



Ring Their Bells: A New Way to Deliver Bell Work

Because students bring a broad variety of needs and emotions, start class with bell work that engages their working memory and sets the tone for positive, productive learning.

By [Dr. Lori Desautels](#)
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This is the most frequent challenge that I hear from educators in all grade levels (including higher education): "How do I create and sustain engagement?" When we engage our students from the onset, we reduce negative behaviors while creating experiences that are emotion-packed, drive curiosity, and deliver brain states of anticipation and intrigue. It sounds simple, but for those of us who greet students each day or class period, we encounter a variety of personal experiences, private logics, stressors, learning profiles, and mindsets as intricate and diverse as fingerprints.

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During the past few years, as I've reentered K-12 classrooms in addition to my undergraduate coursework, I'm learning that how I begin the day or class sets the tone for how well the instruction will be received and the content will be remembered. Traditionally, educators have implemented **bell work** -- shortened assignments that begin class with content reviews, silent reading, or completion of assignments -- as the students trickle in carrying backpacks and a broad variety of needs and emotions.

This past year, I began looking at research about the [primary/recency effect](#) and how I could better engage students the minute they walked through the door each day. Bell work rang my bell! I was reminded how content and experiences in the first few minutes of a lecture, teaching episode, or assignment have the best chance of staying in





working memory, where new thoughts and ideas connect to what students already consider relevant or meaningful. Brain-aligned bell work captured the engagement that I desired for longer-term learning. Not all bell work has to be tied to whatever standards or topics we're teaching that day or week. Sometimes, it activates powerful ways to explore perceptual data from the students with regard to their interests, passions, feelings, insights, and bundles of beliefs.

10 Bell Work Activities

The following activities have been successful in my classrooms.

1. Fantasy Interview: When students enter the class, they choose a half sheet of colored paper with a set of instructions displayed on the smart board. In the front of class is an empty chair and a few props to create a comfortable setting. I begin with a question: "If you could spend 15 minutes with any person in the whole world discussing, questioning, and sharing, who would this be and why did you choose him or her?" The students can write or draw their responses and, if they choose, share them following the exercise. When I implemented this experience with middle school and undergraduate students, the sharing and empathy in the room was palpable, and I learned so much about the emotional and social profiles of these students!

2. The Things I Carry: At the front of the room is a backpack containing five or six items, pictures, or words that I identify with or hold close to my mind and heart. As I model for my students the contents of my own backpack, I begin sharing who I am as a person. This is a powerful way of not only getting to know your students, but also tying in the backpack's contents with a class novel, science experiment, or any standard that you're teaching -- simply by aligning items in the bag with what students need to know. Students can guess what items might be in the backpack before you reveal them. Prediction is an effective brain state which increases the brain's dopamine levels that are responsible for [pleasure- and goal-seeking behaviors](#).





3. Just Ten Words: Write or draw a ten-word story on a specific topic that you're teaching, or have students write a ten-word story describing their strengths and expertise. Another option for those who don't want to write is creating an infographic.

4. Predict an Outcome: Choose a short TED Talk or documentary and watch the first minute. Following this one-minute presentation, students will predict two or three outcomes as to how this presentation will end. This can be related to subject matter that you're teaching, or it could be a motivational video addressing social and emotional skillsets.

5. Beliefs Infomercial: Using images, words, colors, or technology, have students design an infomercial about a strong belief that they hold. It could be a longtime personal belief, one that they've developed through recent experiences, or one that they're beginning to question.

6. Reinventing Gum: Place a stick of gum on every desk as students walk in. On five notecards, have them design five new inventions for chewing gum. Students can share and compare at the end of the bell work.

7. Meeting of the Minds: Students will select characters from a book, historical figures, or any author, inventor, scientist, or individual whom they've been studying. Given a 21st-century challenge, how would these individuals solve it? What would their discussion look like, and how would they relate to one another?

8. The Traveling Pants: Place an old pair of trousers or blue jeans on a table in the front of the room. Present a variety of questions and activities about these pants, such as:

- Where have they been?
- Where would you travel?



- Describe three places you'd travel or goals you'd accomplish while wearing these pants.
- What will it take for you to get there?
- How can you begin creating these destinations or goals today?

9. Invent a New Language: Either individually or with a partner, have students create a new language that we need today. It could be a language of feelings, kindness, service, or just a silly variation by adding or deleting words, parts of words, vowels, or consonants.

10. Legibility Test: With their opposite hand or blindfolded, students write a short review paragraph about a topic on the upcoming test or something that needs to be remembered. Then they trade papers with a classmate to see if they can read and understand what was written.

The environments that our students bring into our classrooms often reflect a mindset that has developed without effort or awareness. For many of students, attending school is an adverse experience because school hasn't been a place where they've felt emotionally safe or academically successful. They would rather act out or look like rebels than appear "dumb" -- especially in front of their peers! As educators, we can start counteracting that negative experience the moment they enter our classrooms. I hope that these bell work activities will inspire your students and set their brain state for feeling capable and engaged at the start of each day.

How do you use bell work in your practice?

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