

How To Produce Engaging Course Instruction that Enhances Student Outcomes in English Composition

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Introduction

In my review of existing peer-reviewed studies, I have learned that there is conclusive proof that engaged students perform better than those who are not. Most of the research I found is focused on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). While these subjects are crucial to our position in the global arena, I assert that they do not matter if our accomplishments cannot be clearly communicated to the world. That would require mastery of English composition.

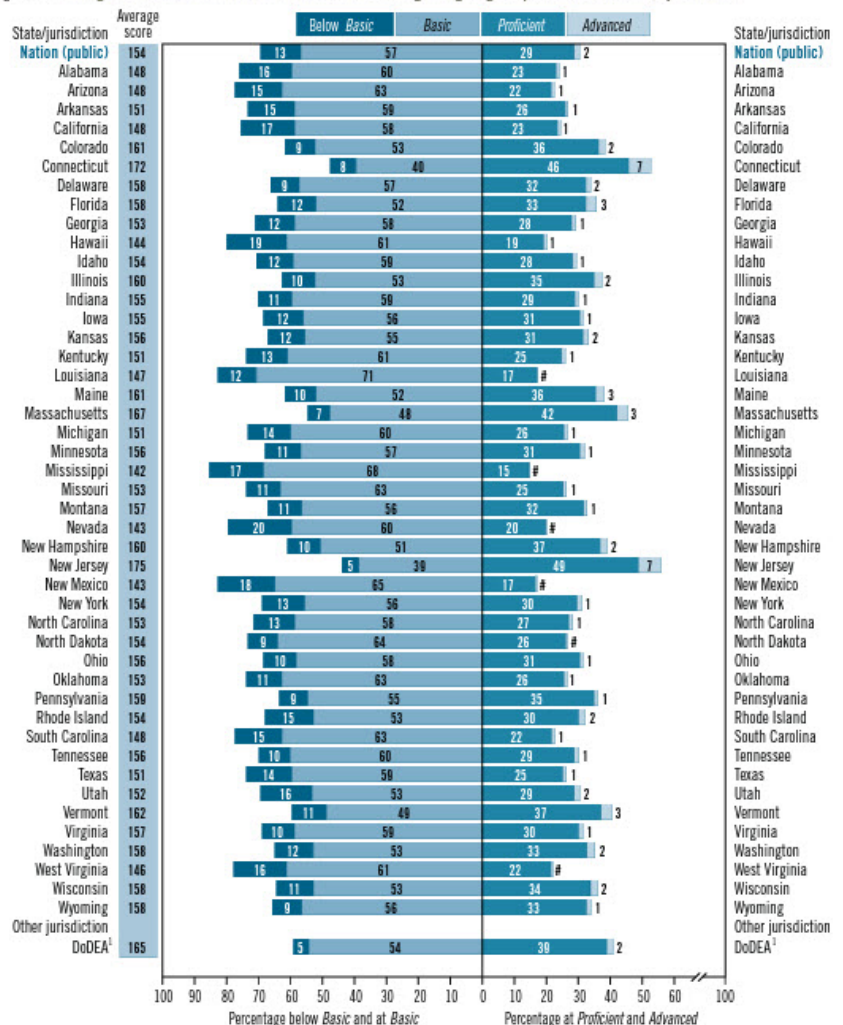
In addition to the focus on STEM, most of the studies published on student engagement focus on middle school, high school, and university students. We need to place more emphasis on the fundamental years of the development of written communication which, in the United States, typically takes place in grades 4-6. I propose to use the existing research on student engagement to guide my study of creating engaging English Composition instruction for these young students. It is not my intention to diminish the importance of other school subjects but to concentrate my efforts on the skill that has enabled me to make a living for over 20 years.

Problem Statement

A 2017 New York Times article summed up our state of affairs, “Three-quarters of both 12th and 8th graders lack proficiency in writing, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress. And 40 percent of those who took the ACT writing exam in the high school class of 2016 lacked the reading and writing skills necessary to complete successfully a college-level English composition class, according to the company’s data” (Goldstein, 2017).

The last National Center for Education Statistics report that broke down writing scores state-by-state was The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2007 State Snapshot Reports for Grade 8. Figure 11 of the report (shown to the right) revealed 8th-grade writing proficiency levels as 5-20% below basic, 39-71% at basic, 15-49% proficient, and 0-7% advanced (Salahu-Din et al., 2008).

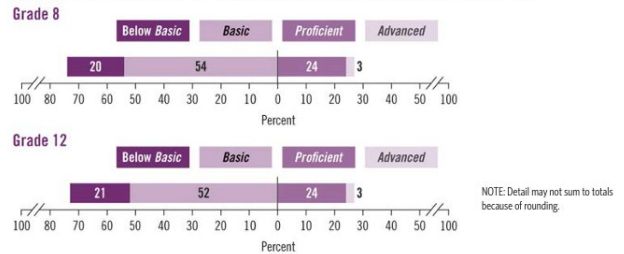
Figure 11. Average scores and achievement-level results in NAEP writing for eighth-grade public school students, by state: 2007



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Even the most recent declarations by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) stated, “Twenty-four percent of students in grades 8 and 12 performed at the *Proficient* level in writing in 2011” illustrated in Figure A from the report shown on the right. (Duncan, 2012).

