

## Strategies & Tools for Elevating Learner Engagement in Instruction and Learning



What follows are strategies and tools, with a brief description, that are effective in incorporating higher levels of learner engagement into instruction and learning. Of course, let where a teacher is on the GRC spectrum inform how you suggest and explain these strategies to her. As with the strategies and tools for rigor and relevance, this list is here to launch your ongoing search for additional engagement strategies and tools you can suggest to teachers.

**Accountable Talk:** Accountable talk strategies create opportunities for all students to stay engaged during classroom activities. One such strategy is Numbered Heads, where students are placed in groups and then assigned a number, such that each assigned number occurs once in each group. The teacher calls on different numbers to share the group’s response to different questions. A different take on this strategy is using a Talking Clip (aka a paper clip). Only the student with the paper clip is allowed to answer. The Talking Clip is moved from student to student in the group until all students have had an opportunity to share their thoughts. A third strategy is the use of playing cards. Each student in a group is given a different card and categories of cards can align to certain responsibilities (this requires you taking from a deck of cards only those cards you need in advance of distributing them). For example, the “diamonds” are responsible for gathering supplies for the group, while those with “clubs” are responsible for being the group reporter. Take care to ensure each group receives the same card distribution.

**Feedback:** Student feedback can be written or oral and should always be delivered with compassion and respect toward the student. Feedback should be timely, in that it should help students deepen learning about the content currently being taught. Teachers should not shy away from discussing errors with students in feedback, as guiding students to work through errors promotes resilience, perseverance, and a growth mindset.

Hattie assigns feedback, when used expertly and strategically, a .70 effect size. According to an article on the Visible Learning website, there are nine guidelines to using feedback to elicit its maximal effect size (2018). An adapted version of them follow:

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1. Keep feedback's focus on the task, not the student.
2. Provide detailed feedback that uses content-specific language.
3. Present detailed feedback in manageable chunks; calibrate feedback chunks to a student's age.
4. Be specific and clear in your feedback.
5. Take care to ensure that feedback is unbiased and objective.
6. Keep feedback as simple as possible but not overly simplified.
7. Use feedback to help the student cultivate a learning-goal orientation.
8. Ensure that the student clearly grasps the goals and how her performance can help her meet goals.
9. Give feedback after students have attempted a solution or completion of a learning task.

**Group Guidelines:** A Group Guidelines sheet outlines the expectations of groups as they collaborate on learning tasks. Prior to assigning any type of group work to the class, the teacher provides this sheet to all groups and goes over the rules with them to ensure understanding. During group work, each group of students displays the Group Guidelines sheet. As the teacher circulates to offer assistance to groups, students make notes on the sheet to indicate how well they are abiding by the guidelines and staying on task. At the end of the group work, the students also assess their individual behavior on the same sheet and then turn it into the teacher. You can find an example of a Group Guidelines sheet at [leadered.com/coachingredefined](http://leadered.com/coachingredefined).

**Group Roles and Responsibilities:** Assigning roles and corresponding responsibilities to students doing group work helps keep students on task and coordinated toward meeting learning goals. The roles also help students feel accountable for their learning and to each other, which deepens emotional engagement. You can see an example of a Group Roles and Responsibilities sheet I use at [leadered.com/coachingredefined](http://leadered.com/coachingredefined). It includes roles and explanations of responsibilities for leader, manager, recorder, and spokesperson.

**Leadership Development:** Leadership skills are those that enable a person to work positively and productively with others and earn their respect and trust. When students struggle with leadership, they often struggle with self-responsibility and self-awareness; the ability to set goals and commit to reaching them; the ability to communicate clearly and effectively; perseverance and remaining positive, especially in the face of setbacks, to name some. When you see students struggle in some or all of these ways, they will benefit from

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applying leadership to their own lives and learning. When one can lead one's own learning productively, then her skills are developing to the point where they can be used to motivate and inspire others to do the same; i.e., where she demonstrates strong leadership potential.

Teachers have several tools they can apply in their classrooms to promote leadership skills. To begin, the teacher can make a point to acknowledge, praise, and explain when a student exhibits leadership skills. The explaining point is key; the teacher will name the skill and explain to students its importance in one's own life and the impact on others. As an example: "Pedro, thanks for helping Samantha learn that content instead of telling her the answer. You showed real leadership by helping her think through the problem, as this helps her take responsibility and leadership for her own learning. This helps her become a leader, too."

More formally, the teacher can intentionally assign reading materials that portray leadership skills and their impacts. A learning task or discussion time should be attached to the reading. The teacher can also create leadership opportunities in her classroom and assign roles to students to practice leadership skills. Roles can include:

- Greeter: greets guests as they come into class.
- Teaching Assistant: often, teachers will use the "ask three and then ask me" rule, where students must ask at least three students a question before going to the teacher if the question has not been answered. Teachers can assign the "teaching assistant" role to three students, and students know to go to them to ask questions before turning to the teacher. The role can also be assigned to one student in the absence of the rule.
- Praise Leader: offers praise to students when they achieve goals and have success; encourages other students to do the same.
- Goal Leader: helps remind students to track their learning goals and set new ones.
- Effort Leader: encourages students in class to persevere when they begin to struggle.

