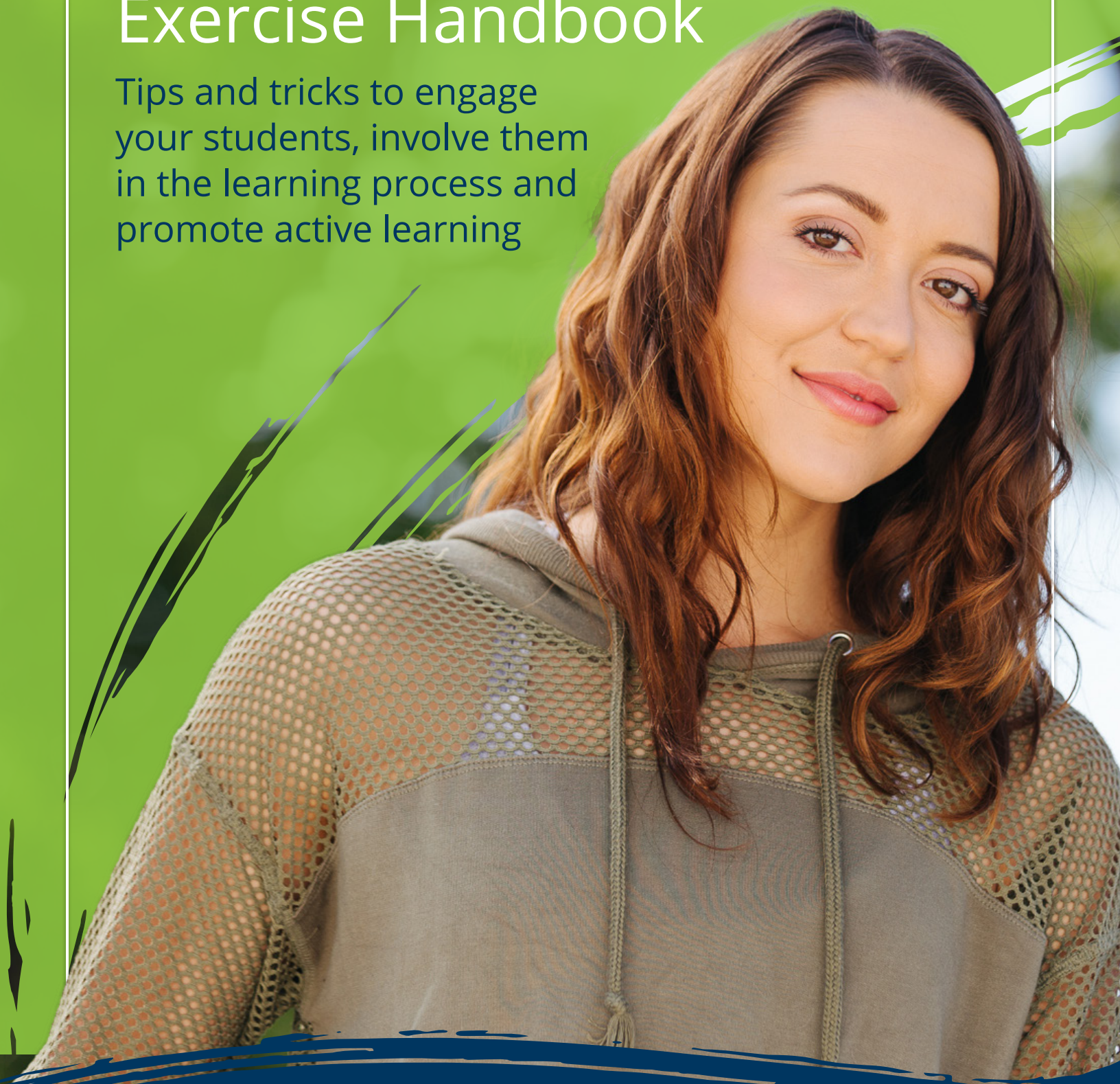


# The Student Engagement Exercise Handbook

Tips and tricks to engage your students, involve them in the learning process and promote active learning



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# Curated Tips from Your Peers

As a busy educator, there are only so many hours in the day. Unfortunately, this can make it difficult when it's time to find new and exciting ways to engage your students.

To help you take back your time, bolster instruction and empower your students, we asked your peers to share their go-to student engagement exercises.

Read on to get four peer-tested tips—along with some useful implementation and assessment ideas to help you bring these strategies into your own classroom!

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## Foster Classroom Communication

The first week of class is critical for establishing a connection with your students, bringing them up to speed on your syllabus and familiarizing them with their course materials.

