Learning Conditions that Build Engagement

Introduction

As teachers know, students learn best when they *engage*—when they focus their attention, invest effort, and resist distractions. However, eliciting students' engagement can be challenging.

In some cases, the barriers to engagement are outside the teacher's control. For example, students may have trouble focusing if they come to school tired or hungry or scared.

Fortunately, in many other cases, teachers can create conditions that build students' engagement. For example, students are more likely to engage if their teachers can help them:

- feel welcomed, supported, and appreciated in class
- understand that their teachers want to help them grow as learners
- believe that the work they're doing in class matters for their lives

In short, teachers can take a variety of steps to create learning conditions that foster engagement—to create a classroom climate in which students are more eager to learn and more receptive to feedback.

Teachers create ideal learning conditions for students in much the same way that a gardener creates ideal "growing conditions" for plants. An expert gardener carefully adjusts the levels of shade, water, and soil composition to match the unique needs of the plants a given garden.

Following a similar logic, teachers can ask their students targeted questions to understand how their students experience their class. Then they can adjust their practice in order to create a more optimal environment for their students to thrive as learners.

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Additional Strategy Resources in this Guide

Blue boxes throughout this guide link to additional, research-based strategy resources. Some dive deeper into single strategies within each learning condition. Others link to a curated list of strategy recommendations.

Teacher Caring

> *"One time when I got in trouble in 7th grade, I still remember how my teacher took me aside later and listened to my side of the story. She repeated what I said back to me to be sure she understood what I was saying. Then she explained why she still had to give me a detention because I was disrupting class. Even though I got a detention, I was glad that she didn't just dismiss what I had to say, like other teachers sometimes did. After that, I actually felt better in school because I knew I had someone to talk to."*
>
> - *A high school student reflecting on middle school*

In our achievement driven school system, it's easy to forget how much relationships matter for students' engagement. In fact, the kind of relationships students have with their teachers affect whether they decide to engage with the learning material and how effectively they do so.

Almost every student has a personal story about a teacher who they believed cared (or didn't care) about them. For some, it's a teacher who reached out and helped them feel comfortable or respected in school. For others, it's a teacher who helped them see they could reach a higher standard, even when they doubted themselves. Sometimes it's the story of someone who just listened. These stories show how little things can sometimes create a positive atmosphere that brings out the best in students.

Research suggests that students' relationships with teachers are essential to student engagement. A teacher who makes his or her students feel heard, valued, and respected shows students that the classroom is fair and they can grow and succeed there (1, 2, 3).

The puzzle for many teachers is not figuring out how to care *more* about their students—most teachers already care about their students a great deal. We are not suggesting that teachers should stay up late at night grading homework, or spend more time on weekends preparing lessons. In fact, working around the clock can result in emotional exhaustion that leads to detached, depersonalized interactions with students (4).

Instead, the puzzle for teachers is figuring out how to *communicate caring* to students in a way that feels like caring to them. Students may not always see the long hours their teachers put in, and, even if they did, they might not make the connection between their teacher's hard work and their teacher's caring for them as a person.

Teacher Caring Strategies

What makes students feel personally cared for by their teachers? Research has identified several strategies that reliably help students feel cared for. You will likely recognize some of these strategies in your own teaching practice—or you may have strategies of your own that you know help your students feel cared for that are not mentioned here.

> **Discover More**
>
> For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/teacher-caring.

Strategy 1: Get to Know Students as People

Having a personal conversation with a student—especially one who is struggling—can be a great way to build a relationship that will help the student feel better about their prospects in school. But, as we said earlier, even small things can help students feel cared for. For instance, teachers can:

- Welcome individual students when they come to class
- Ask individual students about their interests outside of school
- Incorporate individual students' interests in class assignments, word problems, projects, etc.

When learning about students' interests, you may not know the latest music artist, or understand the latest fashion trend—and that's ok. The goal is not to come across as "cool." Rather, the goal is to show that you are *listening with interest*. You are trying to get to know your students over time and understand what matters to them as people.

