

What Students Truly Mean When They Say They're Bored (And What to Do About It)

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Today's guest blogger is Erin Westgate, a social psychologist and assistant professor of psychology at the University of Florida. You can follow her on Twitter @ErinWestgate.

How do I get kids to pay attention in class?

When I was in 5th grade, I competed fiercely with my classmate Travis. Not to win multiplication races or come out on top in spelling. Instead, we'd ignore our teacher to focus on our real passion: designing ever-more-elaborate plans for the perfect mousetrap.

We were far from the only bored students finding ways to occupy time in ways our teachers didn't always appreciate. School can be a particularly boring place for students. For instance, middle schoolers report being significantly **more bored** at school (32 percent) than they are at home (23 percent). Such feelings can trap students; bored students not only **do worse**, but performing poorly may lead students to feel even more bored down the road!

When we see "bad" behavior, it's tempting to blame the person. But bored students aren't bad students. Almost **80 percent of boredom** is due to the situations we find ourselves in, not to who we are as individuals. Boredom alerts us that what we're doing doesn't feel meaningful or that we're having trouble paying attention. And it does the same for our students.

In small doses, boredom is a healthy warning that something is off in our environment, in the same way that pain alerts us that something is wrong with our bodies. The challenge for educators isn't fixing boredom; it's preventing it in the first place. Here are some ways to fend off boredom while teaching:

Dial in on difficulty. If activities are either too hard or too easy, students may struggle to pay attention. While it may seem obvious that easy things can be boring, so can overly difficult challenges. A student who proclaims, "I'm bored" may actually be struggling. Scaffolding difficult concepts and providing individualized assignments help students learn to calibrate.

Make it meaningful. Even when appropriately challenged, students may feel bored if they don't care. Meaning is subjective; there's no right or wrong. Rather, it comes from feeling that what you're doing is valuable, makes sense, and has a purpose. **Research** shows that helping students draw connections between class materials and their own personal goals, for instance, can boost interest and performance.

Gamify lessons. Many fun teaching strategies **reframe activities** to make them more meaningful, more challenging, or both (e.g., turning review sessions into a "game," adding time limits to "race" against). And keep in mind, we all have trouble paying attention when we're hungry, tired, or preoccupied with pressing matters.

Boredom in the classroom—or anywhere—stems from a **lack of meaning and attention**. Rather than dismissing it or looking for easy fixes, we can use student boredom as helpful feedback for what is (and isn't) working in our classes.

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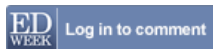
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