TEACH for ATTENTION!

A Tool Belt of Strategies for Engaging Students with Attention Challenges

Ezra Werb, M.Ed.

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CHAPTER 1

GET INTEREST RATES UP

How to Incorporate Students' Personal Interests

We plan great lessons. Let's not be humble.

They're well structured. They're interactive. They're sequenced clearly. The content is interesting. There's plenty of repetition and practice built in. Most of our students seem alert, engaged, and able to complete the related independent work.

But sometimes certain students just can't sustain engagement with our teaching. They miss key ideas. They're confused. When it's time for them to put what they've learned into practice, they show you that blank look, as if they've been somewhere else. It's like there's no one operating their input controls. It may be happening throughout the day, or perhaps at specific times or during certain subjects.

We can more easily reach these kids if we use their own interests in our lessons. Consider how we work with struggling readers. Of course, teaching phonics and practicing fluency is imperative for students with dyslexia, but to motivate these students to engage in an activity that causes them to struggle, teachers and parents give them books that include their personal interests or high-interest material—in other words, books that kids would choose for themselves. This may be a graphic novel of a popular animated series or a video game handbook, a movie-spinoff chapter book or a YA novel about zombies. It works because the familiarity with the material eases stress and increases motivation.

We can apply this same reasoning to the classroom in general. Psychologist Dr. Robert Brooks coined the phrase "islands of competence"

for those areas where people with disabilities shine, where they show skill, where they possess knowledge. Let's bring these islands into our classrooms. Students perk up when they already know something about what you're teaching. It's as if their personal interest makes them feel confident and helps fuel their mental energy, allowing their input abilities to work better.

To make use of students' interests, first we must find out what their interests are.

Get to Know Students' Interests

All of your students have interests. These are topics they know a lot about or activities in which they excel. If given the choice, they would spend most of their time just talking about these things. And because of that, it's usually not difficult to find out what your students are into. Here are some ways you can do that.

- **Surveys.** On day one or day 100 (it's never too late!), have students fill out a paper or an electronic survey. With kindergartners, you can ask them verbally or have their parents fill out a survey. Ask about their favorites: movies, TV shows, books, graphic novels, hobbies, activities, and so on. Students will be impressed that a teacher wants to know how much they love playing Mario Kart Racing, how they know all of Taylor Swift's lyrics, or how they're obsessed with a smartphone's hidden features.
- **Chat with students at recess.** Spend a few minutes with kids at recess. Students and teachers tend to loosen up as soon as the bell rings and everyone goes outside. It's a whole different vibe out there. Even just chatting with kids for a few minutes can tell you so much about them. You can ask what TV shows they're watching these days, what video game they're currently playing, or what after-school activities they're doing. You can also talk with them at other less-formal times, like during hall passing, on the bus for a field trip, or while waiting for pick up after school.
- **Listen in.** If you just hang around while students eat their snacks or chat at the beginning of class, you'll inevitably hear what they're passionate about at the moment. This seems like common sense, but downtime discourse often revolves around their interests. Do a little eavesdropping

and you'll know what new game app your students just can't live without.

With surveys, all that information is recorded. If you're gleaning information through informal chats, take notes so you won't forget. This is valuable data!

For various reasons, some students may not be very forthcoming about their personal interests, and it can be harder to learn about them. Some kids are just shy. Other kids lack confidence or don't think their interests are worth sharing. If they've been struggling in school and feeling beat-up by the experience, they may feel it's too risky to share. But you can still discern their interests. If you're getting lots of "I don't knows" out of students you're trying to help, look for clues. They may have logos or images of characters on their clothing, lunchboxes, binders, or lockers. Maybe a student has an emoji keychain on his backpack. Try mentioning emojis in a lesson and see if his attention perks up. You can also talk to parents and guardians. No need to make a big deal out of it, but a quick email home asking what the student is into might turn up something helpful.

> Let students be the experts and use the confidence that comes from expertise to increase their attention and understanding.

So what do you do with this CIA briefing on your students? That's the fun part: You let them teach you. Allow students to be the experts and use the confidence that comes from expertise to increase attention and understanding.

This doesn't mean building entire lessons around their personal interests, just adding some bits—like throwing some chocolate chips into your morning cereal. Not too many, but enough to give it a kick. Throwing some chocolate chips into your lessons is easy and fun and tastes good.

There are two main ways to incorporate these bits into the curriculum, and they correspond to our *input* and *production* functions. You can use student interests to help them absorb new information (input) and effectively output content (production).

