

GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**Guiding Students to Be Independent Learners**

Three strategies for helping students become self-motivating and take charge of their learning.

By *Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers*

January 2, 2018



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It's estimated that students in the U.S. spend nearly 20,000 hours experiencing classroom education by the age of 18, and that much of what is taught is forgotten within a short time. And there's little evidence that they know how to apply effective learning strategies when they arrive at college.

In essence, many students have not learned how to retain and apply knowledge. Fortunately, current research offers fascinating insights about the brain's capacity to learn at higher levels when effective learning strategies are used.

In the quickly evolving workplace and at a time when graduates are competing for jobs and careers with others around the world, the capacity to change rapidly and apply new skills is paramount. Bottom line: Learning how to learn is a game changer in the global knowledge economy, and it's never too early to teach students how to begin to learn more independently.

CULTIVATING INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Inspire student motivation for learning: Motivation to learn is key to success in school, after graduation in the global job market, and for life in a world of constant changes in technology.

Use the power of your relationship with students to show a passion for learning. When you embody passion for learning, your students are more likely to have a powerful, positive emotional connection to learning that will inspire their motivation to continue to learn. With teachers who release their passion for learning, students across all grades are free to learn new ways of learning with motivation and joy. Over time, expect self-motivation rather than compliance.

Guide students to imagine how they will feel when they learn something new. Allow volunteers to describe their feelings after they learned something. When appropriate, ask students to visualize what a finished project will look like.

Encourage students to tell a friend their learning goal and get their support. This allows students to verbalize their goal, which will help them internalize it. Students of all ages are inherently social, and getting support from a peer can be very motivating.

Coach students to set goals and develop a plan for learning: Support students in developing their own learning goals that are realistic yet challenging. Often the most motivating goals are those that allow us to use our personal strengths. Yet students often have goals set for them based on a one-size-fits-all curriculum or on their personal learning deficits—think individualized education program—which can be discouraging.

If you have students who currently lack motivation to learn, consider helping them to develop learning goals based on their personal learning strengths. For example, a personalized goal for some learners might be to design movement breaks for the class. Another student might set a goal to complete his or her appreciation or gratitude journal with photographs or illustrations. For another student, Pinterest

offers ideas that might aid them in becoming curious about new topics to learn about. Teachers can support students in becoming aware of their strengths and figuring out how to set personal goals.

Teach students how to best structure their independent learning time. Our brains did not evolve to do several hours of physics without a break. We encourage students to plan a shift in focus after every 20 minutes of independent study. At least every hour or so, they should get up and move. When learning new material, they should utilize different locations. For example, we use an outside patio table, a particularly comfortable chair, an inside office desk, and different local cafes as places to work. Because memory for locations is powerful, using several locations for learning aids memory.

Encourage students to become self-disciplined learners. Support them in making a commitment to themselves to get started on achieving their goals. Assist them in affirming their commitment to organize themselves, manage their focus over time, and limit time-wasting distractions. Help students learn to consistently define themselves as people who commit to and achieve their goals. It will probably be necessary to remind them time and again that along the learning pathway, successful people forgive themselves when they make mistakes and then continue on.

Teach students to self-assess: Ask students to write a letter to a student who will be in the class the next year. Upon completion of a project, unit, or chapter, ask students to summarize what they have learned and tell the future student how they have overcome any learning challenges. This strategy provides an opportunity for student reflection on virtually any topic.

Have students pair up and take turns sharing what they have learned. This activity—we call it “brain buddies”—gives students opportunities to learn from each other. For example, each partner may remember different aspects of a lesson. And they may have different points of view, so when they share, each partner can learn to better understand a variety of perspectives.

As your students practice independent learning, encourage them to notice changes. For example, when we asked students to discuss changes in achievement, one student said, “Now I get assignments turned in on time, and my grades have improved.” Another said, “I enjoy school now because I know how to make better grades.” Over time, statements like these become a part of students’ positive identity for school success.

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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

When Am I Ever Going to Use This?

High school students ask this question partly to challenge the teacher's authority, but they may really want to know the answer.

By *Anna Mae Tempus*

January 31, 2019



The question came as it usually does—with an eye roll and a smirk. I was in the middle of explaining the directions for an intricate project with one of my sections of English 10. A student's hand shot up as

his words were already coming out: “Ms. Tempus, when am I ever going to use this?”

This, of course, was the content I was delivering with passion and care, the project that would show me the culmination of several skills we had been hitting hard over the past month. My carefully designed handout, cutesy illustrations alongside student learning outcomes, and honed mini-lesson meant nothing to this particular student. He had doubts and a need to voice them.

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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

7 Ways to Spark Engagement

Strengthening students’ sense of connectedness to their learning is a worthwhile goal, and there are some simple ways to do it.

By Cheryl Abla

January 22, 2019

Student engagement is the Mega Millions of education: When you hear about it, it seems so easy to win—and then you read about the odds. The good news is that there are effective strategies for boosting student engagement, and they’re considerably more likely to pay off than playing the lottery.

A growing body of research in education and the social sciences suggests that students’ curiosity can be stimulated in ways that strengthen their connectedness to lessons, interactions with each other, and willingness to commit to learning goals. There are simple techniques that teachers can use during a lesson to boost curiosity, and thus engagement, among students—especially older ones, who are at greater risk for losing interest.