Of course, it takes more time to reach some students than others. Some students have had good experiences with teachers. Others have had negative experiences, or they might have heard negative stories about school from friends, family, or the media. They might think they won't get a fair shot in school. But teachers who consistently reach out and engage with students and their interests make a difference. These teachers help their students see that, in *their* class, students are seen for the person they are—not as a test score or a stereotype.

Strategy 2: Make Sure Students Feel Heard

Every human being wishes to be heard—and students are no different. Many teachers address this need by seeking students' input whenever appropriate. For example, a teacher might ask students how much they felt they learned from a particular assignment, and then incorporate their feedback into the next lesson plan. Importantly, it's not just about seeking input—it's also important to reflect back what you hear and explain what you'll do differently as a result of the feedback.

Strategy 3: Address Disciplinary Problems with Empathy

Some days it may be easier to show caring for students than others. Many teachers say that some of the greatest challenges they face—and some of their best opportunities for helping students—occur after students misbehave.

Disciplinary situations can be difficult because they often touch on students' sensitivities. Students worry about being treated unfairly, and they are sensitive to any sign that others—especially authority figures, like teachers—are treating them unfairly. These worries can cause students to experience stress, to overreact, and even to disengage from school.

Some students have additional reasons to worry if people will treat them fairly. For instance, students from low income families and students of color may hear discouraging

stories from friends, parents, or the media about how their group is treated by authority figures. So it's completely understandable that these students are sometimes especially sensitive to how they are treated by their teachers. Unfortunately, these worries can lead students to perceive signs of bias or disrespect even in routine classroom management. Suppose a teacher disciplines a boy who is talking loudly. The student may think, "Why me? Everyone was talking?" and conclude that the school is biased against him or people like him. That perception, in turn, can lead to the student's behavior deteriorating further and, eventually, to the student disengaging completely from school.

Fortunately, disciplinary encounters can also offer teachers rich opportunities to talk with students and build trust (5). Sometimes, the most emotionally honest conversations that teachers have with their students are conversations about misbehavior. Below are two strategies for turning difficult disciplinary encounters into opportunities for building trust and understanding.

Talk to Students in Private. When a student gets in trouble, many teachers find it helpful to take the student aside and talk to them in private, rather than in front of the class. This gives the student time to "cool down" and removes any pressure they may feel to be defiant in front of classmates.

Show Students You Hear Their Perspective. When a student misbehaves, it can be helpful to take time to hear the student's point of view. Perhaps they feel that they were treated unfairly, or perhaps they disagree with a rule. You may or may not agree with what the student says, but you want to convey to the student that their viewpoint and feelings matter to you. Even when students are unable to articulate why they misbehaved, asking for their point of view communicates that you are on their side and want to understand them—even though you may have to take disciplinary action. To listen and understand your students does not mean you have to agree with them. However, taking the time to listen and to show interest in their perspective demonstrates care.

Discover More

For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/teacher-caring.

Survey Measures

To help teachers track their progress in communicating caring to their students, PERTS uses three survey questions.

- This week, my teacher treated me with respect.
- I feel like my teacher is glad that I am in their class.
- I feel like my teacher cares what I think.

The results from the surveys can help you decide whether to continue with your current approach or consider new strategies for communicating caring. Ultimately, teachers have to find the strategies that they feel most comfortable with — and that work for their students. It's a mutual learning process that will take time and effort.

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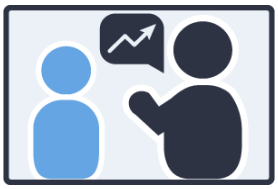

Feedback for Growth

> *"I always thought school wasn't for me. It seemed that people like me just get in trouble in school. But my 8th grade math teacher really changed my mind. She told us that she knew that every one of us could learn and that she would work hard to help us get there. She pointed out every mistake I made but then helped me figure out what I needed to do differently to find the right answer. I worked so hard in her class because she believed in me. I learned math, and I saw that school is a place for me and that if I work hard in school I can do well."*
>
> - *A high school senior, reflecting on middle school*

Notice that this teacher gave frequent, individuated feedback. She did not just make affirming statements, like "I believe in you." She actively collaborated with students on the learning process, and—very importantly—she took steps to ensure that her feedback didn't feel like a *judgement* of her students or of their ability. Instead, the frequency and tone of her feedback conveyed that she was there to help them learn and grow so that they could reach a higher standard.

