

Five Ways to Fight Student Apathy

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Do you have an imaginary teacher persona, an avatar of sorts programmed into your brain? I do.

I like to think that I'm a blend of Mary Poppins, Katniss Everdeen, and Hermione Granger. A little bit of sweet, sass, and smarts.

I also like to think that I'm a good teacher. But every year, life gives me a hard-to-reach student (or two or three). You know the type...the tired, the smirking, the do-nothing students. Those who try to hide use of AirPods to tune you out in hopes that you won't notice...student apathy at its finest.

For many years, I let these students get to me, throw me off my game. I've learned, though, that you can't let them steal your sparkle...In fact, that's the worst thing you can do.

Here is the BEST thing you can do – implement these five ways to combat student apathy, all conveniently starting with the letter “C.”

Connection fights student apathy

We, as humans, desire to be **known**, to be **understood**, to feel like someone “gets” us. **Education begins with connection.** According to long-time educator, Doctor Trenton Hanson, in his article for *Leadership*, “Evidence suggests that the empathy and caring of even one adult in the life of a child can prevent future negative consequence for that child.” That's huge... **all it takes is ONE.**

Teachers know, if not quantitatively, then intuitively that academic performance and rapport go hand-in-hand. We begin the year by establishing norms, create opportunities for students to feel “safe” and use their voice in classroom conversation. We play ice-breaker games and plan team-building activities. We survey students about their interests and work those interests into class whenever possible. We greet students at the door, have classroom traditions, and the list goes on. All of this because we know that, if students have a connection to teachers as a human, not just as a teacher, they are likely to want to perform better.

This is not to say that it is always easy. The apathetic students are our *hardest audience* to reach, right? They're the “indifferent audience” that first needs to be made to feel *something* before they can be won over. To do this, *we* have to go in with caring **and** our “**game face**,” you know the one that doesn't get flustered, that keeps on keepin' on no matter what.

- Some students need to see that we won't give up on them like other teachers have.
- Some students need to see that they can achieve small wins, that they *can* do it. Some students need to see that we care about them, no strings attached, no grade attached, just because.
- And some students, despite our best efforts, will not be ready to connect, but we won't give up on them.

Choice fights student apathy

Student choice and connection go hand-in-hand in fighting student apathy. When students see that they have the ability to think deeply, explore, create, use inquiry, make connections, the relationship with the teacher is strengthened. When students feel like they are “in a box,” always wondering what the “right” answer is, and what the “teacher wants,” the relationship is weakened. If you're looking for ways to make your classroom more student-centered, particularly with student-led discussion, be sure to check out [this blog post](#).

I think the key here is in the unspoken messages we send students. **If my classroom promotes inquiry and values student choice and voice as a part of the learning process, I'm sending the message that I value students as partners in learning**, that I don't “have all of the answers,” but will guide them as they find answers for themselves. I'm sending the message that students are capable of asking and answering tough questions. **On the flip-side, if my classroom is rigid, black-and-white, there is a lack of trust in my students as learners.**

Sometimes, this trust has to be earned. I also understand that *some learners are not yet ready for complete autonomy*. **If this is your situation, I would encourage you to think about ways to build in choice with boundaries.** Maybe you want to give students options for their focus in an essay, or choice between a couple of different final products (that both demonstrate the same skills). Be persistent. Like anything, independence and inquiry are skills that we need to foster in students. Maybe you'll start the year with a lot of structure as students learn expectations and then gradually release to independence as the year goes on.

Creativity fights student apathy

Do you remember a project from your school days that **REALLY allowed you to be creative?** Even a lesson or activity will suffice... I sometimes think of how the high school students I teach have six or seven other classes each day. **How am I standing out in a sea of think-pair-share, get out your homework, let's discuss this article, there's an assessment coming up status quo that I imagine is mind-numbing to students?**

Creativity and choice also tend to go hand-in-hand (are you seeing the connections here?) as choice offers the opportunity for creativity to flourish. I think of creativity as the opportunity to find the intersection between what students are passionate about or invested in and the skills that I'm teaching in the classroom. **Changing up the output, allowing students to choose a topic, explore, build, create, can be powerful for student engagement.** This encourages buy-in and also allows you to connect with students, helping students to avoid sinking into an apathetic frame of mind.

Checkpoints fight student apathy

Set expectations that are **rigorous, but achievable**, and put supports in place for all students to meet these expectations. I'm doing students a disservice if I lower my expectations of them due to circumstances or other factors. (This actually hurts the relationship I want to build if students see I won't hold them to a high standard.) **I want to set an academic tone, give opportunities for collaboration and fun within the curriculum, and give a heap of praise and affirmation when students succeed.**

One of the ways that I help students to succeed in my classroom is to provide [checkpoints sheets for major projects](#). **On each checkpoints sheet, I break down (sometimes collaboratively with the students) the parts of the project into "check-ins" with "mini" due dates.** I'll add in the language of the rubric and connections to class activities underneath each checkpoint so that students see how each step aligns with the end goal and skills. Students are expected to hang on to these sheets.

Every time a checkpoint is due, I check-in with each student and give a stamp on the sheet if the work has been completed to expectations and a note to the student (and to me so that I'll remember) if the checkpoint hasn't been met (sometimes, I'll recommend a resource or require an academic support and make a note of it here). These checkpoints allow me to *hold students responsible* for keeping up with their work and also to have *continued conversations* with them about their progress. **If a student is not progressing, I can intervene sooner and more consistently, matching him or her to in-school interventions such as the writing center, making parent contact, and having them come in for extra help from me.**

If the sheet is lost, no credit is given for the time management strand on the rubric (our district has switched to this method instead of taking off points for each day late), and in the end I can assess them for the skill of time management using all of the notes and stamps on the collected sheets.

Bonus: A checkpoints sheet is a support that I would *typically put in place for my IEP/504 students who require a project to be broken down into smaller steps*, but one that helps every student to succeed. **For students who are excelling, I might not require all of the steps, or challenge them individually by customizing checkpoints. On the opposite side of the differentiation spectrum, I might put more interventions in place for students who need more support.**

Consistency fights student apathy

Some apathetic students aren't engaged by the flashiest of lessons, the most engaging of assignments. **Chances are, there is something going on outside of the classroom for a lot of these students.** Sit down, talk with the student, form an action plan and come together. **Show that you care. And keep caring. Don't give up.**

Remember the somewhat cliché adage that students will remember how you made them *feel*. **The relationship you build with students, consistent over time, creates a culture of caring in the classroom.** Remember that the influence of relationships is directly connected to fostering resilience and achievement. To me, this also speaks to the teacher's need for resilience in fostering that relationship in the face of student apathy. That doesn't mean that you are "soft" on students, but it does mean that you show that you care about them personally and academically day in and day out.