Still, amidst the hustle and bustle of the first few classes, it can be easy to overlook what a great opportunity the start of the semester is to ensure you can consistently engage students throughout their learning journey. How? By creating clear, concise communication with your students—from day one.

According to [one poll](#), which asked students what kind of actions a great professor takes, they shared the following:

Question: What Traits Make a Professor Your Favorite?	Question: What Advice Would You Give on How to Become a Student's Favorite Professor?
The instructor is straightforward—making expectations clear	Show students that you value them as people
There is availability for help outside the classroom	Be personal and relatable—share your story with students
Students are treated as people, not numbers	Get feedback from students
The instructor goes the extra mile to ensure students have what they need	Help struggling students
 Students receive detailed feedback on areas they struggle with	Keep communication open 

To help you optimize your efforts and empower your students, consider incorporating the following communication activities into your teaching strategy:



### Communication Checklist:

- ☐ Include resources, links, expectations, contact information, etc. in your [course syllabus](#)—and emphasize the importance of reaching out to you and classmates across the semester.
- ☐ After sending the syllabus, have students send self-introductions that acknowledge they've read it and require students to engage with at least two other students from your class.
- ☐ If you use an online learning platform, post weekly reflection prompts where students can discuss their thoughts and engage with you.
- ☐ Provide students with a weekly announcement that includes a list of tasks due that week, a recap of the prior week, notable updates and a reminder of office hours and locations.





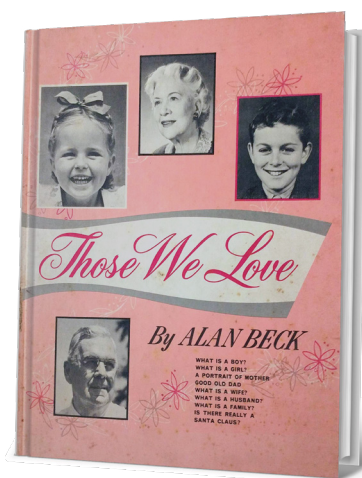
## Leverage Controversy in Your Lessons

It's no secret that [passionate students](#) are engaged students. When learners are invested in a topic, they're much more likely to engage in your class activities, lessons and coursework. One of the best ways to get students invested in a topic: **Make it controversial.** [Research shows](#) that quality discussion on a divisive topic can lead to:

- Growth in tolerance for outside points of view
- Interest in politics and knowledge on the current political landscape
- Increased critical thinking skills
- Improved attention, creativity, motivation and achievement

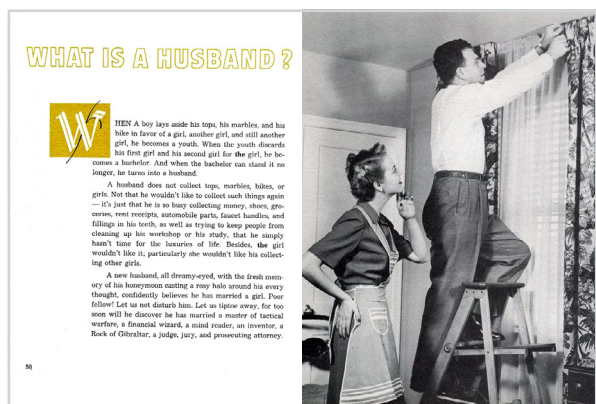
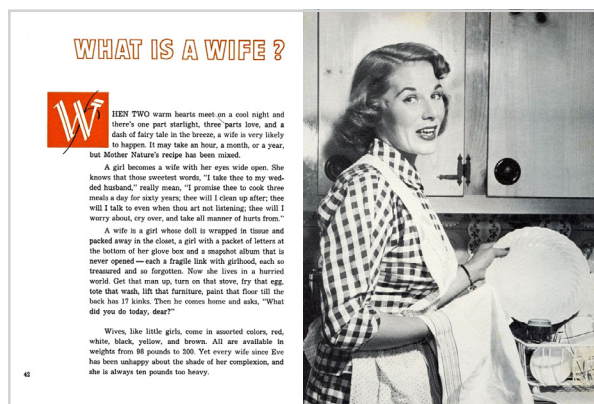
Wondering how to incorporate controversy into your lesson plan? Consider "[Those We Love](#)," a book exploring gender roles in 1960's America. Written by Alan Beck, this book is a treasure trove of outdated stereotypes like:

*"A wife is a girl whose doll is wrapped in tissue and packed away in the closet, a girl with a packet of letters at the bottom of her glove box and a snapshot album that is never opened—each a fragile link with girlhood, each so treasured and so forgotten. Now she lives in a hurried world: get that man up, turn on that stove, fry that egg, tote that wash, lift that furniture, paint that floor till the back has 17 kinks. Then he comes home and asks, 'What did you do today, dear?'"*