Research shows that the feedback students hear from their teachers is a powerful force in students' learning.

First, and perhaps most obviously, students need feedback to learn. Students can only correct what they realize is incorrect, and they are unlikely to be able to consistently and accurately evaluate their learning on their own, even in high school.

But there is a second role of teacher feedback that often gets less attention than it deserves: when teachers give students feedback, they convey what they expect and value. If a teacher praises students for thinking deeply and points out new ways in which deeper thinking could be achieved, this signals that deep thinking is valued. In a similar

way, a teacher's feedback can convey that it's valuable to try new strategies or not be afraid to ask for help when you're stuck. It can also help students learn that all questions are welcome and respected.

Discover More

For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/feedback-for-growth.

Feedback for Growth Strategies

In this section we discuss strategies for giving feedback to students in a way that promotes their cognitive and social/emotional development. **The central strategy is focusing on *growth* over *proficiency*.** Emphasizing growth will help you focus on giving rich, detailed feedback from which students can learn, and it conveys that you value and believe in your students' growth.

Strategy 1: Explicitly Prioritize Growth Over Proficiency

Research over the last several decades has clearly shown that focusing on *improvement* allows students to maintain their motivation and engagement, even when work gets tough and they start making mistakes.

When students and their teachers focus on whether they've reached a specific proficiency, students who have reached it may rest on their laurels, whereas students who fall short may feel discouraged. You can emphasize clearly and explicitly that in *your* class, what you care about is *growth*: you want to see that everybody at all times is learning and improving, regardless of what they already knew at the beginning of the school year.

Strategy 2: Give Actionable Critical Feedback Along with Reassurance

Sometimes teachers are reluctant to give honest feedback to students who are struggling—or students who are members of underserved groups. But research has shown that certain kinds of honest feedback are critical for promoting students' learning.

It's very important to be sensitive while at the same giving feedback with very specific suggestions about how to improve going forward. This kind of feedback should be done in a way that shows the student you're on their side, that you are invested in their success, and that you are a collaborator in their learning. We call this feedback for growth.

Feedback for growth is a core part of teaching—how else are students supposed to learn? But most teachers have had experiences where critical feedback did not go as well as it could have. Perhaps a student became defensive or discouraged, feeling they were being judged. This section discusses strategies for giving feedback in a way that inspires students to improve.

- ***Explain That You Give Critical Feedback so That Students Grow as Thinkers.*** When sharing critical feedback, it is important not to leave the reason for your criticism to the student's imagination. Explain to students the reason why you are giving critical feedback is because you care about and believe in their growth as learners. For example, prior to offering more substantive feedback, a teacher might say, "I made a lot of comments on this essay because I expect you to make great strides this year as a writer, and I know that you are capable of that if we work together," (2, 3)

- ***Make it Specific and Actionable.*** The best critiques are those that are specific and actionable. Students can learn a great deal more from hearing, "this sentence does not support your thesis because..." , or "I see you subtracted X from both sides correctly, but then you forgot to..." than they can from just hearing, "this paragraph is not organized well" or "that's not the right answer." For more recommendations on making feedback specific, check out the Rethinking Feedback toolkit.

- ***Use the Power of "Yet."*** Language can convey powerful expectations. One example of this is the word, "yet." From a student's point of view, there is a vast difference between hearing, "these problems aren't done correctly" and hearing, "these problems aren't done correctly, yet." The first critique holds summative meaning, whereas the second sounds like a formative critique. Incorporating

words like “yet” and “so far” into your feedback to students can be a simple way to remind them (and maybe to remind yourself) that your feedback is for growth—it is not a statement about their potential to learn.

Strategy 3: With Praise, Think Quality Over Quantity

Compared with the task of delivering critical feedback, praising students when they do well may seem like a breeze. Celebrating students’ accomplishments can certainly be one of the more enjoyable aspects of teaching. Like critical feedback, positive feedback offers great opportunities to communicate your belief in your students’ ability to learn. In this section, we discuss strategies for delivering praise in a way that is motivating and compelling for students.