Input: Incorporate Their Interests Into Lessons

Just to emphasize, you're not going to have students read Captain Underpants as an introduction to literary analysis. But there are countless ways you can use him and characters like him in supporting roles in your lessons. You can always change the details of your discussions to add a bit of content your students care about, or use extra examples based on their entertainment loves. Here is an example.

ATTENTION GRABBER

Maleficent Math Problems

For students with input challenges, math word problems can induce nightmares—falling-off-a-building, stuck-in-a-maze caliber nightmares about quantities of things, and having to do something with those things, and just how many things do we have now?! It is very difficult for these students to input the language, input the numbers, and then process those two elements in conjunction to deduce what operation to use. And because it is so difficult for them, students often tune out immediately, their minds' way of giving up.

I once had a third-grade student, Veronica, in my resource group who was a huge fan of the Disney Channel movies, the *Descendants*; she had the books and accessories and all that. But she was having a real tough time making sense of word problems, and so she would stop listening whenever they came up. She wouldn't even attempt problems that had more than a few words in them.

Knowing she was such a fan of the magic-themed show, I rewrote a few of the problems incorporating some of the characters into them. Here's one of the original problems: "If Becky already has 12 flowers and her mother gives her ⅓ as many, will she have enough total flowers to put into 18 vases?"

And here's how I rewrote it, incorporating characters from the Disney show: "Mal and Evie are preparing for a slumber party. Mal uses magic to create 12 cupcakes. Evie uses her magic to

create ⅓ as many. Together, will they have enough if 18 guests are coming over?"

Immediately, Veronica smiled and started telling me about the show. We started talking about the characters and how they use magic, and I allowed her a minute to tell me all about it. She was very expressive when it came to something she knew a lot about. Then, when I prompted her to read the problem, she was quicker and more energetic to do so. After reading it, she needed some reteaching for how to draw pictures to help her figure out the problem, but she got it. Once she was connected to the material, it was easier to reteach her the steps to solve it.

I realize that this is a small, simple adjustment. Perhaps it seems almost trite. But I've rarely seen teachers do it, and it's too easy *not* to try. Don't underestimate how effective even a slight change can make in reaching students. Throw in a problem with some characters they like, and they feel comfortable because with these characters, they're experts. Invite Peppa Pig and the PAW Patrol into your math lessons and watch your kindergartners' eyes light up.

Wikipedia. You may not want to use it for scholarly research, but it comes in handy for quick learning about your students' interests.

By the way, how did I know about Mal and Evie? Wikipedia. You may not want to use it for scholarly research, but it comes in handy for quick learning about your students' interests. Once I got the idea, I looked up the *Descendants* during a spare moment and scanned the characters section. It took about two minutes of grueling research.

Using students' interests can be an especially effective tool in English language arts. For example, when we teach story elements like character, conflict, plot, and setting, we pick a story the students are familiar with to dissect the pieces and highlight their meaning. Sure, you could use your read-aloud book or maybe something they read last year. But for struggling

readers, these references might not be as engaging as a movie they just saw over the weekend.

If you ask for volunteers to recap a new kid-trendy movie, students who never volunteer for anything involving language arts may suddenly want to tell you every plot detail of the movie. Now that they're engaged and confident, you can generalize the narrative elements to any story, and soon enough, to whatever book you're reading in class.

The technique of using movies works for older students as well. When teaching literature in middle school classrooms, explaining the concept of a story's theme can be tricky. It's not a moral or a message, necessarily; it's the idea and concept the story is centered around. Students with attention difficulties expend a lot of mental energy just to input all of the story information while reading, which makes the more abstract, higher-order thinking that much more challenging. Often, this is where they lose engagement with the material.

But it can be really effective to reference movies to engage students in the process of text analysis. For those into superheroes and comic books, discuss how the X-Men movies center around themes of conformity versus individuality as well as society's acceptance of people's differences. You could show your students how *Wonder Woman* is a meditation on war or how *Toy Story* is about identity and agency. I once had a student who loved *Rocky*, so we figured out that it's a movie about a working-class hero and the ambition to rise above one's social status.

Sports are another common student passion. Wherever you teach, you will almost certainly have sports fans among your students. Whether you're a fan or not, it's easy to catch up on big sports events or athletes and use that information to help kids digest lessons.

