

Strategies to Engage the Adolescent Brain

In all classes, our students possess brains that are in varying degrees of development and as such
- we encounter vast and diverse ranges of emotions on a daily basis; it's not our students' fault, it is purely natural and the challenge for us is to cater for them

To quote Andrew Fuller, "Adolescents are not little adults. Their brains are anatomically different. They are all tuned up for emotions but not so well tuned for planning, controlling impulses and forward thinking."

Because their brain circuitry is not complete and still developing, they haven't the capacity to consistently make good decisions. Their decision making control centre, the prefrontal cortex is not wired up. Often we believe our children **won't** do things on a regular basis, when the reality is that they **can't** because of their formative brains.

Professor Chap Clark believes adolescence takes young people through a journey of discovering

- "Who am I?" (Identity)
- "Do I matter?" (Autonomy)
- "Where do I fit?" (Belonging)

Adolescents are at a precious and private time in their lives and we need to be aware of that in our teaching
- many of their behaviours may seem contradictory, but that's adolescence
- their image is all important to them; they are concerned about their hair, body shape, and most of all how they are perceived and accepted by their peers
- they don't care what we know until they know we care; they can consider us as caring, threatening or irrelevant should we choose to ignore their desperate search for their identity
- they need to be acknowledged for good things publicly, but admonished privately; at times many of us let fly from the front of the class for individual inappropriate behaviours, but fail to realise that we have mortally ruined our relationship with the particular student; we have overtly questioned their image and as such crossed the line of trust. Also, the rest of the class don't need to hear it
- avoid at all costs comparing individual students; doing this arouses their resentment
- our judgmental actions may well have been OK in our formative years, but not in the 21st century

How many of us understand that the majority of students make decisions on their subject selections based on "the teachers who like them and are there for them", rather than their individual liking of a particular subject; we may choose to ignore this or find it insulting, but it's a proven reality.

How we have conversations with teenagers makes an amazing difference

- Start with Curiosity, not Certainty
- Identify Sameness, not Difference
- Focus on Purpose, not Method
- Everyone has something special, expect it and respect it
- Purpose conversations become exploratory, inclusive and inspire shared methods

The following strategies have proven to cater very well for our adolescent students

- through class discussion establish an agreed set expectations of behaviours and consequences for not meeting them; BUT be discerning with individual students who may be enduring very difficult private lives – all of us come to school sometimes with weighty things happening in our lives
- privately, one on one, reward our students or if necessary discuss inappropriate behaviours
- listen to and seek to understand them, don't resort to telling and lecturing
- use thinking tools to provide pathways and baby steps for our students' brain functioning such as Think, Pair, Share, and Pluses, Minuses, Interesting and Y Diagram and Six Thinking Hats and Know, What, How, Learnt and The Hand

- google “**Visible Thinking**” at Project Zero, Harvard University, for many more thinking tools that will assist our students to link their thinking and learning; it’s not that our students “won’t” , it’s all about that they really “can’t”; they haven’t the brain circuitry as yet to genuinely fulfil our instructions

The constants that we can ensure, are our attitudes and behaviours

- aim to create considered options so that students feel they have choice
- listen, don’t argue, it’s futile
- be flexible, interested and in the learning zone
- be present and there for our students when they need us, not so much when we think they need us
- be developmental and non judgmental with respect

“Adolescence is a condition that improves daily” MW