- ***Avoid Person-Focused Praise.*** Praise that focuses on the student as a whole person (e.g., saying “you’re so smart!” or “you’re great at math!”) might seem like a great way to boost students’ self-esteem. But research by Carol Dweck and others shows that this kind of person-focused feedback can backfire—even when it’s positive. Hearing “you’re so smart” in response to a high score can make students feel good in the moment. But when they inevitably have to struggle, those students then start thinking, “maybe I’m not so smart after all,” and become discouraged. Study after study has shown that when students are given person-focused praise, their motivation can fall apart when tasks become challenging (1, 4, 5). Not only that, but labeling some students in a class as “smart” or “talented” implies that other students are not smart, even if this was not the teacher’s intention. Instead of attributing success to “smartness,” call out the specific strategies that helped the students succeed (see below).

- ***Highlight Specific Improvements (and link to the associated strategy).*** When praising a well-done essay, it is more useful for students to point out why and how the student’s writing worked well, rather than simply saying “you’re such a good writer” or just “good job” (1). Maybe the student did a nice job of introducing the main ideas in their opening paragraph, or perhaps they thought of a great way to address a counter-argument. Pointing out these specific accomplishments teaches students much more than just hearing “good job” — it helps them recognize the specific strategies and skills that helped them succeed. To see how one teacher highlights specific improvements for praise, check out this video from the PERTS Mindset Kit.

- ***More Praise Isn't Always Better.*** Noticing and celebrating students' progress is a wonderful thing. If you are the kind of teacher that can't help but bubble over with enthusiasm for your students' growth, be yourself! But if frequent praise doesn't come naturally to you, don't worry: research suggests that constant praise is not necessary. In fact, too much praise can sometimes be counterproductive, especially when it comes across as inauthentic and over the top ("wow, that was an incredibly amazing sentence!"), or if it is given for mediocre work (6, 7).

Discover More

For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/feedback-for-growth.

Survey Measures

To help teachers track their progress at providing feedback that helps students grow, PERTS uses several survey questions.

- This week, my teacher challenged me to learn as much as I can.
- This week in class, I thought about ways to improve the quality of my work.
- This week in class, I got specific suggestions about how to improve my skills.

The results of the surveys can help you know how your students are experiencing your feedback. Ultimately, teachers have to find the strategies that work best for them and their students, but most teachers who are intentional about improving their feedback for growth scores start to see gains within a few months.

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Meaningful Work

> *"For the longest time, school seemed pointless and oppressive, like I just had to jump through hoops. Working hard seemed like selling out. Then in Ms. B's class we started talking about why school exists and its history. We talked about why it was illegal to teach slaves to read. We talked about the way jobs are changing and how almost all good jobs today involve constant learning. It completely flipped how I think about school. Instead of oppression, I started to see school as empowerment, as a way to prepare myself for better opportunities."*
>
> - *A student reflecting on her high school experience*

People rarely work hard for no reason. On the other hand, they often work hard when the work *serves a purpose* they find meaningful, e.g., to provide for one's family, to help one's friends or students in times of need, or to improve one's health. If you can't find a good reason to do something hard, chances are you won't do it.

Although we do everything for a reason, research clearly shows that not all reasons are created equal. Some reasons make us feel resentful and depleted. Just imagine someone telling you that you have to do something "because I said so"—it immediately invites resentment and resistance. Conversely, other reasons make us feel proud and energized: think about the feeling you get when you help a student understand something for the first time and you see that "lightbulb" turn on.

Meaningful Work Strategies

Self-Determination Theory provides a useful framework for understanding what motivates people to work hard and persist. Students are more motivated to engage with tasks when those tasks address three fundamental human needs (1):

- **Autonomy** – “I am choosing to do this.”
- **Competence** – “This act affirms or grows my effectiveness.”
- **Relationships** – “This act affirms or improves my relationships.”

