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### Engaging Endings: Finishing the Year with Flair

As the end of another academic year approaches, professors and students alike begin to feel the doldrums of fatigue and routine weighing down upon them. This period of the year, however, can be one of the most meaningful for instructors and pupils alike with a few motivational strategies.

Professional development opportunities abound as the spring term winds down, and taking part in these workshops, seminars, and presentations can result in a real boost of pedagogical motivation and inspiration. Nothing is quite so invigorating as learning about improving and supplementing one's classroom craft. With new techniques and ideas, professors of all subjects can breathe new life into a time that is traditionally considered lacking.

Additionally, students can be compelled toward greater mastery with simple environmental changes. Whether that alteration means taking a class outside, moving the desks into a new arrangement, or simply adding a dash of color to a drab room, making the learning environment different will result in a certain level of neurological refreshment. This reinvigoration can give a "second wind" to a tired, ready-to-be-done class. Be warned, however: Some students with various learning differences like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder or Asperger's Autism can become distraught by new or unexpected setting changes. Considering one's audience is a good idea for any classroom-level decision.

Another method to re-engage a lackluster class can be found in adopting a fresh approach. Classes get accustomed to certain routines and procedures, and while there is safety in such expectations, a certain degree of boredom can also be an unintended result. Changing the order of class tasks, throwing in critical thinking discussion topics, or even trying out some physical or kinesthetic strategies can pull a ho-hum lesson back into the realm of engagement.

Yes, in some respects, using tactile strategies means thinking more like a school teacher and less like a collegiate expert. Getting students out of their seats (and their comfort zones) may seem like an approach better suited for secondary education, but the formed connections, both mental and interpersonal, make these types of activities well worth the time and effort. Using something as simple as a foam ball to facilitate review and reinforcement can liven up even the most distinguished and reserved students, for example. By "mixing it up" with exercise and excited discourse, students experience the added benefit of greater blood flow to their brains, research indicates. The new neurons and synapses created by motion- and touch-based learning can bring about great gains, as well.

No matter what content is being taught, students of all ages possess a desire to connect with their teacher. Some professors believe in maintaining distance from their students, and with good reason. The stories of allegations and accusations lobbed at professors for being too "cozy" with their pupils are enough to scare anyone away from emotional investment. But to reach those being taught, it is imperative to demonstrate a certain level of humanity. Stepping down off the professorial pedestal once in a while to share a

meal with students or play a couple of rounds of nine-ball isn't endangering anyone's image; it is, however, a great way to foster positive yet professional relationships with those who learn from us. When students see professors as more than just walking repositories of knowledge, research states that they are more apt to perform. Making cautious but meaningful connections with students yields positive academic and personal achievements for them.

At some colleges, administrators have encouraged professors to share mealtimes with students by offering incentives or performance-based rewards. At other institutions, there simply exists the expectation that professors and students will share eating space with one another as part of the community culture. Either way, sitting down to eat with class members can help to forge relevant bonds with them.

For those who believe that the traditional methods work best, though, there remains a glimmer of hope. Sometimes revamping old methods with new tools can result in end-of-the-year increases. Experiential education has been around since the 1930s (or before, depending on whom we cite). Giving students the opportunity to show their learning using technology or alternative assessments is another way to inspire a lethargic class.

Older tools like word processors or presentation software are fine, but to stimulate the interest of learners, it becomes necessary to speak their language. Allowing movies to be made, podcasts to be recorded, or even games to be designed can spring students back to life. What's more, they will appreciate an educator who relates well and offers them the chance to shine digitally.

While an expectation of rigor and structure exists at most colleges (as it should), those classes where students are given options are often the most memorable. Managed choice is not a new idea, but when students choose the method to demonstrate mastery from two or three other options, authentic learning is often the result. Greater student buy-in occurs, according to various studies, and, therefore, student ownership of the assignment peaks. Giving choices late in the year, when students are most stressed about final exams and big projects for their other courses, allows some mental flexibility to students who are already under duress. With the last day of classes creeping ever closer, students and professors alike need motivation. By seizing professional development opportunities, modifying classroom conditions and approaches, engaging students beyond the academic setting, and re-tooling old ideas with fresh techniques, the end of the year is capable of becoming exciting, memorable, and positive for everyone.

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