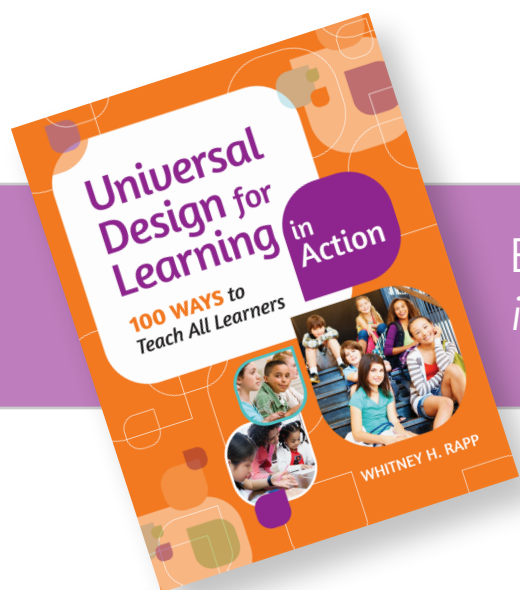


7 Budget-Friendly Ways to

Promote Student Engagement



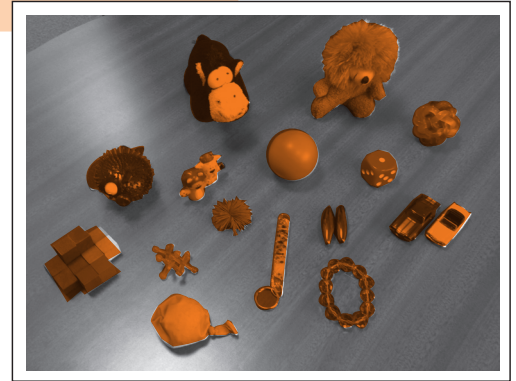
Excerpted from *Universal Design for Learning in Action* by Whitney H. Rapp



Fidget Toys

Have a variety of fidget toys available. Some students process auditory information more efficiently if simultaneously handling a small toy that keeps their hands busy. Collect many different kinds to appeal to many different sensory needs. Some ideas include small plush animals; hacky sacks; spiky rubber or squishy foam balls; one-piece wooden puzzles; toy metal cars with spinning wheels; sparkly liquid-filled tubes; beaded bracelets; or balloons filled with sand, rice, or flour. Fidget toys should be soothing, yet sturdy. Avoid toys that light up too brightly or make noise. Encourage students to try different kinds during different activities. Once you establish ground rules about safe and respectful use (e.g., no throwing, use a maximum of two toys at a time), it often takes little time for students to settle in to their favorite toy or even decide they do not need one at all. I have even found my college students stay engaged longer with their fidgets!

Try This



Fidgets

Why This Works

- **Research base.** Use of fidget toys enhances passive learning experiences, facilitates communication between both sides of the brain, and stimulates the release of chemicals vital to learning (Zawitz, 2009). Stalvey and Brasell (2006) also found that stress balls can provide the physical and sensory stimulation needed to focus attention.
- **Student involvement.** Students have choice of use, may contribute fidgets to the collection or make their own, and should help keep them clean and maintained.
- **Reasonable use.** Fidget toys are inexpensive, especially if homemade, and readily available at any retail store or online. Keeping a basketful in the classroom that is accessible to every student is simple.
- **Expectations maintained.** Students are expected to use the fidget toys safely and respectfully, as with any classroom materials. Fidget toys are used to engage in learning and work, not be excused from it.
- **Equity and universality.** A choice of fidgets are available to all students at all times.

IF ... THEN

If the fidgets are used to enhance the processing of new information, then this can also be a strategy for **Input**.

INPUT





Professional Equipment

Supply professional gear for student activities

when possible. Materials and equipment that are close to those used in the field by professionals bring a real-life feel to the task at hand. And they increase the feeling of significance, importance, and application of the knowledge and skills to future careers. For example, lab coats, nonprescription eyeglasses, folders and notebooks with company logos, ledgers, and forms in triplicate engage students as professionals in their work.