*"Good old dad and his hard-earned paycheck are usually taken for granted, like the foundations of his house. Dad is the only one who gets told what the family is going to do, does most of the work, pays all the cost—and it wasn't his idea in the first place."*

*"Wives, like little girls, come in assorted colors, red, white, black, yellow, and brown. All are available in weights from 98 pounds to 200. Yet every wife since Eve has been unhappy about the shade of her complexion, and she is ten pounds too heavy."*



## Teaching with Controversy (cont.)

While this book is no doubt controversial, how can you leverage it to better engage your students? To find out, we asked peers how they would incorporate it into their classrooms:



### History

***"I like to talk about 'What's for dinner' in my history classes."***

– [Sherri Singer](#), instructor at Alamance Community College

- 1 How much time did people spend preparing meals?
- 2 What is the content?
- 3 How does your social class impact your meal today and historically?



### Law and Ethics

***"A key piece of [my] course is for students to reflect on their own biases and develop the ability to look at situations from an objective position. This book would be a great tool to facilitate a discussion related to working with the elderly population."***

– [Maggie Major](#), instructor at Harrisburg Area Community College

- 1 What surprised you when you read the book?
- 2 What connections can you make between the book and your patients' behaviors in the healthcare environment?
- 3 How and where might you use your new knowledge?



### Psychology

***"As a psych teacher, my goal would be to talk about the book in terms of the topic of Gender Roles. I'd like students to have a better understanding of the roles women, men, boys and girls were expected to fulfill in that era and how those roles have changed or not changed. Here's an activity I would try. It's an informal content analysis."***

– [Dr. Michael Britt](#), host of Psychology podcast, [The Pysch Files](#)

- 1 Have the students work in groups of 2, or at most 3.
- 2 Ask them to read through the text of "What is a boy?" and pull out all the adjectives and adverbs to see how boys are described by the author.
- 3 Ask them to read through the text of "What is a girl?" and pull out all the adjectives and adverbs to see how girls are described by the author.
- 4 The same thing can be done with "What is a wife?" and "What is a husband?"
- 5 Ask students to share what they've learned about how boys, girls, husbands and wives are "supposed" to act according to the author.

The results of this exercise could lead to a discussion on the effect books like this have on children as they grow:

- 1 Does what you've found explain, at least partially, why boys are often not as aware of their emotions as girls?
- 2 Does it explain why girls are often reluctant to be assertive?



## Activities for Any Discipline

I would add prompts to a discussion board, not limited to online courses. Discussion boards, in both seated and online courses, help me to ease students into the idea of reflecting upon a topic and then sharing their perspectives.... They just need to be asked their opinions and be provided a safe forum in which to share their thoughts.

**[Donna Sue Shellman](#)**

*Instructor, Gaston College*

Assign a creative writing project asking students to re-write this piece to match our current reality—which would lead them to think more deeply and critically about gender role stereotypes in our own era.

**[Diane Carter](#)**

*Instructor, University of Idaho*

Evaluate "then" versus "now" and how gender roles, etc. have evolved (or not) since that time. In fact, some social behaviors may be returning since publishing as history repeats itself.

**[Donna Sue Shellman](#)**

*Instructor, Gaston College*



## Create Connections with Icebreaker Activities

While most instructors think of icebreakers as a quick way for students to introduce themselves at the start of the semester, there's a wide range of applications that can be used to demonstrate course content, concepts, expectations and more. In fact, [icebreakers](#) have been shown to:

- Help create a relaxed environment where students share ideas and participate more fully in class
- Encourage students to share ownership for the learning environment of the class
- Build rapport among students and foster a productive learning environment
- Prepare students for collaborative group work

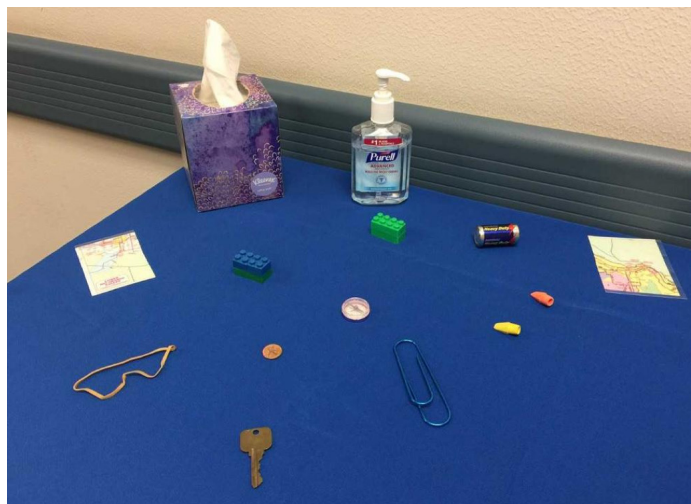
Icebreakers do more than help the class get acquainted. Here are some creative activities instructors have used to drive engagement and acclimate their students.