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LITERACY

Teaching Students to Read Metacognitively

A mini-lesson and anchor chart for showing early elementary students how to monitor their comprehension as they read.

By *Brooke MacKenzie*

March 7, 2019

Comprehension is, of course, the whole point of reading. As proficient readers read, they make meaning, learn new information, connect with characters, and enjoy the author's craft. But as students begin to transition in their skills from cracking the sound-symbol code to becoming active meaning makers, they do not always monitor their understanding of the text as they read or notice when they make errors.

There are several categories of errors that students tend to make as they read. They may insert words where they don't belong, substitute words as they read (this tends to happen with smaller sight words—reading *the* as *a*), make phonetic errors, or omit words completely. They may also make fluency-related errors, such as not attending to punctuation, which can lead to confusion about which character is speaking, for example.

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Time to Play: More State Laws Require Recess

Unstructured playtime is making a comeback in schools as frustrated teachers, parents, and advocacy groups demand legislative action.

By *Brittany Shammis*

March 7, 2019

Jana Della Rosa's 7-year-old son, Riley, never had any particular interest in her job as an Arkansas state representative. At least, not until she started pushing for students to get 40 minutes of recess each day. Then, she says, he transformed into a little lobbyist.

"All this time I haven't had a cool job," said Della Rosa, a Republican from the city of Rogers and a mother of two. "Now Mom has a cool job. He asks me at least weekly, 'Have you got me more recess time yet?'"

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THE RESEARCH IS IN

The Science of Drawing and Memory

Want students to remember something? Ask them to draw it.

By *Youki Terada*

March 14, 2019

It's long been known that drawing something helps a person remember it. A **new study**

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0963721418755385>) shows that drawing is superior to activities such as reading or writing because it forces the person to process information in multiple ways: visually, kinesthetically, and semantically. Across a series of experiments, researchers found drawing information to be a powerful way to boost memory, increasing recall by nearly double.

Myra Fernandes, Jeffrey Wammes, and Melissa Meade are experts in the science of memory—how people encode, retain, and recall information. At the University of Waterloo, they conducted experiments to better understand how activities such as writing, looking at pictures, listening to lectures, drawing, and visualizing images affect a student's ability to remember information.

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RESILIENCE AND GRIT

Tips for Teaching Realistic Optimism

Some simple strategies can help students reframe challenges as opportunities for growth.

By *Ginna Guiang-Myers*

March 19, 2019

Optimism is more than positive thinking; it's a way to combat learned helplessness that is created when one approaches a challenge with a defeated mindset.

Students manifesting learned helplessness refuse to engage in any effort that could lead to improved outcomes, even if these ways are available, obvious, and easy. Learned helplessness may lead to action paralysis. In contrast, optimism frames negative events as springboards to favorable outcomes.

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MATH

60-Second Strategy: 3-Read Protocol

Demystify math word problems with this simple technique that helps kids see the story beyond the numbers.

April 5, 2019

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MEDIA LITERACY

Using a Social Media Account With Your Class

Students can learn how to use social media responsibly through teacher modeling and shared responsibility for posting.

By Jennifer Casa-Todd

April 5, 2019

Given the reality that most teens **have smartphones and use social media daily**

([https://www.common sense media.org/research/social-media-social-life-2018?](https://www.common sense media.org/research/social-media-social-life-2018?j=6933610&sfmc_sub=167414493&l=2048712_HTML&u=115213283&mid=6409703&jb=72)

[j=6933610&sfmc_sub=167414493&l=2048712_HTML&u=115213283&mid=6409703&jb=72](https://www.common sense media.org/research/social-media-social-life-2018?j=6933610&sfmc_sub=167414493&l=2048712_HTML&u=115213283&mid=6409703&jb=72))

, how can schools help support digital citizenship and the ethical and responsible use of technology in our schools?

One solution is a class social media account—an account created by the teacher and students together that provides students with opportunities to practice digital citizenship in context, with a teacher’s mentorship, and teaches digital literacy skills while countering the idea that social media is only for entertainment. I’ve seen kids as young as 5 help make decisions about what photos or learning artifacts should be posted to the class account, and the results have been very positive.

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LITERACY

How Living Poets Can Inspire Students

A classroom activity for sharing the work of living poets shows students that poetry isn’t a thing of the past.

By *Angelina Murphy*

April 4, 2019

When I announced our poetry unit to my high school freshmen, I was met with loud sighs and groans. While I was disheartened by the reaction, I was not surprised. I remember feeling similarly about poetry when I was their age. Poetry was difficult, boring, coded, dated, and not relatable. When I look at the literary canon—Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe, and others—that reaction makes sense. The poets that students are so often exposed to are overwhelmingly male, white, straight, and, well, dead.

We shouldn't necessarily stop teaching these poets, but we also shouldn't let this canon limit how we define poetry, nor should we automatically make these poets the default.

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TEACHING STRATEGIES

5 Research-Backed Studying Techniques

Teachers can guide students to avoid ineffective studying habits in favor of ones that will increase their learning outcomes.

By *Edward Kang*

April 4, 2019

Too often people imagine that long hours of studying are the best path to being a model, straight-A student. Yet **research shows** (<http://www.calnewport.com/books/straight-a-student/>) that highly successful students actually spend less time studying than their peers do—they just study more effectively.

Teachers can help all students learn to more effectively use the time they spend studying by sharing research-proven techniques.

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