

# Getting Through - How to Avoid Student Disengagement

Andy Greenhill, a university lecturer in the United Kingdom and CEO of Tenkai Consulting, explains 5 approaches to avoid disengagement from your students (relevant also to anyone in any leadership position) and how to re-engage them if it does happen.

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*"No written word, no spoken plea can teach our youth what they should be, nor all the books on all the shelves, it's what the teachers are themselves." Anon (popularised by John Wooden)*

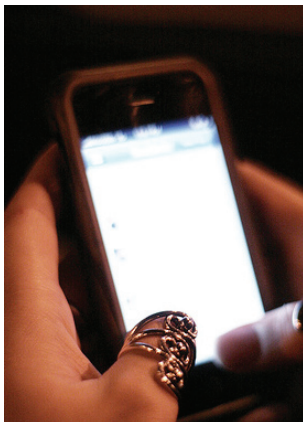
In a university class I was teaching, a very capable and intelligent student arrived late and without the required class materials. He proceeded to drift off to sleep three times during individual exercise time before starting to play a game on his mobile phone under the desk. Enough was enough.

For a teacher, there are few things more disheartening, more exhausting and more frustrating than a totally disengaged student. All too often it takes only one such student to negatively impact an entire class. Challenging students are the topic of staff room discussions everywhere and one of the largest contributors to educator stress and discontent. Below are five tips on how to avoid student disengagement and how to address it when the challenge arises.

## 1) 'What do you want from me?'

**Expectations:** Conflict, anger and disappointment in life can often be traced back to mismatched expectations. You expected something of someone else that they didn't do; someone else expected something from you that you didn't do. These mismatches are often easily avoided by being explicit about what each party expects and gaining an agreement to honour what has been shared.

At the beginning of each course it is worth investing some time asking each class what they expect from you as their teacher and what they think is fair for you to expect from them. Discuss each expectation in turn, adjusting them where necessary until you have a consensus on a list for each party. Express your agreement and gain agreement from the class to honour these expectations over your time together, then hold yourself and your class accountable to live up to the agreements.



## 2) 'How bad do you want it?'

**Commitment:** As with all things, balance is essential. A thoroughly committed teacher and totally uncommitted student will lead to failure. Similarly, a totally committed student and thoroughly uncommitted teacher

will result in the same outcome. A successful outcome is dependent on a matched commitment from both parties.

As a teacher, it is critical that we communicate and demonstrate our commitment to the success of each student. Once this is established, we are in a position to discuss their side of the equation. This is their jigsaw puzzle; we can give them the pieces and tell them what the picture looks like but they have to put the pieces together on their own. Our commitment alone will not get them through the course. They

have to do their part or they will not succeed.

**3) 'It's up to you' Choice:** A strong sense of personal responsibility is facilitated by accepting and acknowledging choices. When speaking to disengaged students, let them know that it is entirely their choice how to act and behave. Explain that all actions and inactions have consequences which are best considered before any action is taken. Share with them that they must understand and be ready to accept the consequences of their chosen behaviour. How they behave today determines where they will end up tomorrow.

**4) 'Yes you can' Belief:** One of the greatest gifts that a teacher can seed in a student is a strong sense of self-belief. Explicitly state your belief in their capacity to succeed, tell them that you know that everyone of them has the ability to pass and operate from this belief at all times. This has the effect of causing the student to reconsider any negative self images or beliefs about what they can accomplish, and instead tap into more of their potential. It also encourages the educator to look for alternative ways to support a struggling student instead of writing them off too early in the process.

## 5) 'Why won't they just listen?' Be human:

By far the greatest asset an educator can leverage with a student is a powerful connection. When a student really feels that their teacher cares deeply about their growth and development, they become more responsive to your influence. To build this connection, the student must feel understood. In most cases you can achieve this by listening to them and really hearing what they have to say.

This is best achieved one-to-one; when there is no one around whom they feel they need to impress. This allows both teacher and the student to be really authentic. In the martial arts, we refer to a teacher as Sensei which we take to mean 'one who has gone before'. When connecting with your students, don't be averse to sharing experiences of your own that they can associate with, it will show them that you are human and facilitate a stronger bond.

## Connection

So I asked my sleepy, disengaged student to stay behind at the end of class for a chat. Our discussion was guided by the principles above and in our next class he arrived on time with all the class materials, concentrated on the lecture and then worked diligently on the set work. I again asked him to stay behind after class but this time I acknowledged his change in behaviour and genuinely thanked him for making the shift. He thanked me in return and had performed well ever since.

Balance exists in all things. Just as disengaged students are disheartening, exhausting and frustrating; engaged students are rewarding, energising and life-affirming. By applying the principles above we can continue to experience the truth; that helping the leaders of tomorrow realise more of their true potential is a real privilege.