



VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Keep Kids Weird: Using Student Strangeness for Good Instead of Evil

Diversity is one of our greatest strengths — as a society, a school, and a class. Diversity allows us to think differently about the challenges we face, to consider different viewpoints, and lead richer, more creative lives.

But the world is often hostile toward people and perspectives that are different from the norm; there's a reason the word “weird” is most frequently used as an insult.

How can we reclaim the power of weirdness, help students share their unique personalities, and allow diversity to flourish in our schools? Here are a few ideas!

Get Innovative

When we encourage open-ended thinking, we create a culture where ideas that are “different” can thrive. Teachers can use these teacher-tested resources and strategies to cultivate a culture of creativity!

- **What Else?** — Playing games that encourage students to think of unique answers can put them in an innovator's mindset. [What Else?](#) is a simple, free example!
- **Weirdness of the Week** — Encourage teachers to share students' strangeness with the world by collecting a “weirdness of the week” and sharing it with the world. For instance, if students come across [this strange poem](#) or this delightfully [bizarre music video](#), you could share them out with your school community on a bulletin board or on social media.
- **Analogy a Day/Square Pegs** — Want weird answers? You need some weird questions. Share the [Analogy a Day Generator](#) or the [Square Peg Generator](#) with your teachers so that they can create bizarre wonderings for students.



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Get Authentic

One of the most important reasons to create a culture of weirdness is that it allows students to really express themselves. Help your students feel comfortable being authentic in your school with ideas that let them embrace their own wonderful weirdness.

- **Nicknames of Greatness** — Find out what your students love and give them corresponding nicknames. Your student who loves space can be called Astronaut Sam if their name is Sam. Your student who loves sea life can become The Shark. A kid who loves music can be called Carnegie. In your everyday interactions, you can reaffirm your belief that they can do great things if they work hard and follow their passions.
- **Open Their Gifts** — Have teachers show students that they see their talents and that they value them — and save some time and energy while they're at it. For each student, have teachers identify a few of their gifts, and then think of ways to put that gift to work in the school community. The [Gifts Organizer](#) will help you get started!
- **What YOU Wonder** — Uncovering what someone wonders is a wonderful way to discover their weirdness. Create space for students to share their own wonderings with a school-wide Ask-It Basket and create some time to follow up on these curiosities. For randomized fun, put the questions on a [Wonder Wheel](#) and spin it to see what curiosity you'll follow!
- **F is for Fantastic Failure** — Students CANNOT be their authentic selves if they're not free to fail. So, celebrate failure by giving out a weekly award to a student or students who failed while daring greatly. This is an excellent way to teach students that if they never fail they never grow. This is a classic way to build a growth mindset in your students, and to create a culture where weirdos know that it's okay to try new stuff, even if it flops.

Expand Your Toolkit

If you really want to inspire diverse thinking and unique approaches in your school, your teachers need to have diverse sets of teaching tools themselves. That way, they can model the variety and novelty they want students to emulate.

These [Strategy Explorations resources](#) are an incredible way for teachers to expand their professional toolkit so they can get a little bit weirder in ways that work well for them and for their students!

Get DEEP

No one remembers boring content. By injecting a little peculiarity in your learning, you leverage the power of weirdness to supercharge student understanding and retention.

- **The Baboon Effect** — Take a normal, ordinary, boring task and inject a little levity by adding a baboon, a weasel, a poodle, some mayonnaise, or a super villain named Bob. Little tweaks and twists like this make things more fun and keep students in that weird frame of mind.
- **Mystery** — Here are a few outside-the-box ideas (and one “inside-the-box” idea) that you can share with your teachers to help them activate curiosity in their students.
 - **Mystery Box** — Teachers can put something related to your content in a box. They can have students try to guess what it is by reaching in and feeling (if it's slimy or furry or it moves), by playing Twenty Questions, or by giving them a series of ascending clues. Students will surely raise their hands and be really excited, [like this](#).
 - **Mystery Zoom** — Encourage teachers to find a picture connecting to their content and then zoom way in on it, then to show students this zoomed in view. They can gradually show views that are less and less zoomed in and have students update their guesses as they get more information. Taking a different perspective on something is the essence of weirdness!
 - **Mystery Reveal** — This also starts with a picture connecting to your content. For the Mystery Reveal, teachers cover the picture up with boxes and let students guess what it might be as you reveal more and more boxes. Another great way to build mystery for any content area!

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Project-Based Learning that Lets Student Weirdness SHINE



Want your teachers to really stand out? To be the sort of life-changing educators who students remember forever? Check out [Take a Stand!](#) Students get a chance to take a respectful stand about a topic THEY feel passionately about, then to share their unique perspective with the world. The project integrates standards from ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and culminates when students present an inspirational podcast on the topic of their choice!

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson-by-lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 Content Standard Connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).



Conclusion

Your students are wonderfully weird, delightfully daffy, and excellently eccentric. When you create a school culture where oddness is an asset instead of a liability, you let students be more innovative and authentic — and you help them to learn in ways that are profound. So, fire up a little weirdness in your class today!

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:
[Keep Kids Weird: Using Student Strangeness for Good Instead of Evil.](#)**

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