

Principles and Practices to Secure and Hold Interest¹

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Introduction

The first major step in teaching is to decide what to teach and how to teach it. Establishing a sound curriculum that includes well-written essential questions and learning objectives is the first priority. Once the curriculum is set, then it is time to decide how to teach the content. And first among those decisions is how to build lasting interest in the content to be taught. Students learn more and retain what they have learned longer when they are interested in the content, see its usefulness, and are motivated to learn and apply what they have learned. Securing and holding interest is a major role for the teacher.

Twelve principles, or general truths, which are useful to teachers in their efforts to control interest and to build new interests in their students are stated below. Several authors have described various approaches to securing and holding interest, including Crunkilton and Krebs (1986), Newcomb and his co-authors in 1986 and 2003, Stewart (1950), and McKeachie in the various editions of his book, *Teaching Tips* (2013). However, nearly all modern writings harken to a landmark text by Lancelot in 1929 and its subsequent book (1944).

Lancelot described twelve basic tenets of interest. The first five of these are designated as the *primary principles* of interest because of their wide applicability and general effectiveness in the hands of skillful teachers. The remaining seven, while very useful, are of a somewhat lesser value and are referred to as the *secondary principles* of interest. The

following descriptions of the twelve principles are presented near to the original writing of Lancelot (1929, pp.34–39).

Primary Principles of Interest

1. All interest has its original source in the so-called natural impulses, urges, or drives. The ten of these that seem most useful to teachers are
 - a. activity,
 - b. love of nature,
 - c. curiosity,
 - d. creativeness,
 - e. gregariousness,
 - f. desire for approval,
 - g. altruism,
 - h. self-advancement,
 - i. competition, and
 - j. ownership.
2. A subject is interesting if it affects us, others around us, or humanity at large.
3. Interest increases with an increase in related knowledge of any subject, provided such knowledge is well understood.
4. Interest increases with the acquisition of any given ability or skill.

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5. Interest flows, or spreads, from any interesting thing into any uninteresting thing whenever the two are clearly connected in thought.

Secondary Principles of Interest

1. Thinking is essentially interesting; memorization is uninteresting.
2. Interest is contagious in the sense that one person may “take it” from another.
3. Interest is strengthened by a sense of progress.
4. Interest is created and sustained by a state of suspense.
5. An ideal, when fully accepted, becomes a new interest center, from which interest will spread to any other thing that is seen to be connected with it.
6. The novel and unexpected are interesting.
7. Humor creates interest.

Applying the Principles Governing Interest

The twelve principles relating to interest are stated above in the form of apparent truths describing its origin and behavior. As teachers, we must find ways and means of applying them, to devise simple *rules of action* whereby we may put them to effective use. Lancelot proposed actions for teachers to utilize in applying the twelve principles of interest. His proposed actions are as relevant today as they were when first proposed and are presented here in the order in which they appear above (Lancelot, 1929, pp.29–43).

1. State each question, or problem, in such a manner as to appeal to one or more of the five senses.
2. Keep students conscious of the usefulness and future value of what they are learning, beyond simply memorizing for the test.
3. Organize the subject or course taught in such a manner that its parts will be closely and clearly related. Tell students how each part of the course or lesson is connected with others and with previous learning.
4. Develop in the students the actual abilities they wish to acquire.

5. Connect the knowledge that is taught with things in which the students are already interested.
6. Teach by problems or thought questions. Require the memorization of facts only when clearly necessary.
7. Keep your own interest high. Call upon interested students early in each discussion. Be enthusiastic about the content and about teaching.
8. Keep students progressing and conscious of their progress toward their own goals.
9. Keep the answers of all problems and questions in doubt until all important facts have been considered.
10. Keep students constantly aware of how what they are learning relates to the ideals or goals that they have set for themselves.
11. Vary your procedures frequently. Avoid a fixed routine in teaching. Use a variety of teaching strategies and types of assessments.
12. Make use of humor whenever it can be appropriately introduced.

Summary

Students may not always enroll in a course because of deep-seated interest in the subject matter. Teachers can utilize these principles and practices to help students create their own interest and identify the usefulness of their learning. As a side note, it is somewhat fascinating to see the similarities between Lancelot’s principles and the Rosenshine and Furst (1971) teacher behaviors study. Research justified Lancelot’s thinking and philosophy. For more reading, see the EDIS publication *Teacher Behavior and Student Achievement*, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc242>.

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