### Items on the Table: A Teachable Moment

**Purpose:** To teach students to be more aware and observant—[crucial soft skills](#) for success in class and in the workforce.

- 1 Place a signup sheet on a table and ask students to write their names
- 2 On the same table, place several small objects (see picture) by the signup sheet
- 3 Ask your students to organize themselves into small groups
- 4 Then, ask them to work together to see if they can remember what objects were placed by the signup sheet



### Understanding Students: The Paper Plate Activity

**Purpose:** To give students the chance to reflect on what they want from the course while having an immediate voice in the class. Instructors also get valuable insight into what students are looking for from your class.

- 1 Have students pick up a paper plate as they enter the classroom
- 2 Display 3 questions on the board like, "what do you want to learn in this class?"
- 3 Students only write the number and the answer to the question on their paper plate—no talking is allowed; no names are recorded on the paper plates
- 4 After 2–3 minutes, collect the paper plates and share as many responses as time will allow



## Icebreaker Activities (cont.)



### Five Finger Introduction

**Purpose:** A fun way to introduce yourself to students and facilitate introductions between students.

- 1 Draw a hand on the board
- 2 Label the fingers on the hand accordingly:
  - A Thumb:** Something you'd love to discuss or learn today
  - B Index:** Introduce yourself: name, major, a one-word description of you as a student
  - C Middle:** Someone you look up to
  - D Ring:** Someone you love
  - E Pinky:** Something you'd like to be a little "more" or "less" of
- 3 Have students introduce themselves using the "five finger" prompt



### Syllabus Speed Dating

**Purpose:** To help students get acquainted with each other while getting them to read and understand key elements of your course syllabus.

- 1 Organize two rows of chairs to face each other (more rows can be used for larger classes)
- 2 Have students sit across from one another
- 3 As the instructor, ask two questions per turn—one question covering something on your syllabus and the other covering something personal (what's your favorite hobby?, what motivates you?, etc.)
- 4 After each question, the students in one row move to the next chair and repeat the process with the new student across from them







## Make Learning Exciting

While the need to adapt to [changes in student behavior](#) is nothing new, today, those changes are happening more rapidly than ever. As new distractions like smartphones, tablets and more increasingly distract students in and out of the classroom, instructors are left with the challenge of pivoting their instruction to compensate for this.

One solution your peers are experimenting with? Finding inventive ways to make learning exciting—turning distractions into awesome learning opportunities.

You've likely seen the impact of smartphones and their potential to hinder classroom engagement in your own professional experience, but what if you used students' devices to play educational learning games? What if instead of traditional lectures that passively involve students, you used questions related to students' real-world experiences to solicit better responses?

Check out some creative ideas your peers are sharing to help limit distraction by making learning an awesome experience for their students:



### Educational Games

[Kahoot](#): A tool to administer quizzes, discussions or surveys in real time

[Quizlet Live](#): An activity where teams of students work together, racing to learn the material in a Quizlet study set



### Twitter Pages

Twitter was [shown to improve](#) communication between instructors and students, encourage collaboration, promote prompt feedback, aid in completing tasks, communicate expectations and increase respect for diversity.



### GIFS and Memes

GIFs and memes [foster connections](#) to students, put them at ease, affirm their identities and create a sense of belonging by referencing a relatable piece of media.



### Padlet

[Padlet](#) creates an online bulletin board to display information for any topic. Instructors can add images, links, videos and more—and use it in the classroom or online courses.



### Nearpod

[Nearpod](#) gives students a code to a lesson that is synced to all devices. Instructors can evaluate student responses and clarify concepts missed, encouraging full student participation.



### Small Groups with Problem Solving Activities

Students break into small groups to discuss topics, prepare for class presentations or work on problem solving projects. Professors can take a few minutes to talk with different groups of students in order to build and strengthen relationships.



### Poll Everywhere

[Poll Everywhere](#) can be used to ask the class a question/survey. Watch as the chart updates automatically with student responses. This is great for students who are afraid to talk during a discussion, and it engages them in real time from their digital devices.

# Ready to Explore Even More Helpful Student Engagement Tips and Solutions?

Check out our [Empowered Educator Series](#)—a collection of peer-led discussions on topics like active learning, online engagement strategies, flipping the classroom and more. Additionally, you can access our on-demand library of webinar recordings to even more tips and tricks dedicated to empowering your instruction and enriching your students.

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