2026 VicTESOL Symposium
From research to the classroom:
Putting theory into practice

Beating the Odds:
Reclaiming Engagement in a hybrid learning model



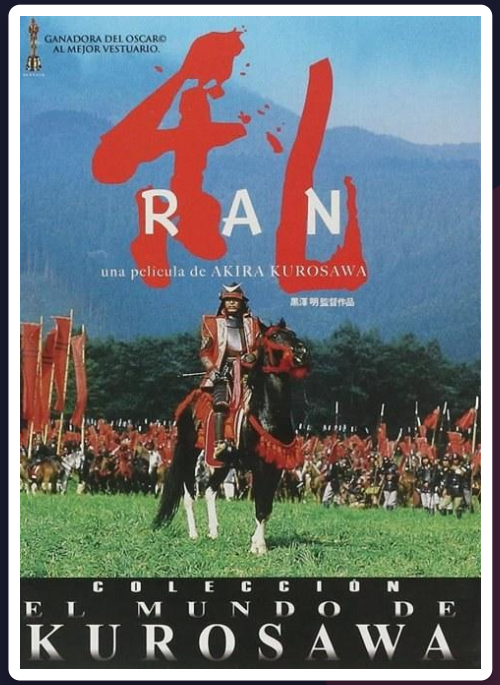
Dr Paul LI

DUELI, Deakin University
30 Oct 2026

VicTESOL
Supporting English language teaching, learning and multicultural education

Who is Akira Kurosawa?





A craft hard to acquire

> *Upon receiving the life achievement award, the veteran director Kurosawa Akira said that he didn't know how to make movies.*

That applies to teaching, which is a craft difficult to acquire, probably due to



Lack of up-to-date subject knowledge (PD in dire need)



Simply our character flaws (impatience)



Failure to engage our students (Tik Tok ...)

QUIZ

How would you define “student engagement”?



Why engagement matters



Enhancing student motivation to learn



Reducing the sense of isolation (especially international students)



Improving students' performance

Astin (1984)



"the amount of **time and effort** students put into their studies and other *educational purposeful* activities … [and] how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities."

Two more definitions

Chapman (2003)

"depict students' ***willingness*** to participate in routine school activities, such as attending class, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class."

Fletcher (2005)

"describe ***meaningful*** student involvement throughout the learning environment, including students participating curriculum design, classroom management and school building climate."

Student Engagement

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

Abraham Lincoln

It boils down to effective teaching strategies.

Engagement strategies (via Zoom) count. But they are never enough.

25 strategies to engage on Zoom

TASK

Your turn

1

Recall a moment students got disengaged

2

How did you bring them back? What have you learnt?

Artificial Intelligence

Goldsworthy

AI poses an imminent threat to work (career), meaning of life, social justice and human survival.

Magnifica Humanitas (by Pope Leo XIV)

Humanities at the apex of all other things. If we're deprived of human dignity, we simply could not carry on.



Why engagement now

With AI being universally accessible, are students going to read the oeuvre or write an essay on their own?

Deprived of getting an opportunity to be humanistic

Getting students engaged is the priority

My Take



Microlearning

0–3 mins

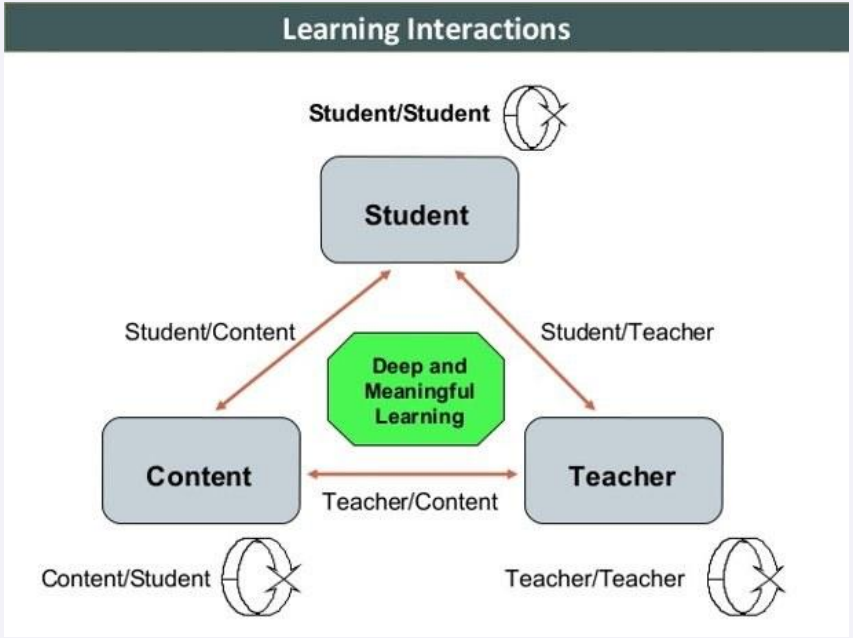
Spaced learning

4–6 mins

Training

7–18 mins

Engagement Framework



1. Learner-to-learner
2. Learner-to-content
3. Learner-to-instructor

Learner-to-learner

Breaking isolation

Turning a group of strangers into a learning community

When students get comfortable talking to, questioning and challenging one another, discussion can be so animated that no one even bothers to be called on.