ATTENTION GRABBER

Proper and Common Nouns Are a Slam Dunk

Anthony, a second grader with a terrific sense of humor, also had severe attention issues among other undiagnosed processing difficulties. As a result, he was barely hanging on in an academically rigorous private school. As a resource specialist, I spent time in his classroom supporting a few of the students with learning challenges, including Anthony, while the

teacher taught lessons. During direct instruction, he struggled greatly with input; he could only attend to the classroom teacher for about a minute at a time, even when the lessons were simple.

He also happened to be a sports fan, and I knew what did hold his attention: a certain NBA team. He often wore a Golden State Warriors hat to school, which he begrudgingly took off every morning before he came into class.

Up front, the teacher was explaining the difference between common and proper nouns. She had some standard examples on the T-chart: girl, Sarah; state, California; planet, Jupiter. Straightforward stuff, but Anthony was clearly not absorbing any of it. I stepped up behind him, kneeled close, and whispered: “What about Stephen Curry?”

He instantly perked up. “You know who he is?” he asked.

“Of course I do. He’s one of the best players in the NBA. And Stephen Curry is a proper noun. The common noun is *basketball player*.”

“Ohhhhh,” he said, the light bulb going *ping* over his head.

Now I had his attention. “What about the name of his team?” I asked.

“The Warriors,” he said.

“Right. *Warriors* is the proper noun. Proper nouns are names. The common noun is *team*. It says what the proper noun is naming.”

This exchange seemed to jump-start his mind. Not only was he attentive and participating for the remainder of the lesson, he was able to independently complete the worksheet afterward, outputting information using the new skill he’d learned.

It worked because Anthony could be confident in his knowledge. And, of course, talking about his favorite sports team made him feel like he was relaxing at home on his couch watching a Warriors game. Feeling confident and relaxed can increase a student’s engagement to the point where it lasts through independent work time as well.

The whole intervention with Anthony took thirty seconds, and I thought of it on the spot—no prep necessary. You can drop references to specific students' interests easily in one-to-one moments with students like Anthony, but you can use this tool just as easily in your lessons for the whole class; the proper names T-chart could have included "basketball team, Warriors."

Of course, students' interests go well beyond sports and entertainment, and you can tap into all sorts of student passions to help them digest lessons. Students have wide-ranging and often surprising hobbies, from gardening to baking, commercial airliners to online video gaming, horse care to skateboarding. I've known a male student who was into sewing and a female third grader who was into horror movies. It seems that *Magic: The Gathering* is still hanging around. Many kids enjoy athletic activities like martial arts, dance, and parkour.

Whatever hobbies students have, you can engage them by referencing these islands of competence during lessons. Even video games can be a legitimate way to engage students.

ATTENTION GRABBER

Stock Market for Gamers

I was working after school with an eighth grader with ADHD who had written a short research paper about the 1929 stock market crash. Alexander did a bare-bones job of culling some information from the internet and weaving it into a summary. It was clear from his demeanor and tone he had zero interest in the stock market. What the heck did he care if it crashed 100 years ago, or whatever, and can't we just talk about the new *God of War* game? He was a huge online gamer and was extremely knowledgeable on the subject.

I asked him if he understood what the stock market is and what the crash really meant, and he quickly said he had no idea. As I began explaining how stocks are traded on the market, he made a connection to something he cared about. He told me about an online video game where players can buy and sell digital items to use within the game. He explained that it wasn't the game company that facilitated the trading but a

third-party site where people would post their items for sale and buyers would come looking, like Craigslist. He went even further and spoke about how the prices of the items would fluctuate depending on the demand for them.

During this conversation, I could almost see the neurons firing in his brain. He was engaged because he had made a connection to something with which he was an expert, something that greatly interested him, and in the process, he had grasped a pretty complex concept. We proceeded to have an in-depth discussion about the market crash and consequences of it: What if everyone pulled their money out of the online gaming exchange? Would the digital items have any value?

In this case, I didn't plan anything; the student brought his own interest to the table without being prompted. If we show interest in students' hobbies and passions, talk to them about video games, movies, or whatever they're into, we open the door for them to make connections like this and share them in class.

Production: Let Students Be Experts in the Work They Produce

Students can be intense about their interests. Not only do they love certain aspects of culture—music, movies, fashion, sports, and so on—but they can often tell you every little detail about them. They've done their research, they've thought deeply, and their strong opinions are proof of this.

Inspiring kids to care this strongly about anything academic? Not as easy. But if we let them produce content related to their interests, we get buy in.

