

Episode 397: Easy Ways to Make Your Lessons More Engaging

Julie Gouthier (00:00)

If you and your students are tired of the same old, same old, then maybe it's time to try a new twist on an old favorite. We'll talk all about this in today's episode. Well, welcome back to the Teach for the Heart podcast, where we tackle teaching challenges from a biblical perspective. This episode is brought to you in part by the Herzog Foundation. So if you don't know me, my name is Julie. I am the podcast manager here at Teach 4 the Heart

At the time of recording this, Linda is currently on sabbatical. She will be back soon.

But I am excited to be joined by Amanda. So thank you for joining me today.

Amanda Reed (00:34)

I'm so happy to be here.

Julie Gouthier (00:37)

So today we're gonna talk about ways that you can make old lessons new again with simple engaging tips. And Amanda, you talked about how it's important to know what is engagement and what it is, what it isn't, because sometimes us teachers get it twisted in our head. so did you wanna talk a little bit more about that?

00:58 What Engagement Is & What It Isn't

Amanda Reed (00:58)

Yeah, so the big question is what is engagement? and in this world that we're in, you can often get it confused with entertainment. Where while while being very entertaining can be engaging, that that is not what engagement is.

So when we talk about student engagement.

That that really refers to the degree of attention and curiosity and interest and passion that the students are showing whenever they are learning in a lesson. and it's more than just simply like behaving because a student can be sitting in their chair, they can have their eye contact, they can be making notes, but they are not engaged, they are clocked out, they are just simply following the behavioral expectations, and that is not engagement.

And then you can

Julie Gouthier (01:43)

Right.

Amanda Reed (01:43)

also be up there and be super entertaining and have all these different voices and these videos and all these different manipulatives, and that can just be chaos. That is not engagement. for students to be engaged, there's there's three different types of student engagement. there's behavioral engagement, there's emotional engagement, and there's cognitive engagement where

Behavioral engagement, that's like what you would think of, you know, are they actually behaving properly in your class? They're not turned around, face somebody else. They're paying attention, they're doing all the right things with what a good student would look like in class. And then when you think of emotional engagement, that's whenever students feel safe to ask a question, because oftentimes teachers can say, you know.

Who has any questions? And nobody raises their hands because they may not feel safe in that space to ask a question, whether it's just because you know, they don't want to look stupid in front of a friend, or maybe it really is. You're they're kind of scared to ask for help in front of you. you know, do they value the material that you're teaching? do they feel left out of a certain type of

discussion or activity that's going on in the class. And then you have the cognitive engagement. And that's really working their brain, getting those higher order thinking questions, challenging them, having them take ownership and in in their own education. So yeah, it's really important to

understand what engagement

is and what it is not. So you can properly plan your lessons to be engaging.

Julie Gouthier (03:16)

Right. And I can even remember one time I was doing an activity that I I thought was very engaging and a kid in the front row just shouted out, I'm bored. And I said, Well,

Amanda Reed (03:27)

Yeah.

Julie Gouthier (03:28)

it's not my job to entertain you. It's my job to teach you. And he said, Aren't you supposed to do both? And of course I got a little offended. I'm sure looking back now, I probably could have responded a better in that situation. But yeah, we do know that engagement is important, right? It's not entertainment, but we do want to engage their minds.

getting them to collaborate with one another and all of those things really do help them retain it more than just sit and get. So we've

Amanda Reed (03:53)

Yeah.

Julie Gouthier (03:54)

been we've been throwing strategies left and right. and that's not our goal today is to tell you how you should do things. Obviously, every classroom is different, every teacher is different, every class period is different. So, really, we don't want you to reinvent the wheel. We just want to give you some tips and tricks that we've used in our classrooms.

That we think you could hopefully implement in yours. So, Amanda, did you have a fun idea that you wanted to share to help your students be engaged?

Amanda Reed (04:22)

Yeah. But first I want to share one one one quick story. Your little story made made my come to mind. Whenever

Julie Gouthier (04:26)

Yes. We love stories. Yes. Do you tell?

