

Emotional engagement is when learners exhibit high interest, a positive attitude, curiosity and task involvement. Therefore, teachers must find the sweet spot of learner engagement to be successful when presenting new information in a lesson. This means that teachers must know their learners and be skilled at adjusting the pace and strategies to maximise learning.

