

# 20 Strategies for Motivating Reluctant Learners

Katrina  
Schwartz

**Kathy Perez** has decades of experience as a classroom educator, with training in special education and teaching English language learners. She also has a dynamic style. Sitting through her workshop presentation with like being a student in her classroom. She presents on how to make the classroom engaging and motivating to all students, even the most reluctant learners, while modeling for her audience exactly how she would do it. The experience is a bit jarring because it's so different from the lectures that dominate big education conferences, but it's also refreshing and way more fun.

Perez says when students are engaged, predicting answers, talking with one another and sharing with the class in ways that follow safe routines and practices, they not only achieve more but they also act out less. And everyone, including the teacher, has more fun.

"If we don't have their attention, what's the point?" Perez asked an audience at a [Learning and the Brain conference](#) on mindsets.

She's a big proponent of brain breaks and getting kids moving around frequently during the day. She reminded educators that most kids' attention spans are about as long in minutes as their age. So a third-grader can concentrate for about eight minutes before losing interest. It's a teacher's job to make sure there are lots of quick, effective brain breaks built into the lesson to give children a moment to recalibrate. Perez says teachers must be prepared for a diverse cross section of learners with a large toolkit of strategies for teaching in multiple modalities, with many entry points to participation and content.

## PEREZ' BRAIN-BASED STRATEGIES

### 1. Don't Be Boring

"In our engaging classrooms, we have to have a set of procedures and routines," Perez said. But they don't have to be boring. She often has students come in and look at a list of adjectives on the board, many of which stretch her students' vocabularies. She asks them to greet two other students and use one of the adjectives to describe how they are feeling today. The activity gets them up, moving and ready to learn, plus they've used a new vocabulary word in relation to themselves, checking in with their community along the way.

### 2. Vote

Activate students' brains with a quick round of voting. Perez often puts three learning goals for the day up on the board and asks students to vote for the one they think is most important. All three goals are good ones and there's no wrong answer. "The reluctant learners get to look around the room and see who else thinks just like them," Perez said. This quick activity helps create curiosity among students about what each of them is thinking.

### 3. Set Goals

Perez is also a proponent of both teacher and students setting personal learning goals every day that are achievable, believable and measurable. "Part of reaching that goal is publicizing that goal," Perez said. Making goal-setting a regular and visible part of one's teaching practice models it for students. But it's very important to leave time for students to revisit the goal they set at the end of the day, Perez said. That opportunity to reflect will help them see and value what they did during the day, as well as where they may have fallen short of the goal.

### 4. Form Groups

Perez constantly asks her students (in this case a group of educators) to break off to share with one another, brainstorm or collaborate, and she always sets a time limit for the conversation, like 72 seconds. "In my classroom I use bizarre time limits and then they think I'm actually watching the clock and they get to it," Perez said. She finds this promotes more time on task than a generic five-minute time limit, which students know is just as likely to stretch into eight minutes.

## **5. Quick Writes**

Often Perez will throw out a question and ask students to quickly brainstorm on paper as many answers as they can. Then she'll do a "popcorn share" where students stand up whenever they want and throw out an idea. This could be an alternative to something like "round-robin reading," which can put reluctant learners in the hot seat. In this case, Perez sets her students up for success by giving them time to brainstorm first — the answers are right in front of them. This strategy has the added value of forcing students to listen closely to their peers, since they don't know who will pop up next.

## **6. Focus on the ABCs: Acceptance, Belonging and Community**

"Without this set of ABCs, traditional ABCs will not be as successful," Perez said. She's aware of the rush to cover content in many schools and classrooms, but says teaching is not about what is covered today, it's about what is uncovered in students. "Don't be so standards-driven that you forget the needs of your students," she said.

## **7. Continually change the "state" of the classroom**

These are changes in who is providing the information, who is doing the talking. Perez likes to say for every 10 minutes of content, teachers need to give students two minutes of "chew time."

