


3 Ways to Ask Questions That Engage the Whole Class

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Student Engagement

These techniques guide all students to process course content and then actively demonstrate their learning.

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It's likely one of the most common questions that educators use when attempting to engage a room full of students: "Who can tell me?" Though it may come in different forms—"Does anyone know the answer?"—the results are the same: Typically only a few students raise their hands, and their responses serve as a barometer for gauging the progress of the entire class.

Of course, those responses can be misleading, lulling teachers into believing that all of their students are learning when they aren't. Luckily, there are far more effective ways to check for understanding, ways that allow all students to process and respond to teacher prompts. The three simple techniques here can help teachers structure their lessons so that all students are required to actively demonstrate their learning.

The Chalkboard Splash gives teachers a peek into the minds of students when they respond in writing to a particular prompt. The effectiveness of this technique relies on the creation of a deep and meaningful prompt that captures the big ideas behind the content being presented. For example, instead of asking for the definition of capitalism, a question for which all students would be expected to give similar responses, a teacher might ask, "What are some challenges that you could see developing within societies that embrace capitalism?"

Directions:

- The teacher should prepare a higher-order prompt that captures a major element of the lesson.
- In class, the teacher asks students to write down their responses in their notes or on a separate sheet of paper.
- To make sure that this activity doesn't take up too much time, students then pare their responses down to 15 words or less. They then grab a piece of chalk or a whiteboard marker, and write that short response on a designated area of the board.

Unlike a verbal question, the Chalkboard Splash guides all students to process and share their responses to an important question at the same time—they can't just wait for that one student who always raises their hand. In our experience, even students who are disengaged will actively think about the content and make connections as required by the higher-order prompt.

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Appointment Agendas

If teachers are really seeking to engage their students, there should be plenty of opportunities for student talk. The Appointment Agendas technique allows teachers to quickly pair students to discuss a question by simply calling out a time of day. This strategy also requires that students get out of their seats, making this a wonderful vehicle for tying movement to learning.

Directions:

- The teacher gives each student a copy of an Appointment Agenda.
- The teacher asks students to create "appointments" for each time slot on their Appointment Agenda. If a student makes an appointment with a peer for 8 a.m., both of the students should write each other's names in the slot for 8 a.m.
- Students continue making appointments with different peers, with none appearing more than once, until all of the slots are filled.

When it comes time for students to be paired up, teachers can simply call out a random time—it doesn't have to match the actual time—and ask students to discuss the prompt with their appointment buddy. For example, the teacher might say,

“Please meet up with your 3 p.m. appointment and discuss your responses to the prompt.”

We usually print the Appointment Agendas on colored paper so they’re easy to find, but you can use plain white paper if that’s what you have. We also keep photocopies of student agendas in a binder, with tabs that separate class sections. Students who lose their agenda can quickly check the binder to find the names of their appointments. The completed agendas can be used over and over again.

Pause, Star, Rank

The Pause, Star, Rank technique guides students to process their thinking by reviewing and analyzing content they’ve been taught. This technique works particularly well when a large volume of content has been presented—for example, after a two-week unit on the American Revolution, or a three-day sequence of lessons on the impacts of climate change on the world’s oceans. It’s a great wrap-up activity and a useful way to pause and review dense content before it becomes overwhelming for students.

Directions:

- At the end of a lesson or series of lessons, the teacher asks students to quickly skim over their notes and place stars on concepts they think are important to remember.
- Next, the teacher asks students to rank and label their top three starred items according to perceived importance.
- Finally, the teacher asks students to either do a Chalkboard Splash with their most important concept or to discuss their number one item with a designated Appointment Agenda classmate.

It often seems that the most natural way to try and engage a classroom full of students is by defaulting to the question “Who can tell me?” or a variant of it. However, this question provides teachers with a very limited snapshot of student understanding, and those students who are most likely to need help, who have deep misunderstandings, or who are in the process of learning English are the ones who are unintentionally left out of the conversation.

A better way to gauge students’ understanding is to embed techniques that ensure that all students are engaged and interacting with the content that matters most in any given lesson.