ATTENTION GRABBER

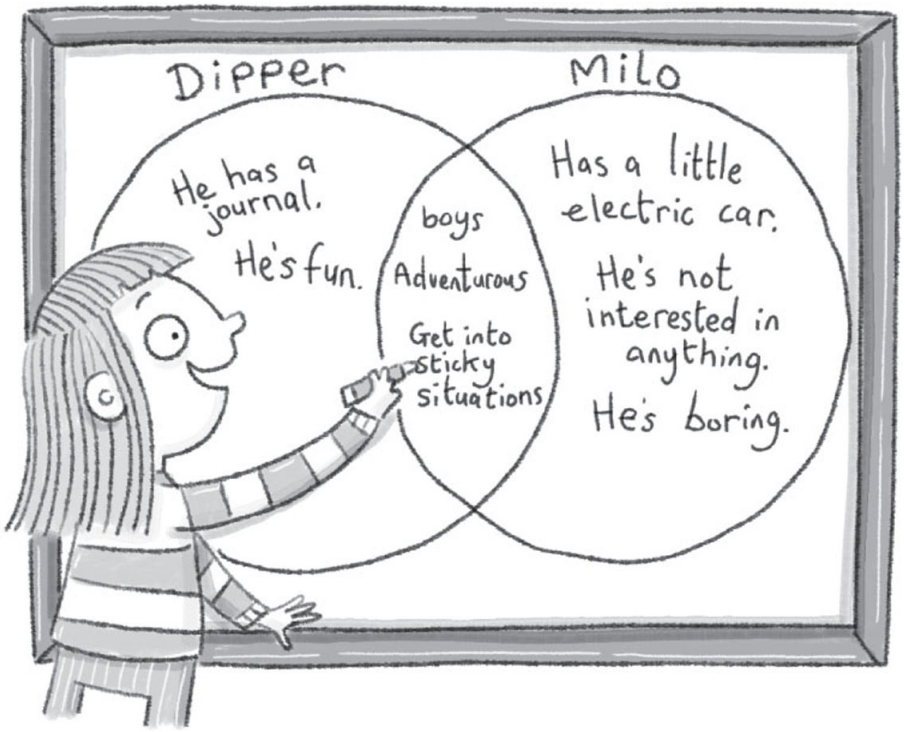
Adding Gravity to Venn Diagrams

Sasha was a fourth grader diagnosed with ADHD and high-functioning autism, and I was providing in-class academic

support for her and some other students. She loved talking about animated TV series and could tell you all about the characters, their histories, and what they liked for breakfast. She wasn't so interested in academic topics.

The teacher was reading *The Phantom Tollbooth* with the students, and she was introducing Venn diagrams. This being a tool for comprehension, it was one Sasha would truly benefit from. Graphic organizers like Venn diagrams, cause-effect charts, and story maps present information clearly so students can input the information and make sense of it (these are discussed further in chapter 6). But for Sasha, a Venn diagram was just some abstract art that wasn't relevant to her. Furthermore, she had been struggling to engage with the novel—the language was difficult, and she was getting tripped up with the wordplay.

My main objective was to get her attention focused on *Tollbooth* and the new concept map. So I helped introduce the Venn diagram to the class by asking Sasha to compare Milo, the main character of the novel, to Dipper Pines, the main character of her favorite animated show, *Gravity Falls.*



I blinked, and she was at the whiteboard, marker in hand, adding information to all three sections of the chart. Because she was interested in the content, her input abilities were fully functioning, allowing her to learn a new concept. As a result, she was able to output knowledge she already possessed, fusing it with the new skill she'd just learned.

Here's the value added to using this sort of strategy. In her mind, Sasha may always be wondering if and when I will be referencing her favorite show again, or maybe another show she loves. In the ensuing weeks, we did drop in *Gravity Falls* references intermittently, when it made sense to do so.

And her anticipation grew, along with her sustained attention to lessons.

Of course, it's not always a smooth process when we bring student interests into the classroom. In fact, when I first tried to engage Sasha by mentioning her favorite TV show in class, prior to the Venn diagram lesson, it was a disaster. I had planned to announce during the lesson that *The Phantom Tollbooth* had some things in common with *Gravity Falls*. I figured just mentioning the show would get her interested and lead to her participation in the discussion. So I proposed that the strange, mysterious quality of the universe of *The Phantom Tollbooth* was similar to that of *Gravity Falls,* another world where bizarre things happened.

Sasha perked up at the mention of her favorite show, but the problem was what happened next. She proceeded to explain how the show was really nothing like this book.