## **8. Empathize**

Keep in mind the students' perspective and listen when they explain what they need to learn. Take Ned's Great Eight to heart.

## **NED'S GREAT EIGHT**

- I feel OK
- It matters
- It's active
- It stretches me
- I have a coach
- I have to use it
- I think back on it
- I plan my next steps

## **9. Do a BRAIN checklist**

- Build a safe environment
- Recognize diversity in the classroom
- Assessment must be formative, authentic and ongoing
- Instructional strategies should be a palette of opportunities
- New models

"We've got to be growing and open to new ideas," Perez said. "That's why teaching is such an adventure. Each day you walk into the classroom, you never know what you're going to get."

## **10. Simplify**

Perez suggests framing every lesson in a similar format, but executing it differently each time. First activate the learners by making them curious and developing a need-to-know. Then, let them dig into the content in an exploratory phase that takes them deeply into rich content. Last, help scaffold students' broader understanding by helping them integrate it with what they already know. Some metacognitive questions that can get them

thinking this way include: What part of the lesson did you like the best? What part was the most difficult for you? What do you think that was? What do you think you can do today to help yourself stay focused?

“If we don’t give our kids time to reflect, to connect, to marinate on the information, they’re going to regurgitate what’s right there in front of them without even thinking,” Perez said. Reflection and rehearsal of what was learned is crucial to move information from [working memory into long-term memory](#).

### **11. Chunk Information**

Make information more easily digestible for students. “We need to be more purposeful in our delivery of information,” Perez said. Too often teachers deliver an entire lesson without letting students move or discuss once. Kids will give up if they are overloaded with facts, and chunking provides a way to pause and let students think over what they’ve learned. Breaks to assimilate information are crucial for mastery.

“Lesson mastery means students have mastered the content when they do something substantive with the content beyond echoing it,” Perez said.

### **12. Props**

Perez keeps a box of props for when she’s teaching. She often throws something to a child when it’s his turn to talk so he has something to focus on. She says this works particularly well for kids with attention problems, as well as for the tactile learners.

### **13. Breaks**

Short video clips can be a great brain break. A great clip can be interpreted in multiple ways. “You’re fostering divergent thinking,” Perez said.

### **14. Post-Its**

Post-It note discussions are a good way to get all students involved without making anyone uncomfortable by putting them on the spot. Ask an open-ended question. It could be an activator at the beginning, a marinator in the middle, or even a summarizer to test for understanding at the end of a lesson. Students jot down their answers to the prompt on Post-Its. English Language learners or special needs students could write just one word or draw something. Then students share in pairs. “Even the most reticent learner is OK sharing one-on-one,” Perez said. Post all the responses on a graffiti board and pull out some trends.