Amanda Reed (04:29)

I was doing my student teaching, I had this this this fun because you know you had to be fun. I had this fun activity planned where we were using macaroni noodles to and to to glue them down for quotations to work on these jokes. And it was just a lot of fun. We had jokes, we had macaroni, we had glue, like it was gonna be fun. But then after it, my supervisor came up and she's like

So what was the point of all that? Couldn't could couldn't that 40 minute activity have been done in five minutes with the pencil and paper? Like so I had all this fun stuff, but it it was it was entertaining, but it it was a big waste of time. So fun is not always mean effective. So

Julie Gouthier (05:11)

That's true.

Amanda Reed (05:14)

so I do have a quick idea. and this can be used for any grade level for any subject.

And is to simply ask the question, how would you teach this? So this can be done at the start of a of a unit or a lesson or at the very end as a review. and this could be or you could have this just as a discussion time. They can talk with each other in class, they can talk with you. This can be done as as centers if you have some younger kids and you have centers in in your class, they can kind of work together.

05:23 Flip the Script

You know, if if we were the teacher, what would we do? How would how how would we teach our classmates this? they can be homework. They can actually create a a lesson on how they would teach this to the class tomorrow. it can be an extension project or it can be an enrichment project for some kids, but just answering the simple question, how would you teach this? And it also gives those those kids kind of the power back of like, well, this is what I would do when you didn't do this.

Hmm.

Julie Gouthier (06:18)

Right. Okay, that is such a good point because my idea that I was gonna share is similar but a little different. So I love that you said, you know, having them teach because my idea, this is one that I've used with my middle school kids and they absolutely love it. You wouldn't think so maybe at first, but we do what was called a student teacher swap. So basically the day or two after learning a new topic,

you

know, they're not quite experts on the subject, but they're familiar enough with the terminology.

I would ask them to open their journals. We would do just basic like vocab, whether it's doing a Venn diagram or a T chart. Sometimes we would draw a model and label it. And so I'd have them open their journals, get started, and then I would ask for volunteers. Sometimes I would tell them what they were doing, sometimes I didn't, just to add a little bit of mystery. and so usually I'd get a few volunteers and then I'd pick a student to swap places with me.

So I'd have them come up to the front. I would go sit in their seat. and basically we just swap roles. So I would take notes while they called on students to fill in our T chart or a Venn diagram or to label our drawing. And honestly, they were so engaged. It was just a random idea I had one time. And these eighth graders that I had, wow, they like they ate it up. And so it was really great to see my kids who'd

weren't typically engaged. She would maybe didn't want to listen to me, but they're gonna listen to old buddy over here who's, you know, leading the classroom. And then of course we always had our fun moments of the ones who were in charge of threatening to send kids to the principal and stuff like that. So like there was a I there

Amanda Reed (07:58)

Ha ha ha

Julie Gouthier (07:59)

there was fun that happened. That was not the goal, but it really did kind of snap their attention, like, this is not how we normally do things. And so just that swap of routine really did like

capture their attention and I would look around the room and everyone's actually taking notes, which is not always the case. And so this is not something I did with every class period based on the students once I got to know them, but it definitely is

just a quick little thing you can do for ten minutes just to go over and review something that maybe you learned the day or two before that they absolutely ate up. So if that's something you can implement, then, you know, by all means, we we want you to try new things.

Amanda Reed (08:40)

I I love that because that's something where you don't have to to prep any materials for that. You don't have to plan extra time in your lesson for that. That is literally just your lesson that you're having somebody else go on up and just do a little part for you instead. You get a little break, they they get some more engagement, it's it's a win-win. I love it.

Julie Gouthier (08:58)

Yeah.

I mean, you say they get a little break, but I definitely was kind and took notes for them. I was like, okay, let me not have them sit down later and be like, wait, she didn't write anything. So I would fill out their notes for them. So that was also more encouragement for them to volunteer because they know if they go up and do my job, then I'm gonna take their notes for them. So that was just a little bonus.