They just talk on discussion forum, blogs, and social media.

Learner-to-content

- Scholarly readings
- Interactive instructional materials
- Well-tailored assessments
- Real-world application, i.e. role play, case studies, or client projects
- Discussion with structured guiding questions
- Change students' understanding and perspectives via these materials

What the research says ...



Teacher–student rapport more strongly predicted classroom behavior



Students who believed that their teacher cared about them were more motivated to try hard and pay attention in class, and earned higher grades



Evidence suggests that secure teacher–student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals

Expectations of our students

How do we set the bar?

01

Eloquent (get the message across)

02

IT Literate

03

Team player, if not Leader

04

Challenging the status quo

05

Problem solver (“Think out of the box”)

06

Being innovative

07

Integrity

How about instructors?

- Create small learning communities
- Show an interest in students on a personal level
- Regular announcements or email reminders
- Grading rubrics
- Timely feedback on assignments
- Responsive and supportive
- Focus on the development of peer relationships (fostering networking via organizations such as VicTESOL)

Building relationships

01 Foster relationships with students to identify their needs (emotional and intellectual) and identify their individual learning style

02 Emphasize that each student is unique with value, talents and abilities

03 Teach for meaning (relevance to the reality)

In Hong Kong and Melbourne

In Hong Kong

- Video conferencing with Texas State University
- Visits and workshops
- Annual Arts & Humanities Festival

In Melbourne

- Interactive classroom activities
- Incursion
- Excursion

English through Social Issue

Develop students' English language skills, critical thinking skills and information by exploring and discussing contemporary social issues

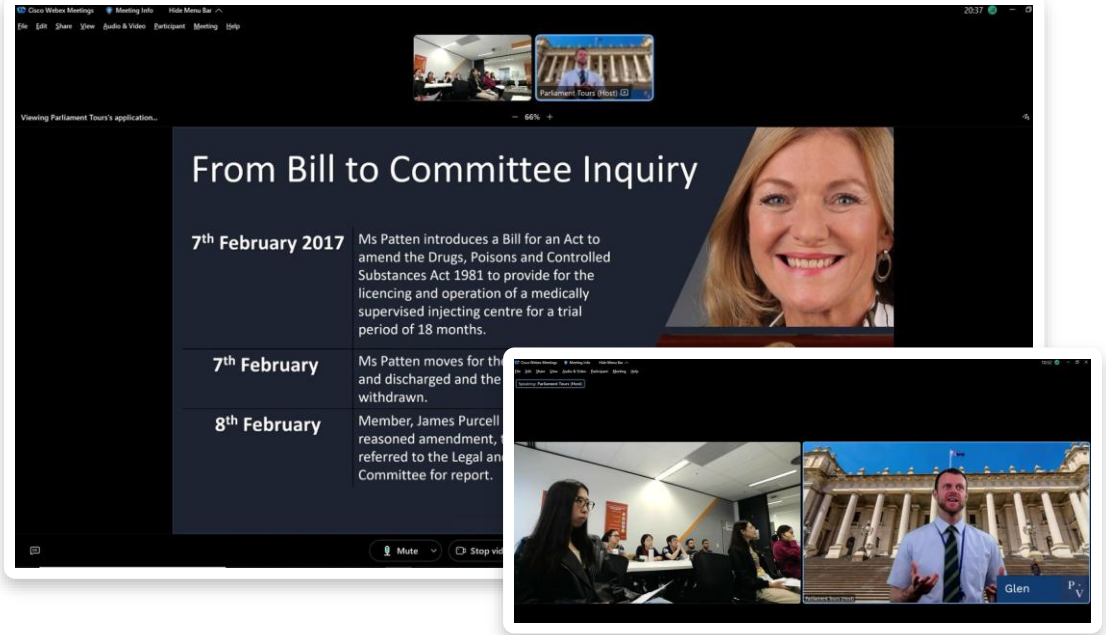
- **Discussions and debates**
- **Excursion optional**
- **Cultural capital**
- **Trust**
- **High degree of Autonomy**
- **Incursion + excursion**
- **Pedagogical linkage/ rationale**
- **Protest exhibits (a city of protests)**



