

Collins Writing Exchange

Ideas, Tips, and Resources to Improve Learning Through Writing

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Raise Achievement by Boosting Engagement



How often do you ask your class questions that are met with...silence? Glazed looks? One or two hands up (the same students as always!)? This is a common frustration among educators, and post-pandemic, it seems that active classroom engagement is at an all-time low. We can blame passive student behavior on many factors, but more importantly, what can we do to change things? And why should we?

A [2019 Gallup study](#) was conducted in 128 schools and included more than 110,000 students. Its conclusion:

student engagement has a significant positive relationship with student academic achievement in math, reading, and all subjects combined.

All too often, our students have learned how to be compliant, but not engaged, in the school environment. While this compliance yields quiet, orderly classrooms, it does not always reflect actual learning. Actual learning is messy, it's difficult at times, and it's done best in a classroom that offers students opportunities to do more than just listen, watch, read, and copy notes from the board. Students need to be actively engaged in the thinking and doing in the classroom. The key to increasing classroom engagement and, in turn, learning, lies in a few small adjustments that yield big results, and that is the focus of this *Exchange* issue.

You'll notice that an engaged classroom focuses on *student* behaviors. Many teachers are led to believe that their role is that of a "performer" in front of the class. In fact, it is *students* who should take the lead role in the learning and activity that takes place in the classroom. Students, not teachers, should be doing the heavy lifting and, by doing so, learning is deeper, more meaningful, and longer lasting.

Not sure where to start? See our [Instead of This ... Try This!](#) guide with lots of ideas on how to engage students and improve learning. A sample is below.

Instead of This ... Try This! Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement

Instead of ...	Try this!
Starting class with a question to the whole group, such as "Who can tell me what we learned yesterday?"	Assign a Type One writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">In 5 lines or more, write down as many things as you can remember from yesterday's lesson. OR Assign a Type Two writing that reviews a specific topic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Yesterday we discussed ____ (e.g., the reasons why the Treaty of Versailles eventually led to WW2). Identify at least 3 of the ____ (e.g., reasons) we discussed. THEN Have students draw a line below their responses and share their answers with a partner, small group, or the whole class, adding new ideas below the line.

TIP OF THE MONTH

Vertical Learning: A Powerful Tool

Recently, our team of Collins Associates came across an exciting article by Jennifer Gonzalez on her website, *Cult of Pedagogy*. Gonzalez interviewed author and professor of math education Peter Liljedahl to discuss his recent book, [Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics, Grades K-12: 14 Teaching Practices for Enhancing Learning](#). One of the strategies he introduces for promoting "thinking classrooms" is the use of vertical, non-permanent surfaces. While Liljedahl's ideas focus on math, we saw a strong connection to one of our key Collins strategies and discovered how we might make our technique even better by embracing Liljedahl's technique.

In past issues of the *Exchange*, we have offered tips on using student writing samples to teach and model writing skills, clarify content understanding, and troubleshoot common errors. We focused on the common I-Do, We-Do, You-Do approach, modeling our analysis of student work, encouraging partners to analyze a new student sample, and asking students to reflect independently on a piece of writing. This method is highly effective when we need to calibrate our grading system for students, directly call out a common error and teach students how to fix it, or show students exemplary pieces of writing to help them craft their own.



But we now see another option, one that puts students in the driver's seat and promotes higher order thinking and higher levels of engagement: vertical analysis of student writing samples. In this scenario, we tape student writing samples to a vertical whiteboard and send randomly selected groups of three to each taped sample. Students are prompted to analyze the given sample and make notes on the board surrounding their sample. The teacher moves among the groups, watching, listening, and encouraging.

Once students have worked through their sample, the teacher ends with what Liljedahl calls a consolidation activity in which the teacher highlights key elements on each work surface, encourages students to make notes for themselves, or engages students in a short formative assessment to check understanding.

[Check out this list of ideas](#) to prompt students' thinking during a vertical learning experience and check understanding afterward.

FEATURED RESOURCE

You Be the Judge: Evaluating Student Writing

Take vertical writing sample analysis a step further with this tried-and-true assignment. Here, students develop a written evaluation of a written work, essentially taking over the job of the teacher as the “grade-giver” and consolidating learning that occurred during the vertical experience. This assignment, or a pared-down version, can be used multiple times throughout the year as students score and critique essays from peers, other classes, or released samples from state tests or the AP exam.

In math classes, students who are asked to score examples of geometric proofs, algebraic procedures, and other open-ended responses, benefit from building error analysis into their routine while improving the way they communicate math ideas.

Besides increased engagement, here are just a few other benefits:

- Students gain a better understanding of your classroom scoring system or the one encountered on common high-stakes assessments.
- Students practice supporting their ideas with concrete evidence, a critical argumentative skill.
- Students demonstrate their synthesis of the prior vertical activity or of previous instruction.

Find the right assignment for your students here:

- [Grades K-2](#)
- [Grades 3-5](#)
- [Grades 6-12](#)

You Be the Judge
Evaluating an Answer

ADMINISTRATORS' CORNER

Vertical Learning for Teachers

Vertical learning works for teachers, too! It's a great way to freshen up your staff meetings and generate meaningful discussion. Pick one of the strategies from [Using Student Writing Samples to Improve Teacher Instruction](#) and go vertical! Or try one of these new ideas:

- Post school assessment data vertically and ask random groups to annotate the data with observations, patterns, etc.
- Outline a successful lesson you observed (with the teacher's permission) and ask groups to make notes on any variety of topics (How did this teacher engage students? How did students demonstrate learning?). You might even provide teachers with your observation rubric and ask them to evaluate the lesson plan accordingly.



- Provide teachers with a task, such as, “Plan a 40-minute lesson that reviews how to support a claim (or hypothesis) with evidence,” and work in groups to map out a lesson plan that incorporates (and labels) key instructional strategies or school initiatives.

The key is to keep notes vertical and take time to circulate and check in with each group. Much more engaging than a staff meeting that could have been an email!

QUICK LINKS



Quickly diagnose student writing skills and habits and plan purposeful assignments and instruction for the second half of the school year with [Writing Roadmap](#). Watch the [overview video](#) with author Kristine Gibson. Or, [download the PDF](#) of the Preview booklet.

NEW! Retrieval Routine

An easy-to-implement, 4-step routine that establishes good academic habits, builds classroom stamina, and improves learning.

Collins Video Course

A six-part *Introduction to the Collins Writing Program* course with Dr. John Collins. Get started using Collins Writing here.

Check Your Collins IQ

Try a sample of our quick self-assessment survey to review Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Collins implementation strategies.

Essential Conventions

Check Mate™ and other resources to tackle the rules of writing that are teachers' biggest pet peeves!

Free Resources

Ready-to-use Type Threes, Focus Correction Area lists, graphic organizers, and more!

PD Options

Everything you need to know about our PD options, workshops, institutes, and courses.

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