Teachers can incorporate journal writing into learning so that students can reflect on their leadership skills. Journal prompts can include:

- Do you consider yourself a leader or a follower, and why?
- What qualities make someone a good leader?
- How are you working to develop your own leadership skills?
- Why are leadership skills important in today's world?
- Who is a leader you admire, and why do you admire them?

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For students who really struggle with leadership, the teacher can look for ways to increase these students' ownership over their own learning. Personalized instruction is one of the strongest ways to do this. Specifically, teachers routinely should set clear learning goals with these students. Formative processes and data should be used and discussed regularly with students so that they know exactly where they are in progress toward goals. These students and the teacher should have an ongoing dialogue about what the students say they need to meet goals—which puts them in the driver's seat, with the teacher always there to guide and support. Throughout these conversations, the teacher should make a point to name and discuss leadership skills and—importantly—never miss an opportunity to praise these students when they exhibit them.

**My Goals:** Students use a goal-setting worksheet to record content standards and/or behavior goals and to track their progress toward reaching them. As they track their progress, they should reflect on actions needed to reach their goals. For an example of a “My Goals” goal-setting worksheet, go to [leaderead.com/coachingredefined](http://leaderead.com/coachingredefined).

**My Vocabulary Progress:** This strategy helps students track mastery toward learning new vocabulary terms. Students are provided with a text and a copy of the worksheet found at [leaderead.com/coachingredefined](http://leaderead.com/coachingredefined). The teacher provides students with a list of academic vocabulary words from the text, and each student chooses unfamiliar words to study. While reading the text, students record where the word is located in the text and its meaning. Then, on the graphic organizer, students draw a picture, write a synonym, and/or use the word in a sentence. When students feel they have mastered the meaning of the vocabulary words, they check it off on the worksheet.

**Quick-Write:** Quick-Write is a short response to a prompt used to assess student thinking. The teacher typically gives students less than five minutes to quickly and quietly respond to a provided prompt. As the students write their responses, the teacher circulates the room to evaluate their thinking and assess the need for clarification on certain points.

**Reflection Time:** Incorporating reflection time at the end of class helps students assess their behavior and set goals for the following day. At the end of the class, the teacher asks all students to assess their level of engagement throughout the lesson. Students can rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 and justify their answer with evidence from the class. The teacher should then share her assessment of the degree of engagement at the class level, providing evidence for her rating. Finally, the class should set goals for the upcoming class.

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**Stop-and-Reflect Moments:** Stop-and-reflect moments can have many purposes, including aiding in self-assessment, deepening understanding, and regrouping when off task. If the teacher sees a need for some kind of pause to ensure everyone is on the same page, she can incorporate short periods of time (one to five minutes) into the class for whole-class reflection. For example, if students are off task, the teacher can stop instruction, thank those specifically staying on task, and then ask students to reflect on their current level of engagement and progress toward completing learning task goals. A brief discussion of students' assessments can help them regroup and focus on the task at hand. Or if many students are struggling with the same content, the teacher can pause instruction and ask students to take a moment to reflect on what they're learning and share their thoughts. This will help the teacher determine why students are struggling. She can then conduct a quick mini-lesson to support understanding accordingly.

**Student Learning Rubrics:** Student learning rubrics are a great way for students to assess their own learning and set learning goals. There are many tools available online to help teachers create rubrics specific to their classes and students. Some general rubric makers include Teacher Rubric, Rubric Maker, Rubi Star, and EssayTagger. For assessing career competencies such as leadership, problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity, a helpful Life/Career Skills rubric builder can be found at [www.nyctecenter.org](http://www.nyctecenter.org) under the Instruction Tab (2016).

**Technology to Enhance Engaged Learning:** There are several great technology tools available today that can ensure all students are answering questions and that offer students opportunities to give immediate feedback to the teacher or ask questions in real time. In turn, the teacher can alter or adapt instruction in real time based on the changing needs of the students. Such current technology tools include Class Flow, Formative, Quizizz, Kahoot!, Nearpod, and Quizlet, to name a few. Flipgrid is a technology where students can upload videos of themselves presenting on a topic or answering a question. Students then view classmates' videos and provide the presenter with feedback and ideas for improvement.

**Write-Pair-Share:** This strategy builds upon Quick-Write and is also used to assess student thinking. The teacher gives students less than minutes to respond to a question. Students write their responses. Once everyone is finished, the teacher asks them to share their responses with a neighbor. After students are done sharing, each pair selects the best from their two responses to share with the class.