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Introduction

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There is a myth that says engagement is the purview of young, fun, and modern teachers. They draw students in by building rapport around fashion, music, or sports. They turn everything into a Kahoot! or Quizlet so all facets of learning become gamified. They pluck the best samples from their future Rembrandts and Picassos and post them on Instagram, making everyone green with envy.

If you subscribe to this myth, engagement is all parts personality and no part perspiration.

Myths like this work because they exclude or overlook so much. They explain a complex phenomenon in a simple way. The real answer, always, is much broader, more nuanced, and more inclusive. The truth is we all have the capacity to create classrooms that immerse our students in rich and rigorous learning, yet we also have the power to develop a boring, monotonous environment that leaves our students staring like zombies into their phones.

Now, maybe more than ever, school has become an albatross of boredom for many students, and despite our best efforts, they won't engage with us, with each other, or with the subject matter.

How do we make the process of thinking, questioning, and expressing ideas welcoming and invigorating again? How do we capture students' attention, engage them in thought and wonder, and open their eyes to new capacities for hope and possibility, especially when that work is much harder than ever before?

This book will help foster the type of classroom where student motivation is high and interactions are based on mutual respect and appreciation. Students will come to class craving genuine experiences and relishing in the process of learning, and you will feel supported in your efforts.

We have ways for you to achieve this—33, in fact. Yes, 100% participation and even 100% engagement is still possible.

We are teachers with nearly 50 years of combined classroom experience, and we see what you see. As our classrooms have switched from the tangible learning environment of notebooks, pens, papers, and projects to a digital one with Chromebooks, dashboards, spreadsheets, and Docs, our students are turning to their screens to escape learning rather than immerse themselves in it. They have put up barriers that have increased the distance between us and them and between them and learning.

We are right there with you.

Attention and Motivation in Today's Classroom

When social media was in its infancy, we would overhear whispers about Myspace from our students near the end of the period when they had a few minutes to chat. Back then, social media was recreation, a fun diversion that students could turn to after the school day. Now it can be an addictive, all-encompassing part of their lives. We fear that when we hand our students Steinbeck and Shakespeare, their consciousness is already compelled by Snapchat and Instagram. We still have those same few minutes left at the end of a period, but now our students are silent. They turn to their phones rather than each other.

To add to that challenge, as the digital world came to command our students' consciousness, we experienced a pandemic that tore through the seams of a social fabric that stitched schools, teachers, students, and parents together. That era isolated us all. It disrupted routines and structures and stunted student social development at crucial stages, inflicting fear and distrust in many.

A recent survey, conducted by the EdWeek Research Center between December 2022 and February 2023, found that 87% of teachers saw lower motivation in students and 82% recognized lower student morale after the pandemic (Prothero, 2023).

We believe all is not lost. We know the hearts and minds of students crave rich learning experiences. We see opportunities to engage them in deep and immersive lessons once again, and we want to share the solutions to these problems.

On Engagement

To start, let us move past the old idea of engagement, which comes from the French *engager*, meaning “to bind” by promise or oath. One common definition today still hints at this old-school mentality—“to provide occupation for” or “involve” someone in an activity (Merriam-Webster, 2025a).

That may have worked 20 or 30 years ago when we thought of engagement as compliance, but times have changed. Now it is not enough for students to simply be busy with work. We have to do better than merely occupy them with task after task.

A more inspiring definition from Merriam-Webster (2025b) for engagement exists a little further down the page. It speaks to the moment we all face: “the state of being engaged”—that is, “emotional involvement or commitment.”

That definition is the North Star of this book. The 33 lessons within present opportunities for students to take pride in their performance and become absorbed in the moment. Your students will be talking, collaborating, designing, thinking, drawing, making, writing, and doing all the things that make learning so much fun. They will be out of their

seats, up at the board, hanging things on the back wall, and existing in virtual spaces.

These lessons come from our classrooms, but more importantly, they come from the belief that as education evolves, some things remain immutable—students want to be seen, they would rather interact than sit, they like to be heard rather than spoken to, and they want to feel a part of something rather than be isolated.