Well, okay, at least she was interested and comparing the two stories. But then she went off on tangents about the show, and they had nothing to do with our discussion or the novel. And she just kept going. It was tricky, because the lead teacher and I were pleased that she was engaged, but her attention was now focused primarily on the show itself, outside the scope of our lesson. And of course, this distracts other students, and before you know it, it's *Gravity Falls* 101.

This isn't entirely a loss. Sasha was attentive to something classroom related, which was a victory. But I clearly needed to re-strategize. I realized it was key to bring in high interests in a more formal, structured manner.

That's why the Venn diagram lesson worked. Sasha could still be thinking about her favorite show and display her knowledge but do so within the structure of our lesson.

We're all bound to run into some initial failures when trying new strategies. But those failures can be teaching moments, and with course correction, we can make adjustments and find the way.

Teenagers often have even more passion for their interests than younger kids. And it's usually not hard to get them excited about producing work that focuses on those passions.

Consider the persuasive essay. The goal is to get students to think deeply about a topic, arrive at a strong point of view, dissect the topic from multiple angles, find evidence, explain that evidence with coherent writing, and ultimately, make a compelling, articulate argument defending their ideas.

Simple, right? Okay, maybe not—especially for kids who do the bulk of their communication in thumb-typed, fractured phrases with misspelled words and acronyms for lewd language. Factor in attention-related issues like mental energy or production difficulties, and the task of getting certain students excited about writing a persuasive essay can be formidable.

So, before you ask students to produce an essay about something more abstract and complicated—like whether nature or nurture determines a person's life course or whether cloning is morally sound or whether capital punishment is a just system—start by asking them about something they already understand and feel strongly about.

ATTENTION GRABBER

Skating into Persuasion

Kai was a middle school student who I was working with after school. He was able to write clear sentences but putting his attention toward a complete five-paragraph essay was not happening. He was just not interested. I knew he was a huge skateboarding and X-Games fanatic, so I posed this question to him: Who is the greatest big ramp rider of all time, Tony Hawk or Bob Burnquist?

Of course, he was all over this.

He quickly brainstormed various reasons why Hawk was totally the greatest, and anyone who didn't think so was obviously a poseur. Using an essay outline frame, I guided him to begin constructing paragraphs. His interest was high as he searched for facts online to ensure he was including correct information. As he worked, he kept telling me more facts about the two skateboarders, working out the argument in his head.

After completing the essay, Kai turned to me and said the following: "I wish I could write about skateboarding for class assignments."

Yes, because I was seeing him in a one-to-one setting outside the classroom, I had the luxury of time. And obviously you have course material you have to get through. Skateboarding is surely not in the lesson plan. Again, I'm not advocating changing the content of your curriculum. But if your goal is teaching students how to construct a persuasive essay, why not remove obstacles—such as complicated content material—that have nothing to do with those skills? Before you get to the more complex writing tasks, first hook them into the writing process by allowing them to express themselves about a topic that's related to their personal interests. Maybe they could extol the qualities of Instagram versus Snapchat as a means of communication. Or argue why they feel video games should or should not have a rating system.

Another approach to this is to model the writing process for the class as a whole-group exercise using a high-interest topic. Or perhaps break your class into two groups and have each compose an essay taking opposing sides of an argument. One side argues that iPhones are the best handheld devices. The other side argues for Androids. You can bet this is going to be a heated argument.

Then, when they have to write about a more complex topic that requires some background information, ethical thinking, and analysis, at the very least they will already be engaged with the writing process and feel comfortable with it. At best, they might find out they're pretty good at writing persuasive essays or even that they enjoy it.

The following guest speaker used a high-interest topic to help a student's math production, taking this concept even further.

GUEST SPEAKER
LAURA BAHR

Laura Bahr teaches at a school for twice-exceptional students; each student is gifted cognitively but also has learning or developmental challenges. She currently works with high schoolers on special projects, but she taught middle school math for years. Here, she talks about how she used* Minecraft *to grab the attention of one of her anxious math students.

For my middle school students, single-step problems were usually a piece of cake, but multistep algebraic equations made some of them anxious. One particular student had a great deal of math-related anxiety and attention issues. He would say he was “terrible at math” and write insults like “I am so stupid” on worksheets when he struggled.

One assignment was to demonstrate understanding of how to solve multistep equations. I knew this student wouldn’t be able to show that on paper or the whiteboard, and honestly, I couldn’t even tell at that point if he could do any sort of algebra problems because he could barely stand to look at them.

One thing he *did* attend to was the video game *Minecraft,* which he loved almost obsessively. If you’re not familiar, *Minecraft* is a sandbox game, meaning players can interact with the content any way they want to—there are no rules, and play is based on open-ended choice. *Minecraft* is also a building game, so players build their world and interact with it how they like.