Try This



Lab coat

Why This Works

- **Research base.** Supplying professional materials when possible engages students by making the learning more meaningful and contextualized, which facilitates generalization of new knowledge to other settings (Rapp, 1997).
- **Student involvement.** Students can use the equipment and materials independently. They do not require any more preparation than typical supplies. Students should have the opportunity to reflect on the impact the materials has on their engagement.
- **Reasonable use.** These are inexpensive items that can be donated or found at thrift stores or garage sales. Triplicate paper that can be run through the printer to create custom forms is available from office supply stores.
- **Expectations maintained.** Students are achieving the same standards and mastering the same skills, but they are engaging with the tasks in a different way.
- **Equity and universality.** Connection to real-life situations is important for the learning styles and engagement of diverse learners. Being able to picture themselves in a particular role (e.g., scientist, business executive, teacher, historian) introduces every student to career choices.

► IF ... THEN ◀

If professional equipment is used so that student learning is generalized and applied in other settings, then this can also be a strategy for **Output**.

OUTPUT





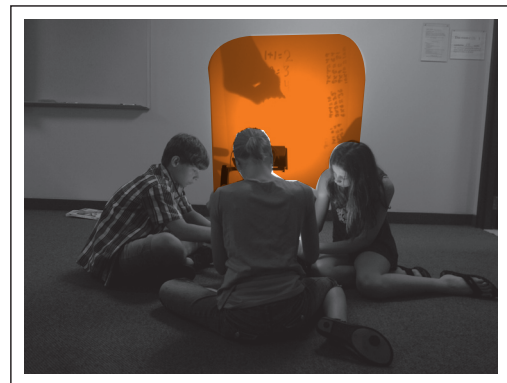
Writing Surfaces

Offer clever things to write on. Familiar tasks in the classroom, such as practicing spelling words or solving math equations, can be more engaging if atypical or “retro” materials are used for writing out the answers. Clipboards, for example, can be used in any spot in the classroom, so writing can occur in fun places such as in bean bag chairs or in window seats rather than at a desk. There also is novelty in equipment that is hardly ever seen anymore, such as overhead projectors or label makers. An overhead projector placed in a learning center with transparencies and markers creates a new way to display work to peers in small groups. Punching out words or math products on a label maker can renew students’ interest in a task.

Try This



Label maker



Overhead projector

Why This Works

- **Research base.** Classrooms that embrace UDL offer a variety of materials (both high-tech and low-tech) for presentation, engagement, and response (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010).
- **Student involvement.** Once these items are set up and students are instructed in their use, students can use any of these materials or pieces of equipment independently. Students can complete rating scales on how engaging an activity is when using each material. This data, coupled with level of performance, should be shared with students to show how the materials have an impact on their learning.
- **Reasonable use.** A clipboard for each student (so anyone can use one at any time) is reasonable because they are inexpensive. Label makers are more expensive (about \$20–\$40 at office supply stores), but only a few are needed for the whole class to share. An overhead projector could be taken out of storage, and only one is needed for the whole class. Chances are there is a supply room full of them!
- **Expectations maintained.** The spelling words, math problems, or writing prompts have not changed, just the materials with which the students can present their responses.

(continued)



- **Equity and universality.** If these writing surfaces are offered to everyone, students are welcome to explore and make choices about what is most engaging for them. Making the effort to supply various materials shows all students in the class that you want every subject area to be refreshing and interesting.

► IF ... THEN ◀

If various tools are used so that students can better express themselves, then this can also be a strategy for **Output.**

OUTPUT



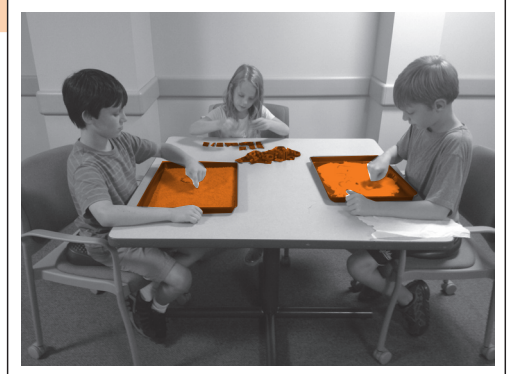


Tactile Activities

Offer tactile practice. When we think of reinforcing skills through more than one modality, we often think of auditory and visual means. Tactile activities, however, are seldom engaged. Tracing letters, spelling words, solving math problems, or drawing a picture in different materials (e.g., shaving cream, sand, rice, glue, finger paint, modeling clay) provides the brain with another way to learn. It is novel and stimulating—oh, and fun!