Time and time again we have seen our students excited to come to our classes because these lessons have made our English classrooms a space of opportunity and growth rather than a confine of intimidation and limitation. We have seen our students grow comfortable taking risks as rigorous material is approached in a way that allows for multiple entry points so that everyone can flourish. Creativity is celebrated throughout these lessons. We honor the artistry of the works that we teach, but that appreciation is equally matched by the love that we exude for our students' work.

We have 10 core beliefs that have guided us as we designed these lessons and implemented them in our classrooms. They have enabled us to overcome the obstacles we described earlier and get our students participating in extraordinary ways. They represent the shifts that need to occur to transform any classroom from a boring, repetitive, and uninspired place to one where dynamic learning can occur.

Table 0.1 Ten Core Beliefs That Guide This Book

1.	<i>Myth:</i> Learning is passive.	⇒	Core Belief: Learning occurs when students are actively involved, using multiple modalities in creative ways.
2.	<i>Myth:</i> Students complete work for compliance.	⇒	Core Belief: Students see meaning and value in the work they complete.
3.	<i>Myth:</i> Students fear putting themselves out there.	⇒	Core Belief: Students are connected to something bigger than themselves and feel safe taking academic risks.
4.	<i>Myth:</i> The teacher tells the students what to think about the literature.	⇒	Core Belief: Literature speaks to students about themselves.
5.	<i>Myth:</i> Learning occurs in isolation.	⇒	Core Belief: Learning through collaboration is an essential part of a classroom community.
6.	<i>Myth:</i> Questions are direct and closed.	⇒	Core Belief: Questions are open and inviting to all.

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7.	<i>Myth:</i> The teacher looks for one correct answer.	⇒	Core Belief: Multiple answers reveal the diversity of students and how each one thinks.
8.	<i>Myth:</i> Technology is incorporated for the sake of using technology.	⇒	Core Belief: Technology is a tool for 21st-century thinking.
9.	<i>Myth:</i> The teacher controls how knowledge is disseminated.	⇒	Core Belief: The teacher facilitates an environment in which students discover knowledge on their own terms.
10.	<i>Myth:</i> Lessons are repetitive, rote, and stale, often taken from a curriculum guide.	⇒	Core Belief: Lessons are wonderfully dynamic, drawing inspiration from beyond the walls of the classroom.

It is in this spirit that we welcome you to use this book as a resource. Each lesson has advice on adaptations because the approaches work across grade levels and student populations. The lessons do not need to be given in order. Turn to this book on Sunday night when you have no idea what to teach on Monday. Place it by your side as you plan your next unit. Dedicate a day each week to trying something new within. Most of all, make the choice to be dynamic and invigorating, using this book as a catalyst to take your teaching and your classroom to the next level.

About the Lesson Structure

The lessons in this book are organized by genre—poetry, short fiction, novels and dramas, and writing—and have a common structure to make it easier for you to pick up each one and get started quickly. The lesson structure is as follows:

Lesson Learning Objective

Each lesson starts with an objective to highlight what the lesson is designed to teach students.

Background

In the Background section, we share our personal experiences by giving you the stories behind our lessons. Each section is written either by Susan or by Brian (you'll see the signature noted at the end to reflect who is writing). We reflect back on the problem we wanted to overcome, the inspiration that led to our lightbulb moment, or the really cool idea we saw elsewhere and wanted to shape in our own mold.

From Inspiration to Reality

Whenever we share materials online with teachers, we inevitably get follow-up questions via email or Facebook groups asking, "This is great, but what does the full lesson look like in your classroom?" Well, here it is. In this section we walk you through everything we (and the students) do in the lesson. We share the questions we ask, the diagrams we use, the instructions we provide, and so much more so that you can visualize the lesson and see how it can work in your room. This section for each lesson is written by one author (Brian or Susan) as well.

Variations

The lessons in this book are adaptable to various grade levels as well as skill levels. The Variations part of each lesson incorporates suggestions to help you tailor the lesson to meet the needs of your students.

The Lesson Plan

Want a formal lesson plan? We've got you covered. This section gives everything you need to know about planning for and delivering the lesson, including time required, materials, and a step-by-step plan for an opening, main, and closing activity.

How to Get 100% Engagement

To close each lesson, this section shares the tips and tricks that help make the lesson memorable and ensure that every student in the classroom is participating and engaged.