Amanda, did you have any more ideas on how to increase engagement?

Amanda Reed (10:17)

Yes, so I don't know what the power

of a post-it or a different piece of paper or a different writing utensil, but those hold so much power from every grade level that I have worked with. if students are just really slow with filling out a worksheet because, you know, sometimes we have to have that worksheet, you know, like there there's just no getting around it sometimes. And they're they're just being really slow and they just don't want to do it.

10:20 Switching Up Writing

Get out your bucket of different colored pencils and pens and gel pens and flare pens and pens that have or pencils that have different charms and stuff on them, just giving them a different writing utensil in a different color. the class always five minutes, they were magically done. and and also sometimes instead of saying you're gonna fill out your worksheet, you give them

like four four pieces of a post-it note and they can write their answers on that post-it note and turn that in with their paper. And somehow j just writing on a different piece of paper instead of that

worksheet or their lined paper, they they they love it. I would roll out like some big butcher paper sometimes and

Julie Gouthier (11:27)

Mm-hmm.

Amanda Reed (11:28)

you know you put your answers in your in your own little space, draw yourself a square. They would just lay on the floor and they would write, you know, fill fill out their their math problems or their

They're short answer questions. They would just write it on the butcher paper

and just changing up the paper and changing up the writing utensil. It's magic.

Julie Gouthier (11:48)

Yeah,

we did whiteboards a lot. And so that's what

Amanda Reed (11:51)

Mm-hmm.

Julie Gouthier (11:51)

my kids always loved when I'd say, okay, go get a whiteboard marker and rag. It's just like you see their faces light

Amanda Reed (11:56)

yeah.

Julie Gouthier (11:57)

up and they know that, we're doing something a little different. Like she's gonna expect me to follow along and participate, but it definitely changes the pace. And one thing I always did too was have them write on their desks. I know that

Amanda Reed (12:10)

Mm-hmm.

Julie Gouthier (12:10)

kind of scares probably some teachers at first.

But just hear me out. Okay. So we would often use dry erase markers or chalk markers. And those do really come off well if you've got just like some vinegar spray or a Clorox wipe. so we always keep

those on hand. But we would do this a lot for reviewing before a test. So we would do like a brain dump where I'd have students write down one fact in front of them.

We kind of even turned it into musical chairs a little bit where I'd play music, they'd walk around the room, and when the music stopped, you sat at whatever spot you were at and then added to that

person's brain dump. so it's great for test review, or if you're doing, like I mentioned earlier, if you're labeling a model of something. I taught science, so we did lots of models.

13:06 Rules & Expectations

Venn diagrams, T charts. So just having them do something that's unexpected. Like, yes, the teacher is giving me permission to write on the desk like that.

automatically just makes you go, wow, well maybe I should pay attention and follow along because this is different than what we're doing before. And so we obviously want to encourage you to try new things in your classroom. And when we talk about this though, just keep in mind procedures, those need to stay constant. Like your expectations, those

Amanda Reed (13:23)

Yes.

Julie Gouthier (13:24)

need to remain the same. But we're talking about maybe where the kids come in, it's not, Monday means notes, Tuesday means worksheet.

Wednesday means quiz. Like we want you to try to engage kids with your lesson, but obviously expectations we talk about a lot here at Teach for the Heart. So those do need to remain constant and steady. Make sure your kids know what your expectations are before you go into these activities. but don't be afraid to like switch it up now and again. It's not just engaging for them, but it's engaging for us too.