So I asked my student to do a project in *Minecraft.* His assignment was the same as before, to explain each part of solving two-step equations, but he could build the lesson in a virtual world he created.

He was immediately excited by the idea, asking me questions about what he could and couldn’t do for the assignment. Because his anxiety was lowered and he was actually listening to me, we were able to go through each of the steps of several difficult example equations. We were looking for the perfect one for him to teach.

Once he had identified the equation he wanted to use, he used his expertise with the game app to construct a block classroom in the virtual environment. He designed a guided tour and then brought the viewer to a chalkboard where the different equations were provided. I still didn't know at this point if he actually could solve them, but soon enough, in the virtual classroom he built, he also showed the process for solving the equations.

Now that he was managing the algebra, I asked him also to make up some examples from scratch and encouraged him to play with the levels of difficulty to provide as examples for other students: Do we want our variable to be a whole number? Do we want to use negative coefficients for this example?

This project made him realize that he actually had a knack for solving equations and he enjoyed the puzzle aspect of finding solutions. Solving equations became the area in which he had the most confidence and success in math on future quizzes and tests.

I honestly don't know how else I would have found this out. His anxiety and attention issues were so severe with solving equations that I had to find some way in. *Minecraft* turned out to be the thing he needed.

Laura's story takes me by surprise. I would expect math teachers to use *Minecraft,* which is focused on building, to explore geometry and measurement standards; algebra and *Minecraft* aren't clearly connected. But using his expertise in the game as a way to present his output lowered this student's anxiety and increased his motivation. It is worth considering other methods of presentation that might work with students' interests. Your kids who love YouTube videos might be interested in recording their English "essay" in video format. Perhaps a drama student can give a soliloquy dressed as a character from history. A visual artist might be able to paint a poster describing a geometric proof. The possibilities are as broad as your student population.

Keeping It Appropriate

Sometimes you will run into students whose main interests are in topics that aren't appropriate for the classroom. This might be a mature TV series that some of your kids are streaming, a violent video game, or something else. This may present a problem, especially if you've set a precedent of giving class attention to the interests of other students. You don't want to minimize or denigrate the interests of any of your students, but you also can't devote class time to something that is violent or otherwise inappropriate.

It's a tightrope, but you can usually just level with students if it comes up: For example, "We have a strict policy against talking about guns and violence as entertainment in class." Of course, if this is with older students, and you're discussing this topic in a mature manner, that's another story. You will need to be the judge of what's appropriate, keeping your student population, your principal, your school district, and your own personal comfort level in mind.

As far as violent video games are concerned, there are usually other aspects to these games than just violence—things that might be appropriate and helpful to a student. Often teamwork is involved. Strategy. Some games take place in a real historical context and can lead kids to wanting to learn more. Some games take place in interesting environments or have intriguing stories. One of my students loves a particularly violent game, but he did a project for class where he analyzed how the game uses percentages and other math domains. It might be worth talking to your student during recess or another break to learn what aspects of the game might be appropriate and applicable to your class content. The student is likely to understand your perspective, especially if you show willingness to talk about some elements of the game. If it doesn't work out, and the student is too fixated on the game's violent aspects, you'll have to firmly uphold your policy. See if you can find another entry point to the student's interests.

The Big Takeaway

All of us have interests and activities in which we excel: movies, sports, comics, animals, trivia, sewing, jump rope, online gaming, cooking, crafts, and so on. And don't our interests engage us?

When teachers call attention to their students' personal interests, it tells the students that they, too, have ideas worth sharing—and it tells them that the teacher cares enough to include them in the classroom. This can

perpetuate further participation because now their distracted brains have motivation to *attend*—not just to enjoy speaking and hearing about their high-interest subject weaved into lessons, but also to experience more moments of feeling like an expert in the immediate future.

Using students' interests can be an effective tool for both their inputting of information and their producing of work. Find ways for students to connect to your material.

Use *Finding Dory* to teach about plot structure.

Use Legos to teach about geometry.

Have your elementary students fill out a character traits chart using their favorite *Avengers* superheroes or *Monster High* characters.

Have middle school students write a persuasive essay about whether junk food should be banned from school.

It's a simple strategy that can have a big payoff. And using students' interests is applicable to many other strategies in this book. The only real prep work involves getting to know what the kids are into . . .

. . . and maybe a bit of reconnaissance on Wikipedia.

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