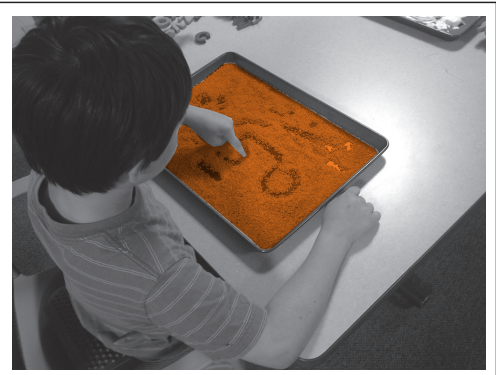
Try This



Group activities

Why This Works

- **Research base.** Willis (2006) explained that learning skills in more than one way—through more than one of the senses—increases neural pathways in the brain, making it easier for the information to be stored, used, and connected to other learning.
- **Student involvement.** Students can come up with ideas for different things to use. Trying them once or twice and having the students reflect on their use will help them decide if the mess and cleanup is worth it, or if it is feasible given the needs in the class. Peanut butter, for example, is a great new idea, but it is difficult to clean up and may be dangerous if anyone has a nut allergy.
- **Reasonable use.** Many items are very reasonably priced and readily available at a dollar store. Many of them are reusable (e.g., rice, beans, sand, clay).
- **Expectations maintained.** Using tactile materials means academic skills and cleanup skills are practiced!



Rice



Shaving cream



Engagement Through Content Instruction: Tactile Activities

- **Equity and universality.** Choice, of course, is important because some textures may be offensive to students with sensitive sensory needs. Writing in tactile materials on the desktop offers a way for students to create text even if they have difficulty grasping a pen or pencil.



Letters

► IF ... THEN ◀

If tactile activities are used to provide students with a different way to create a response, then this can also be a strategy for **Output.**

OUTPUT



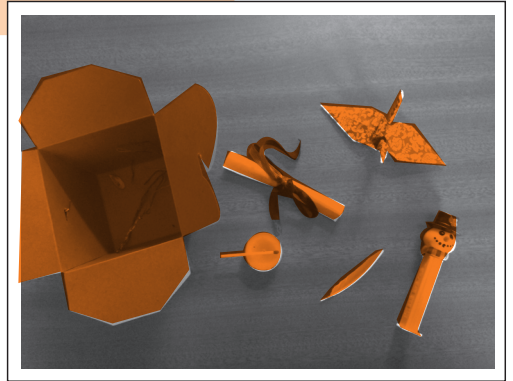


Bag of Writing Ideas

Have students fill a bag with items to prompt writing ideas. Some students struggle when it comes to thinking of a topic for creative writing. To support this process and make the writing experience more meaningful for your students, start out the school year by having them fill a paper lunch bag with small items at home that remind them of things they love, fun experiences, or interesting hobbies. They can keep the bags in their desks or in a writing center in the classroom. When they are prompted to write and find themselves stuck for a topic, encourage them to look through the items in their idea bags. The personal connection to the object often triggers a story to tell.



Try This



Bag of writing ideas



Why This Works

- **Research base.** Effective prompts are those that have a personal connection for the writer, allow for choice, and allow the writer to draw on experiences (Education Northwest, 2013).
- **Student involvement.** Students are involved in this strategy from beginning to end. They collect their own prompts to fill their bag, they decide which ones they will write about and in which order, and they are the experts on their own writing topics.
- **Reasonable use.** All you have to provide is a bag for the students to use.
- **Expectations maintained.** Students become more independent in the writing process because they do not rely on the teacher for a topic and are their own expert on the items in the bag.
- **Equity and universality.** This strategy is culturally responsive and is used to prompt creative expression regardless of supports used in the writing process.