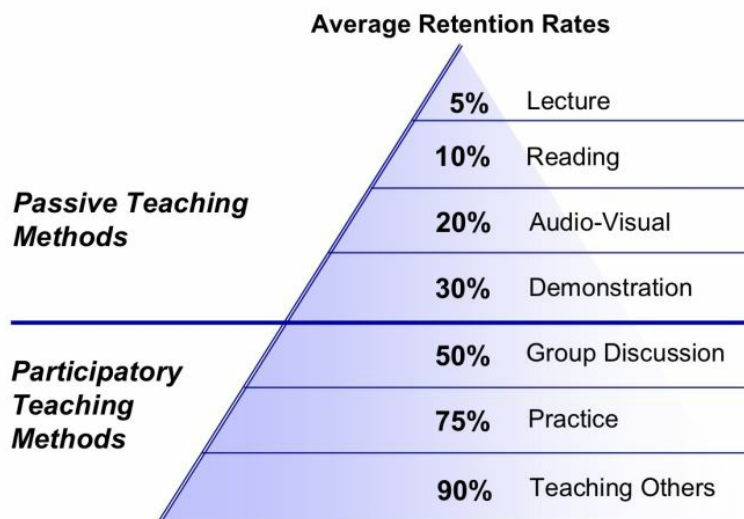
### **15. Make Snowballs**

The Snowball brain break is one of Perez’ favorite ways to summarize learning at the end of a lesson (and should be done when students are on their way to recess or at the end of the day). Students write answers to a prompt on a piece of paper. On the count of three, they throw their “snowball” randomly up and away (but not at anyone). Then everyone grabs a snowball that landed near them. “It’s a way you can purposefully pause, have them reflect and make connections,” Perez said. She uses it in all subjects, sometimes asking students to write three new vocabulary words they learned, or three successes they had in that lesson, or three questions. “Students love it and it’s inclusionary because it’s anonymous,” Perez said. Students also get to see one another’s thinking in this activity.

### **16. Guessing Games**

When slightly boring content must be covered, create a need-to-know in students by having them predict the answers. In her session at Learning and the Brain, Perez demonstrated this by reporting out the results of a [National Training Laboratories](#) 30-year longitudinal study on inquiry-based teaching. Researchers looked at seven teaching approaches and their impact on retention and transfer. In her training, Perez asked participants to break into pairs and predict the order before she delivered the information. Participants were invested in the answers because they had debated and reordered together. They were actively listening for [the answers](#).

# The Learning Pyramid\*



\*Adapted from National Training Laboratories. Bethel, Maine

The Learning Pyramid adapted from the one developed by the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. ([World Bank](#))

Researchers found that when [students teach one another](#) they get the most benefit — 90 percent of the information is retained and transferred. The next most effective approach is to practice by doing, followed by discussion, a demonstration modeling the concept to the student, auditory-visual approaches, reading something verbatim to students and, finally, the least effective approach: [lecture](#), with just 5 percent retention.

The results of this study point to how important it is for students to manipulate and think about the information. “If the teacher does all the interacting with the material, the teacher’s brain, not the students’ brains, will grow,” Perez said. That’s why Perez advocates that teachers have a large toolkit of approaches to get students thinking, speaking, writing, touching, building, listening and, most importantly, doing something with the content.

## 17. Balanced Inquiry

Lectures do have a time and a place, but they are far more effective when they are interactive. Perez likes [Harvey Silver’s guide for an effective lecture](#): connect new knowledge to existing knowledge, organize the materials into chunks, dual code the information so it’s stored in multiple places and exercise the brain.

“It’s a matter of balance to keep the engagement alive,” Perez said. She doesn’t advocate that teachers always have students teach one another just because it has a high retention and transfer rate; doing all of one thing is never effective. Instead, she says, it’s about a balanced use of all the inquiry approaches.

## 18. Mind-streaming

Mind-streaming is another fun brain break activity that also gives students a chance to recall what they’ve learned and teach one another. Have students randomly pair up and then each person teaches the other the most important things they’ve learned in that lesson. Each person will remember different things, and when there is overlap that will reinforce the concept. It’s simple, effective and doesn’t require any teacher preparation because students are teaching one another.

## 19. Be Interactive

Perez begs educators to always try to make tasks engaging and interactive by giving students enough knowledge, giving them the language to express it, giving them an authentic reason for the interaction they’re engaged in, prime them with interesting questions, establish a community of learners that support each other, and give students a clear understanding of the task. If these elements are part of every class, she says, all students can be successful.

## 20. HOPE

The last tip Perez offered educators is to have HOPE, an acronym she uses for Have Only Positive Expectations.

Explore: [Teaching Strategies](#), [inquiry learning](#), [student engagement](#), [student motivation](#)  
[3 Comments](#)

Related

[Research-based Strategies to Help Children Develop Self-Control](#)

[Can Teaching Spatial Skills Help Bridge the STEM Gender Gap?](#)

[How to Determine if Student Engagement is Leading to Learning](#)

[Strategies to Ensure Introverted Students Feel Valued at School](#)

[How Engineering Class in 9th Grade Can Excite Diverse Learners](#)

[How Harnessing the Positive Side of Stress Can Change Student Mindsets](#)

Powered by



