

The English Teacher's Guide to Design Thinking for Engagement

Engaging Students Through Empathetic Connections

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English Language Arts teachers are no strangers to the art of making connections – it's the foundation of what we teach. So how can we teach connection to students who are disengaged in the classroom? With empathy.

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Introduction

Plenty of research over the last two decades has demonstrated the importance of having and teaching empathy in the classroom. But how can teachers structure an empathetic approach to learning?

When students have empathy, they show:

- More classroom engagement
- Higher achievement
- Better communication
- More positive relationships

Let's take it back to the planning stage. To engage students in a critical approach to ELA, teachers need to structure learning (and empathy) in a way that supports simpler, more focused connections between students and literature.

This adapted form of **Design Thinking** provides structure for students' investigation and creation process and uses terminology familiar to high school students within the ELA classroom. Critically, this begins with empathizing in order to initiate connections between students and the material.

Model for English Language Arts

Empathize

Strong readers instinctually make inferences to understand the context of a story. This is a critical step for developing empathy. The "perspective-taking" process involved in reading "can evoke narrative emotions such as empathy with characters, and it promotes the ability to...understand behavior of others by reasoning about their beliefs, desires and intentions" (Thexton et al., 2019).

Ask students to respond to questions like:

- "How does it feel..."
- "If this were to happen to you...."

Define

To make connections between ideas and larger themes, try synthesis activities like:

- Compare and contrast project
- Character analysis response
- Oral presentation

These ideas are supported by textual evidence, and students begin to see the correlation between their inferences and the literary indications.

Ideate

Asking questions to build on ideas both motivates and encourages students to approach learning with more curiosity. Questioning develops analytical mindsets, supporting a critically engaged approach to a topic or text. Try out the journalistic six as a structure: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How?

Write

This step is where students can determine how effective their engagement is. This can look many ways without being an essay response. It can also be scaffolded to support students in the writing process.

Review

Design Thinking is designed to be as non-linear as necessary – so long as process is informed by critical reflection. Much like product design, engagement with literary analysis, and continual learning, involves review for new understanding.

Conclusion

"Teaching with empathy unleashes empathy."

Franzese, 2017

We know that empathetic teachers develop better relationships with their students that lead to more engagement in the classroom (Cooper, 2011).

To support engagement and connection, teachers should:

- Model empathy
- Teach what empathy is and why it matters
- Practice
- Set clear expectations of ethics
- Make school culture and climate a priority

References

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