Amanda Reed (13:57)

Yeah, definitely. I I love that you said that. Before I would ever switch up anything, we always did a super quick, you know, what are the rules? One, two, three, you know, what are the expectations? One, two, three. What can you do? What can you not do? And so that way they know this is not just this is not just fun time, right? This is engagement time. To be engaged, you have to follow our rules and our expectations. and just piggybacking off

Of what you had said about how you used to write on the desks. I had a classroom where our tiles were, you know, like the the 12-inch by 12-inch tiles. And we used to do our math on there because and it would be like big math, where with the third graders they were learning how to do multi-digit by

multi-digit multiplication, and so we would do real big on each one of those 12 by 12-inch squares, they would do their math, so it's like

grid paper, a giant grid paper. So you can even go to the floor sometimes. But make sure do do a little test strip. Make sure it wipes up. Because one class did wipe up, well one did not

Julie Gouthier (15:04)

my gosh. Yeah, we don't want to upset our

janitors. Let's make that clear. Like we we need to be nice and be friends with our janitors. They should not be cleaning up after our crazy ideas.

Amanda Reed (15:10)

Yes.

Julie Gouthier (15:14)

Like, yes, I love that. That's so cool.

Amanda Reed (15:16)

Hmm.

15:17 Easy Ways to Turn Worksheets into Games

Julie Gouthier (15:17)

I did have another idea that I wanted to share too.

So one thing that I was always doing with my students that they absolutely loved, which required really no prep from me, was turning our worksheets into a little bit of a game. So a couple of games we did, one was Connect Four, and then another one was Capture the Flag. So I'll just kind of go over how we did those. And then I've got pictures and videos that I can share too if you're watching on YouTube. So with Connect

Four. This was definitely a fan favorite. so I would take a worksheet, usually we would divide it up into maybe questions of like four or five. So we would chunk them. And then you'd have your students get into pairs, and then each pair was part of a bigger group or a bigger team. So our connect four colors were red and black. So we had black team and we had red team.

And so the students would work together in their pair. They would work on just one chunk. So maybe four or five questions at a time. And then once they finished those questions, they would come up to me at the front of the room. I would check them. And then if they got them correct, then we would use a connect four board. So I've done this well, a few different ways. We've had like an actual connect four where it's just a tiny game that I set at the front of the room. I did write a grant to get

like yard games. So we did have a giant connect four at one point in the classroom, which which

Amanda Reed (16:43)

I love it.

Julie Gouthier (16:44)

definitely was fun. and then I've even had it where I didn't have any supplies and I did it on a whim. And so I just Googled blank connect four board and I projected it on our whiteboard

Amanda Reed (16:56)

Mm-hmm.

Julie Gouthier (16:57)

and then had the kids color in the circles rather than dropping pieces. And so they're answering questions. They are like working because they don't want to let their team down and

If the student gets a question wrong, I would just send them back to their team. They'd work together. so they're working in pairs, but part of a bigger team. And then the first team to get a connect for, they'd get a point. I would erase the board or drop all of the chips, and then we would just go again. So typically we did this like the whole class period. And I'm telling you, even the most apathetic kids were super engaged. And I'm if I had given

Amanda Reed (17:33)

Mm.

Julie Gouthier (17:34)

them that worksheet like I had any other year, it probably would have stayed on that desk.

without a mark on it or maybe ended up in my trash at the end of the class. But just taking it and twisting it a little bit and giving it that flair really, really helped engage them. And like I say, my most apathetic kids were fully focused and engaged. And I got great feedback as the teacher because I'm really able to see, okay, do these kids understand this? Because they're getting

Amanda Reed (18:01)

Yeah.

Julie Gouthier (18:02)

in the moment feedback. So we loved Connect Four. That is definitely one to try if you

Are brave enough.

Amanda Reed (18:10)

Yeah, I I love turning a lesson and review into games. Cause I was a math teacher and if I were to tell students, okay, you're gonna do seventy-five math problems today during this class period, they would be like, What? Like, I go to the nurse, I don't feel so good, you know, I gotta go to the bathroom. but they would easily do seventy-five math problems if we were playing a game. So it's crazy what they can do whenever you're whenever you turn it in into a game instead of just

That paper to pencil worksheet. Love it.