IF ... THEN

If bags of writing ideas are used to provide a personal connection to writing assignments that helps students get started in expressing thoughts in writing, then this can also be a strategy for **Output**.

OUTPUT





Games

Collect board and card games. What's more engaging than a board game or card game—especially if there are many to choose from? Playing a game is an excellent way to reinforce many academic and social skills, but it does not feel like skill practice. There are several adapted games and game pieces to meet various physical, sensory, or cognitive needs, for example, large foam dice or dice with raised markers and numerals printed on each side, checker and chess pieces with pegs on the bottom that fit easily into holes on the board, and magnetic boards so pieces stay put.

Try This



Games

Why This Works

- **Research base.** Games are a fun and effective way to build skills, such as negotiating, taking turns, following rules, being a gracious winner or loser, sharing, patience, and strategizing (Lavoie, 2005a).
- **Student involvement.** Students are responsible for set up, cleanup, and maintenance of the games. Self-reflection sheets included in each game box can be completed individually or collaboratively by the players. Questions on the sheet might be, “Was playing this game a good use of your time for practicing ____?” or “How could you modify the rules of the game in order to practice ____?”
- **Reasonable use.** Games are relatively inexpensive, ranging from \$5 to \$20, or they can be found at garage sales for considerably less. Only one of each game is typically needed for the whole classroom to share, although having multiple decks of cards is a good idea. A few new games each year builds an impressive classroom library of engaging teaching tools. One classroom planned a game drive that outfitted several rooms with many gently used or new games.
- **Expectations maintained.** If you walked by a classroom full of students playing board or card games, you might assume it was free time. However, very effective academic and social skill learning is truly taking place!
- **Equity and universality.** The teacher's job is to offer choice in games and grouping while making careful note as to which students consistently choose or avoid a certain activity. One way to encourage students to move outside of their comfort zone on occasion is to set up carefully planned game stations and have small groups rotate through. All of the games should be accessible to everyone.

IF . . . THEN

If games are used so that the teacher can observe and gather a great deal of formative evaluation information, then this could also be a strategy for **Assessment**.

ASSESSMENT





Lighting

Use different lighting. Meeting the needs of all students in terms of lighting is difficult, especially if some students prefer bright lighting and others prefer dimmer or softer lighting. In the same open space, how do you provide both? There are classroom light filters commercially available. These fabric filters come in a variety of colors and are fastened over the bright ceiling lights in the classroom. Different colors can be used in different areas of the classroom to meet students' preferences and needs. Partitions also may help. Another solution is to turn off the overhead lighting altogether and use table and floor lamps with soft or full-spectrum light bulbs where needed or desired.



Try This



Variable lighting



Why This Works

- **Research base.** A summary of studies shows that good lighting contributes to the aesthetics of the learning space, as well as increased achievement and on-task behavior. In addition, colored filters can increase concentration and lessen visual fatigue (Engelbrecht, 2003; Jago & Tanner, 1999).
- **Student involvement.** Students can participate in the design of the classroom and placement of filters or lamps. Working in different areas of the room provides students with the opportunity to determine which lighting type and/or color is most effective for them.
- **Reasonable use.** Approved, heat-resistant light covers should be purchased and used only as instructed—it may not be safe to cover lights with any other fabric or cellophane. Any table or floor lamp will do as long as the lamps are stable and the cords are intact.
- **Expectations maintained.** Expectations of the students are not changed at all. The environment allows them to engage in and concentrate longer on the task at hand.
- **Equity and universality.** All lighting variations must be available to everyone to explore. More than one lighting type should be available at all times as student needs require.

IF . . . THEN

If the lighting and different color options in the visual environment are used to have an impact on perception of visual stimuli, then this can also be a strategy for **Input**.

INPUT

