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Engaged Teaching: "Do Now" Activities for Your Lessons

JUNE 5, 2013 Image credit: Veer [MAURICE ELIAS'S PROFILE](http://www.edutopia.org/users/maurice-elias)

This is a follow up to a May 2013 blog about [The Five Dimensions of Engaged Teaching](http://www.solution-tree.com/five-dimensions-engaged-teaching.html) (Solution Tree, 2013), by Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding -- a book that offers SEL and Common Core-compatible approaches to instruction. As co-executive directors of the [Passageworks Institute](http://passageworks.org/) in Boulder, Colorado, Laura and Mark share with us practical examples of how educators of all grade levels might "Do Now" in classrooms some of their suggestions.

**Elementary School**

*Introduce a golden moment of silence to begin the day*

A golden moment is an opportunity to sit in silence with each other as a way to quiet the body and mind. Ringing a chime or bell to mark the beginning and end of this "moment" is helpful. Teachers can encourage students to listen to the fading sound of the bell until they can no longer hear it. Teachers can start with a very short period of time -- even 30 seconds -- and lengthen this golden moment over time, as the students are ready and able. Use a name and rationale that makes sense to your students and fits with your current SEL and classroom routines (e.g., Calming Time, Quiet Time, Listening Minute, and Settling In).

*Develop a "shared agreements" process*

In the first few weeks of school, students and teachers develop a list of agreements that will guide their classroom and define their classroom culture. These agreements co-exist alongside any school rules. Students are asked to brainstorm a list of what they need --from themselves and each other -- to learn effectively, speak honestly and openly, and share what is important to them. This list is summarized in five- to seven- major "agreements" and posted in the classroom as a reminder. Most should be positively worded but a couple *though shalt not's* are fine (e.g., *put downs*). Examples of agreements can be found in chapter seven of the book and in Edutopia's "Cooperative Arithmetic" video.

**Middle School**

*Transitions circle*

In the first week or two of school, engage your students in a community circle devoted to discussing the challenges and gifts of transitioning to middle school. Give each student a chance to speak, for a short time (one or two minutes) on these challenges and opportunities. An alternative to this activity is to ask students to use separate index cards to anonymously write down their concerns and excitement about middle school -- these can then be shared in a community circle. In such a circle, students gather into a circle and are invited to speak or share something, one by one, on a particular theme. This speaking is invitational and no one is forced to speak. In this case, students can read one of the cards and then open it up for comments by anyone interested in doing so. This is a non-threatening format that helps new groups of students get to know and feel comfortable with one another.

*Personalizing global issues*

When including challenging topics in your lesson (such as climate change or war or a recent difficult event), give students an opportunity to share personal reactions and responses to the material. Create ways for students to creatively express what they are seeing, feeling, and noticing in the world -- past and present. One teacher follows up her lessons on climate change with an opportunity for students to create "What you can do" posters -- in which students engage in brainstorms, working groups, and potential actions in their school and community. Offering students a generative, creative and productive outlet for the emotions that naturally get stirred by certain topics encourages learning, empowerment, and civic engagement. Note: If you notice students are particularly subdued or agitated after a provocative lesson (for example, the Holocaust, or a recent tragedy), provide a few minutes for open conversation, personal response, and dialogue or ask students to reflectively write about their response to the lesson. You may wish to conclude class with quiet reflection or a lighthearted activity. If you notice extreme agitation, it is important to connect a student other resources in the school, such as a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker.

**High School**

*Begin an occasional class with an inspirational quote or question related to your class in some way*

Ask students to engage in 3-5 minutes of reflective writing in which they respond to a quote or question. Ask for some volunteers to share out after this reflective writing. These can be linked to existing school, class, or unit themes, or character or SEL foci. Sir John Templeton's writings about worldwide Laws of Life contain excellent examples of quotes that are sure to promote thinking and discussion by high school students.

*End your class with a three- to five-minute "dyad" or "pair-share"*

Ask students to respond to a question about what one or two things they are taking with them from your class or from the school day. Have them write down a common list for their pair and pass it in to you for your review and comment, and when time allows, ask them to share with the larger group. Focus on helping students make connections between content and their lives, to help making learning relevant for them.

**All Grade Levels**

*Prospective and retrospective learning surveys*

Engage your students in age-appropriate learning goals self-reflections -- in which students identify current strengths and challenges they have as learners. Ask students to identify 3 learning goals they have for this coming marking period and to identify 3 learning challenges and three learning strengths in this class, or three things they feel they are best at and three they have the most trouble with. Take a social-emotional and academic learning approach to the surveys -- in which you invite students to create goals in *each* of those areas for themselves. Let students know that you will revisit these goals mid-way through and then at the end of the marking period.

Even if you have not done this earlier in the year, at the end of the year, you can ask students to reflect on what they see as their social-emotional and academic strengths and where, in each of these areas, they feel they grew the most over this past year.