

Make Any Student The Most Interesting Person In The Room

Bryce Hedstrom

Bryce Hedstrom teaches Spanish at Roosevelt High School in Johnstown, Colorado. He writes TCI/TPRS teaching materials and is a workshop presenter. More information may be found on his website, brycehedstrom.com

Teachers are expected to be the focus of any classroom activity by default. We often don't know how to step back and take a supportive role, and students do not know how to let out their personalities. How can we make our students the focus in our classes? Kids are interested in one another and they want to learn about each others' lives, but we often get things backwards—we talk about pop stars or we talk about ourselves and then we try to get students interested. If we follow the tips below, we can discover what is fascinating about most any student; we can make what is interesting in him or her bloom. Here are 7 ways to make any student the most interesting person in your classroom.

1. Don't be bored yourself.

The best offense is a good defense, so the first way to keep things interesting for your students is to not allow yourself to be bored. That may mean keeping it short. The Hippocratic Oath for teachers should be something like: "First do no harm ... to the image of your student." When we talk to students, we need to be positive and be brief. If we seem bored, students become bored. We teachers can be terrible at this. We're tired. We've done this before. We think that just because we have done this activity in 5 other classes today, we need to keep on talking and talking until we hit the fascinating sweet spot like last time. But the number 1 tip for never boring anyone comes from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's advice for speech-making: "Be sincere; be brief; be seated." To keep from being bored we need to: a) be truly interested, b) not go on too long, and c) stop before the magic ends.

Stay upbeat, stay on the point and keep looking in the student's eyes. It is very hard for a student not to respond to that kind of attention. You become engaging company to the interviewee and, therefore, to the rest of the class. Make the interview go as long as the mojo lasts. A good tip here is to ask yourself, "Is the still student responding with his eyes?" If not, perhaps it is time to end the interview and go on to the next student. You can always come back to that student again later. Maybe they are just having a bad day, or maybe he needs to see if he can trust you. He may open up later. Maybe not, and that's OK.

2. Be a good listener.

The most interesting people are good listeners. Too often, we teachers feel as if we have to be the main speaker in the room. But what if our goal were to get the students talking about themselves? People love to talk about themselves, but there are not nearly enough good listeners. Become one. When people talk about themselves, it gives them as much pleasure as eating or getting paid. You can connect with students by getting them to talk about themselves. The people we like to talk to the most are often those that say the least.

3. Talk about that student's interests.

Every student is interested in something. Find it. Blaine Ray mentions that reading the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie changed his life as a teacher. Talking about the interests of our students comes straight from that book. If you have not had success connecting with students in the past, this is the best piece of advice there is. You do not have to struggle and guess what might be interesting to students. You don't have to do research on youth culture. You do not have to spend days watching popular movies or videos. You don't have to act wild and crazy. You just have to find out what is interesting to them by asking.

Ask about their interests, recent life events, or hobbies, and then follow up with questions. With this basic information you have a good start on connecting with them. If you know a little bit in general about a subject, you can use that knowledge to guide your questions. You may not know the exact musician they are raving about, but you have been to a concert that enthralled you. You may not be familiar with the movie star they idolize, but you have been inspired by great performances. Use that commonality of feeling to drive the conversations with your students. Allow them to talk about what they love and watch the interest grow.

4. Pull stories out of students by modeling with your own stories—a little bit.

Students like stories about people more than vague cultural vignettes. They like drama and gossip—the stuff of reality TV—as do most adults. We all find human behavior fascinating, so think of short stories about people, rather than things. Use stories where you watched or experienced something noteworthy happen, not ones where you made the amazing event happen. Tell stories from your own life where you saw something amazing happen.

When comedians or actors appear on talk shows, they do not spontaneously talk about what they have done in the last week. They have stories prepared. They have rehearsed. It is a planned performance that is not supposed to look like a performance. You need to learn to do the same thing. Pick 3 good stories from your own life experience and practice telling them until you have the timing down. Tell them to co-workers, members at the gym, at parties, at ball games, while volunteering—anywhere and everywhere until you can tell your stories smoothly. Then you can use those to prime the pump and get your students to think of similar stories about themselves.

5. Create excitement with your voice and actions.

Your tone of voice and body language communicate much of what you say to your students. By some estimates, words account for only 7% of the total message. If we depend only on the words, we are muted. So use laughter and drama. Use sweeping gestures. Don't just depend on the words; use your all of the tools at your disposal. For a lay description of why this is important, see *Reading Magic* by Mem Fox; for the scholarly version, see the classic 1967 study by Mehrabian & Ferris for more on the immense effect of voice tone on communication.

6. Talk about interesting places that students mention.

Do not allow the mention of an interesting place flash by in a student answer. Stop and ask about it. Get them to describe it and then follow up with questions. The emotion of the place will carry over to the rest of the class. People find musicians and actors captivating because they take us where we have never been through their music and the emotions portrayed in their acting. This phenomenon is known as the misattribution of emotions—we associate good feelings with a person because our emotions are stimulated by an experience. We identify with the musicians in a band because of the lyrics and the feeling of the music. We think good thoughts about an actor because he appeared in a film that moved us. We can take advantage of this and have our students feel good about one another and about us by taking them to interesting places in their minds in our classes through the stories told by their peers.

7. There is something interesting about every student—find it.

This is the most important idea here. We have already talked about focusing on what is interesting TO a student; now focus on what is interesting ABOUT the student. There are seeds of greatness in every student—seeds that our students may not even be aware of. We just have to water them and let them spring forth. Don Quixote treated those with whom he came in contact as royalty, and they sometimes rose to the occasion. If you want your students to act like interesting people, treat them like interesting people. The interview process gives each student that chance. We are not just trying to make a good impression on the students, but to bring out the best in them—this is much more rewarding than merely trying to make ourselves look good or following a script in a textbook.

It is okay to talk about yourself occasionally, too. You may be the most interesting person that your students know—you have travelled, you speak other languages, you have had fascinating experiences with exotic people in different cultures. You probably have great life experiences and stories. Feel free to share those once in a while, but don't hog the spotlight. Wait until students ask about you.