Julie Gouthier (18:42)

Right. And so

we did that with Connect Four and then also capture the flag. this was a little bit of a newer one that I tried in the last couple of years. it does take a little bit of prep, but honestly, you could do it with sticky notes. but essentially you do break the kids up into teams like with Connect Four. So they are working with a partner, but they're usually part of a bigger team. and so maybe I would have for this game like five different teams. we come up with silly team names like

come up with a sea creature. That's your team name. And then each team would get colored flags. Or again, you could do colored sticky notes. And so what I would do is I would have in my head or written down for myself, not for them to see, different point values for each flag color. So once they answered their chunk of questions from their worksheet, they'd come check with me. If they got them right, then they could take a flag from another team and put it in their team pile.

So they could keep these on their desk, or the way I had done it, which I've got a video I can show, I put it on the whiteboard. So it was behind me. So they'd go and they'd move their flag from one team, put it on theirs. And so by the end, I would count up their flags, but to encourage not rushing, what we would do is I would have different point values for each flag, such they didn't know. So after we counted up the flags, I would say, okay.

Well, the green flags were worth five points, the blue flags were worth one point, and the you know, and so I'd give different point values. And so that definitely helps a little bit with the competition aspect because I don't want those kids who maybe work a little bit slower to feel discouraged about that competition.

Amanda Reed (20:24)

Yeah.

Julie Gouthier (20:26)

and so who knows, you could be lucky and maybe you only had three flags left, but maybe they were worth five points each. And so that also just adds

Amanda Reed (20:32)

Yeah.

Julie Gouthier (20:33)
a little bit of mystery to

But yeah, just these little tweaks that you can do that does not have to make you start over from scratch. You don't have to go and buy all of these supplies. You really can

Amanda Reed (20:44)
Mm-hmm.

Julie Gouthier (20:45)
just with small little adjustments just really increase engagement.

Amanda Reed (20:49)
Yeah, absolutely. And what what I have found is that these free and very low prep I little little changes that I did was a lot more effective than when I would do, you know, an hour of research and print and laminate and completely change my lesson. And it it when you keep it simple like this, it's effective and it can be very engaging. The more elaborate that you get,

Oftentimes the less engaging it can be because it it's it's distracting for the students.

Julie Gouthier (21:24)
Right. Yeah. And I know a lot of people may ask too, like, why does it matter? Like, why do I even have to do this? and one thing that Amanda and I talked about was the fact that Jesus was a very engaging teacher. He

Amanda Reed (21:36)
Mm-hmm.

Julie Gouthier (21:37)
could have just sat down and gave us the list of rules, here's what you can and can't do, and that's it. But really, he wanted to connect with his people. He told real life examples, parables, he would demonstrate, I mean he would do miracles just for the sake of proving to us who he is.

you know, who he said he was and so just even just looking at Jesus as that example of how we live in life, but even how we can be as a teacher, because he was the greatest teacher after all.

Amanda Reed (22:04)
Yeah. And when he was speaking to us, you know, he would speak to us in psalm or with commands or with, you know, like like an urgency, like you need to do this. so it was it it it really engaged all of our emotions. It gave it it engaged the behavioral side of us, that emotional side of us, and that cognitive side of us to get us to think about some things, like with these parables, we had to relate them back to our lives.

so yeah, he he he truly is the ultimate teacher and we can we can learn a lot from him.

Julie Gouthier (22:40)

Yeah,

absolutely. And so if you would love to take these, we hope you will implement them into your classroom. Again, it's not one size fits all. Every teacher is different. You know what's best for you. You know what's best for your kids. so maybe it will just spark an idea for you. And we wanted it to be simple, not reinventing the wheel, but maybe something you can try even tomorrow if you wanted to do a little bit of a shakeup in your class.

So thank you guys so much for joining us today and thank you, Amanda, for chatting with me.

Amanda Reed (23:09)

Thank you so much.

Julie Gouthier (23:11)

This episode is brought to you in part by the Herzog Foundation. All views and opinions are our own and don't necessarily reflect those of the Herzog Foundation. Well, thank you again for joining us, and we look forward to being with you again soon. In the meantime, teacher, remember God is at work in you and through you, and he's using you to make a difference. Keep your eyes on him and teach for the heart.