Engagement in action







Role play





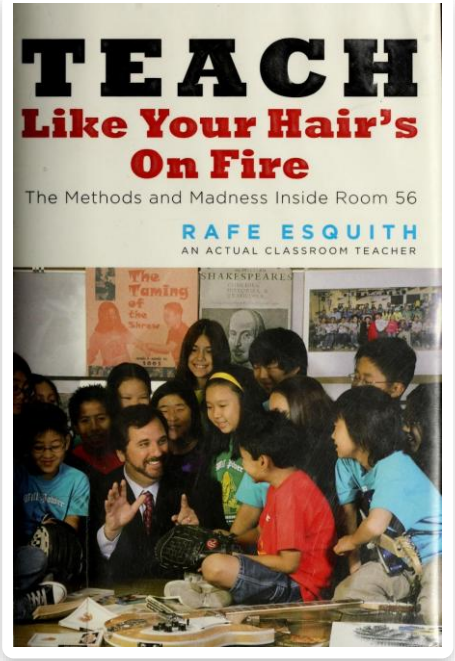


Protest exhibits

A city of protests



Rafe Esquith



An award-winning veteran American elementary school teacher

Many of his students, who were all from a community of poor and immigrant families, started class very early, left late, and typically achieved high scores in standardized tests. English is their second language.

His honors include the Teacher of the Year, a Fellowship from Johns Hopkins University, and an honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire.

Room 56

- Lesson 1: There are no shortcuts
- Lesson 2: Behavior exemplary
- Lesson 3: Shakespeare and Rock 'n' Roll
- **Discipline + practice**



Watch the video

"I do something I love to do."

Parting words

- Putting yourself in students' shoes
- Care + Community
- Collaboration + Alignment + Empowerment
- Being a better person, then a teacher

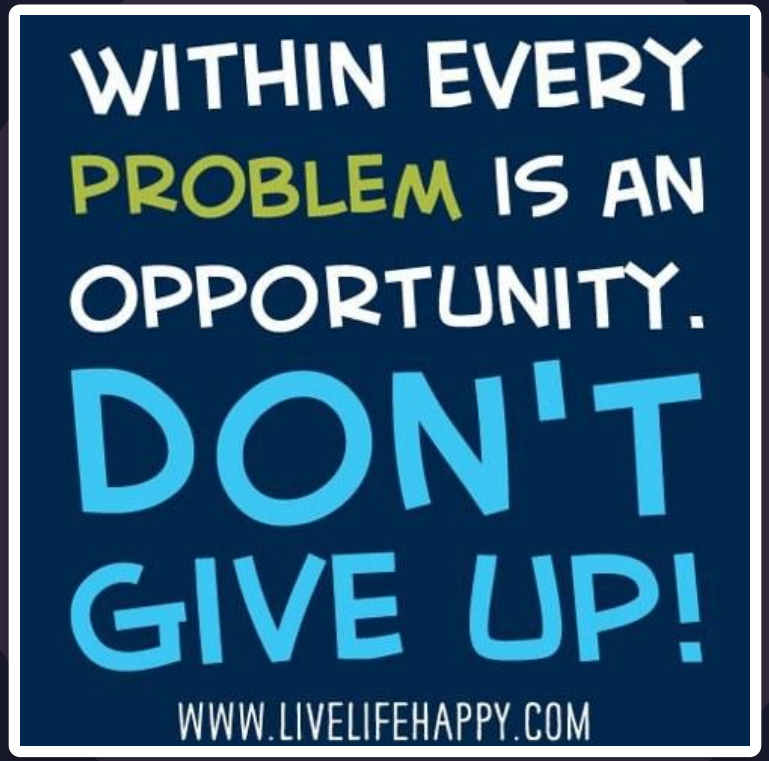
> *"Be kinder than necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle."*
>
> **J.M. Barrie**

“Students don’t care how much you know until they know *how much you care*”

Make High Expectations more than just rhetoric

Empower students rather than enable students

model


WITHIN EVERY
PROBLEM IS AN
OPPORTUNITY.
DON'T
GIVE UP!
WWW.LIVELIFEHAPPY.COM

References

Esquith, Rafe (2003) *There are no shortcuts.* New York : Pantheon Books.

Esquith, Rafe (2007) *Teach like your hair's on fire: the methods and madness inside room 56.* New York : Viking.

Lear, J. L., Ansorge, C., & Steckelberg, A. (2010). Interactivity/community process model for the online education environment. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 6*(1), 71–77.

Martin, F., & Ertzberger, J. (2016). Effects of reflection type in the here and now mobile learning environment. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 47*(5), 932–944. doi:10.1111/bjet.12327

Moore, M. J. (1993). Three types of interaction. In K. Harry, M. John, & D. Keegan (Eds.), *Distance education theory* (pp. 19–24). New York: Routledge.

Any questions?