Figure A. Achievement-level results in eighth- and twelfth-grade NAEP writing: 2011



Their report defined the proficiency levels as follows:

- **Basic** denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.
- **Proficient** represents solid academic performance. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter.
- **Advanced** represents superior performance.

Because I feel that these scores could be better if more effort were put into engagement, I intend to participate in the development of a playbook that educators can use to successfully develop and implement highly engaging learning activities that enhance the student experience and boost their academic performance in English Composition.

Research Questions

- Isn't effective communication a foundational skill that impacts all other aspects of life?
- Has the teacher tapped into their creativity to deliver material engagingly?
- How can educators ensure student engagement?
- Would it be possible to call out real-world applications of this knowledge?
- Can the classroom environment be more interactive?

Pursuing substantive answers to these initial questions will be the foundation of my research. Although I have already found — through research and my experience with individual students — that engagement enhances learning, I have yet to identify specific, repeatable teaching techniques that will be effective for groups of students.

Literature Review

Interested students perform better than those who are uninterested, don't they? This literature review will explore various studies that have sought to answer this question. We will discuss the consensus that how lessons are delivered is the single most important factor that drives ongoing student interest and academic outcomes. And to determine which methods of delivery work best, we will review studies of various findings, particularly hands-on activities and computer-based games.

Teachers Facilitate Learning

There are a great number of studies that focus on attracting and sustaining middle school and high school students' interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). It was interesting to learn that elevating the position of the United States in science and technology had initiated such an interest in making education more interesting to students to motivate them to pursue STEM careers. (Gupta, 2021).

One surprising revelation was that it is not a student's intrinsic interest in a subject that drives achievement; it is the act of learning (Rotgans & Schmidt, 2017). The entire body of research shows that the greatest potential for a subject to become a core student interest lies with educators. Students who enjoy the learning process will be motivated to work harder, overcome obstacles, and excel. To ensure our success in enhancing learning, we must first convince educators that boosting student engagement is essential. Schlosser & Balzano (2014) conclusively proved that witnessing the effectiveness of learning games motivates teachers — even experienced teachers in urban centers — to incorporate them into their lessons.

Hands-On Activities

The most profound advances in capturing students' attention, improving academic outcomes, and sustaining enthusiasm for STEM resulted from hands-on learning activities — particularly when a connection could be made to real-world applications (Hunsu et al., 2017). One of the easiest ways to ensure student engagement that was explored was requiring the students to present their work and explain it to their peers. (Tröbst et al., 2016).

During this research, we discovered a well-developed theory popular in Asian countries, Interest-Driven Creator (IDC) Theory, which combines student interest with hands-on activities to accelerate progress and maintain student engagement. Most notably, IDC has been used quite successfully in using IDC to require students to create videos to solve math word problems. While this may seem very complex, it was equally successful. Students at all achievement levels improved their math skills while improving communication, teamwork, engagement, and filmmaking skills. (Huang et al., 2020).

Although IDC is known for “sparking students' interest, fostering individual creativity, and inculcating lifelong learning habits” (Roschelle & Burke, 2019), a Malaysian study took it a step further by adding challenge-based instructional design to see if the combination would create even greater outcomes. Students gained new knowledge through small challenges, then combined their learnings with group work and focus groups. The student participants exceeded expectations and added innovativeness, character, and camaraderie to their credits (Khambari, 2019).

Computer Games

What is it about girls and math? Although efforts are underway to include more women and other underrepresented categories in STEM fields, some stereotypes persist, as was the case in a study that intended to draw more females into math using computer-based games. Although the games did help the

female elementary students improve their mastery, the girls still didn't like math. (Jamil et al., 2021). This experience was echoed in a similar study of high school students in South Korea (Lee & Boo, 2022). The study by Ishak et al. (2022) had the strongest position on using computer games to promote STEM. They found that using digital games was insufficient, stating, "integration of theories with pedagogy, learning strategies, STEM learning content, game elements, and game principle [stet] design ensures interest and its development."

Methodology

My research will test two approaches to determine the broadest student appeal for writing exercises in grades 4-6. In partnership with a local university, I will work with several classes of elementary school students for one semester. I will begin by introducing the project to the school principals, then classroom teachers before obtaining parental permission and interviewing students individually (to ensure that their current writing skills do not impede our ability to document our preliminary assessments). The focus will be primarily on student interest in writing.

- Group A will be a control group participating in standard writing instruction.
- Group B will view a series of animated lessons introducing new writing topics each week. The writing tasks that follow will refer to the animation.
- Group C will play interactive games in small groups at the beginning of each new lesson. The teacher will briefly explain the concept and demonstrate the game. Writing tasks that follow will relate to the game experience.

Data will be collected each week to track student interest, academic progress, and teacher insights. I will meet with the teachers weekly to address concerns and track progress.

At the end of the semester, I will interview each participant to measure their enthusiasm and interest in writing and review their progress. I will ask students about their opinions of the other groups to gather insight into perceived benefits. I hope that at the end of the semester, we will better understand which activities best motivate students to excel in writing.

Conclusion

Interested students do seem to perform better but making lessons interesting is not an exact science. The literature review covered a number of studies that demonstrate that the method of delivery has the greatest influence on academic outcomes. We learned that hands-on activities are very effective, and computer-based games are most effective when they are created with pedagogy best practices in mind.

We will build on this foundational knowledge in our quest to develop engaging English Composition learning tools that can be implemented in classrooms across the nation and beyond.

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