Unfortunately, many students never get the opportunity to connect their schoolwork to these deep, powerful motives. They find themselves unmotivated because they can’t answer questions like, “why am I learning this?” Or because they can only generate servile reasons that upset their sense of autonomy, like “to get a good grade” or “because it will be on the test.” Consequently, they are far less motivated than they otherwise would be. Fortunately, teachers can use a variety of strategies to help students connect their schoolwork to their deep desires for autonomy, competence, and relationships.

> **Discover More**
>
> For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/meaningful-work.

Strategy 1: Help Students Discover the Personal Relevance of Learning

Below we list several teaching strategies that can help students discover the personal relevance of their schoolwork—to see the work they’re doing as valuable. Importantly, we do not recommend trying to connect each and every specific lesson or concept “to the real world.” Making such connections for every lesson would be extremely time consuming. Furthermore, students are much more likely to appreciate the value of a lesson if they feel like they discovered that value for themselves.

- ***Ask Students to Relate Lessons to Their Lives***. Multiple studies have shown that students—especially students who start out less interested in a subject—experience higher motivation and performance after describing how a week’s lessons relate to their own life, even if they only do it a few times over a whole semester (2). For a concrete example of how to do this, check out the Build Connections toolkit from the Character Lab.

- ***Explore the Power That Comes from Well-Developed Thinking Skills.*** Many students do not realize that the primary purpose of school is to train them to

become effective learners—that it's much more important to learn *how to learn* than it is to learn any particular concept or procedure. Across multiple studies, students became more motivated and more academically successful after reflecting on *why* and *how* developing their intellectual skills could help them lead a more meaningful life (3, 5).

In these studies, students described how the learning they do in school could prepare them to heal people, to teach people, or to build products that improve people's lives. Students were not prompted to reflect on how the specific content they were learning would *directly* help other people or themselves. For example, they did not write things like, "I will need to know long division to help people because... [fill in the blank]." Rather, they were asked to describe how the general skills they were learning in school (like critical thinking, reading, note-taking, mathematical logic, etc.) would prepare them for more meaningful lives.

Exploring these ideas could be done as a class discussion or as a writing activity. However you approach it, it is important to allow students to make their *own* connections about how skills relate to their lives. You might scaffold them to think beyond specific content, e.g., about mathematical logic in general rather than long division in particular. But the connections to life goals must come from students. Simply telling them, "this is why you need to learn this," is unlikely to be convincing or to change their minds.

- ***Respect Students' Desire to Understand Why Lessons Are Relevant.*** If students ask why they have to learn something, respond earnestly and to the best of your abilities. Don't provide shallow or insulting answers, like "because it's going to be on the test" or "because I said so." Instead, remind them of the bigger picture—that the lesson is a chance for them to "develop their learning and thinking skills." To the extent that you can, provide more detail about what those specific skills are or when they might be relevant, or ask students to do some research and provide their own answers. In short, treat those questions as a teachable moment and as an authentic moment for reflection and connection.

Strategy 2: Create Opportunities for Student Choice

A simple way to increase students' investment in their learning is to give them some degree of autonomy regarding what they learn or how they learn it.

- ***Let Students Choose What Books to Read or What Topics to Write About.*** Try to provide a range of options so that each student can find an option that really appeals to them. For example, provide books representing diverse ranges of topics and authors of different cultural backgrounds. If you are in doubt about students' interests, ask!

- ***Even Small or Tangential Choices Can Increase Motivation.*** Research has shown that students complete more math problems in a math learning game if they get to pick the colors of their avatar (4). For example, this video describes the experiences of a Chicago Public School teacher who tracked what happened when he let his students choose which problems to do for homework (spoiler alert: they completed more of them).

Discover More

For more key principles, and to see specific practices associated with these key principles, visit perts.net/meaningful-work.

Survey Measures

To help teachers track their progress at making work feel meaningful to students, PERTS uses several survey questions.

- This week in class, I learned skills that matter for my life.
- This week, I learned skills in class that will help me succeed later in life.
- This week in class, I learned skills I could use to help other people.

The results of the surveys can help you learn how your students are thinking about the relevance and purpose of the work they're doing—and how any new practices you try influence their perceptions.

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