

Review of

On the Edge of Their Seats: What the Best Teachers do to Engage and Inspire Their Students

By Mark E. Jonas and Douglas W. Yacek, Chicago: Post & Lintel Books, 2023

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Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR), Spain.

The best teachers have a clear sense of purpose regarding their role as educators; they seek to provide their students with a good education, far beyond helping their students obtain good grades. According to Gert Biesta (2015), in addition to engaging students with content and knowledge, a good teacher's professional practice is completed by two other domains. First, the domain of socialization, which involves introducing the student to different traditions, and forms of being and doing. Second, the domain of subjectification, which views the student as an agent with responsibility and initiative, rather than an object reactive to the actions of others. During lessons, many teachers want to see their students connected to the classroom, with a sense of curiosity, and with the desire to learn for much more than merely instructional purposes. Instead, however, they often encounter students who do not actively participate in class, are not involved in the learning community, or who behave counterproductively. Disengagement is a real challenge for teachers in the 21st century, especially among older students and students from marginalized social groups (Christenson et al., 2012). Therefore, many teachers might wonder what they can do to overcome the boredom pandemic affecting their students and how to promote aspiration instead (Yacek & Gary, 2023).

Mark Jonas and Douglas Yacek's book, *On the Edge of Their Seats*, offers a possible solution to this challenge, arising from their personal discovery of the transformative potential of teaching. The book is dedicated to their students, who have been their main source of inspiration in their teaching careers and professional development. Over the years of teaching, they have compared their experiences with those of many other teachers from very different contexts, years of seniority, and disciplines. The result of these conversations, observations, and mentoring is the four-step framework described in this book, although the methodological decisions and procedures are barely described. What the authors found through deep analysis of what they call "the best teachers" is that certain characteristics stand out. Despite the contextual and personality differences among the teachers the authors spoke to, some attitudes, methods, or decisions were shared by many of the interviewees. The scope of the resulting framework is not presented as a recipe to follow. Rather, teachers' professional expertise is absolutely respected by the authors, providing through their framework a source of inspiration that every teacher must develop in their own context.

Teachers from middle school to higher education are the principal target audience of this book. The authors are convinced that sharing how teachers can inspire students and contribute to their students' transformation and growth through the subjects or disciplines they teach is crucial. If doing so, teachers may reconsider their teaching methods and attitudes, as well as discover or rediscover the internal goods of their own profession. With the aim of helping to promote an inspirational culture of teaching, this

book is a practical and accessible guide full of real-world examples that can help teachers transform their teaching to make it valuable and engaging for students.

The book is divided into nine chapters. In the introduction, the authors define the book's central purpose: "this book is about what makes these teachers exceptional and how other teachers might follow their lead. It is about what teachers need to do to bring students consistently to *the edge of their seats*" (p. 3). The subsequent chapters delve into the four-step framework for engaging teaching put forward in the book: the Hook, the Pitch, the Awakening, and the Strengthening.

In the second chapter, each of these phases is described theoretically so the reader can grasp the general idea of the steps that may lead students to transformative learning experiences. Before applying the steps, some prerequisites are outlined so the teacher can be aware of key attitudes that seem essential. Patience, perseverance, and hope are three of the values that teachers will need to have if they are to start on the long and challenging road towards engaging and inspiring their students, following the pedagogical guidelines advanced in the book.

Each of the four phases in the framework is presented in chapters 3 to 7, and each of these chapters adopts the same structure. First, a brief conceptualization of the general content of the step is explained. Next, two examples of real teachers are described in detail to delineate and reveal how the step can be put into action. Right after the examples, the authors analyze the characteristics of the corresponding step that is present in the given examples. The aim of the last part of these chapters is to facilitate successful lesson planning by teachers. For that, the key elements of each stage are explained, with direct reference to lesson planning. Here, the authors provide some questions that teachers need to ask themselves if they are to make an authentic transformative lesson plan. Each chapter ends with a Q&A section, addressing potential issues that teachers may encounter in the process. Notably, asking for student feedback is a key suggestion in every phase of the framework.

The Hook is the first stage in the framework. The role of the teacher is to surprise students, "challenge their expectations about how class will be conducted and provoke how they see the world" (p. 11). For that, the teacher must make small but intentional decisions to capture their students' attention. To succeed in this, the teacher's persona is key. It is extremely interesting how the authors distinguish the persona from the teacher's personality, defining the persona as "a version of ourselves made up of one or more aspects of our personality that we intentionally choose to highlight or diminish in our classrooms" (p. 18). Hence, one of the questions the teacher should ask themselves is: "What aspect of my personality can I bring forth, amplify, or diminish to engage students in this way?" (p. 42). It would have been very valuable, however, if the authors had stated more explicitly which initial dispositions, in their view, teachers ought to possess to display their persona. In my opinion, the observational qualities required to appreciate the context of the class; the sufficient self-knowledge of teachers' own personality; and the ability to reflect, deliberate, and make prudent decisions of what is best for the students are key.

The Pitch, "a demonstration of how subject matter can deeply enrich a human life" (p. 48), is the second phase of the framework, described in chapter 4. In this step, the focus shifts from the teacher's behaviour to the discipline of study. For the authors, the subject itself and the communication of its beauty can be transformational, enabling the students to discover the unique and authentic value of the subject being taught. To make this communication effective, teachers must have previously discovered the subject's intrinsic value themselves. Without this personal experience, the potential of the Pitch might be reduced, or the Pitch might not work. Nevertheless, the initial opening up of the teacher, the suspense generated through doubts or questions, might not be sufficient if the students do not trust their teachers or are skeptical about what they might discover throughout the course or the subject.

Assuming that the students' attention has been captured in the first and second stage, the next step, the Awakening, is one of insights and experiences. Reality is placed at the centre of the lesson so that students can see how learning the subject at hand can truly matter in their lives. The planning at this stage revolves around the moment of insight. For this, students need to question some of their previous assumptions, which can lead to certain unsettling and disconcerting moments, similar to the experience of being "pulled up short," described in Kerdeman (2003). Apart from questioning students' prior

knowledge, the emotional impact of this stage can also be very strong: “awakenings are most effective when students not only see the relevance or importance of the subject matter, but also feel personally connected to it” (p. 98). The attempt to create revelatory moment in teaching ensures that students “will not only begin to take a deeper interest in the topics of the class and perform better on assignments; their lives outside the classroom will begin to change, potentially for many years to come” (p. 74).

The Strengthening, described in chapter 6, is the last stage in the framework. The emotional impact of the previous step might be reduced to a sudden “aha moment” unless the teacher introduces an instructional element to let the students “engage with the content of their experience, explore how it can further enrich their perspective, expand their skill set, and develop their sense of who they are and what they strive for” (p. 126). Since the purpose of the four-step framework is to provoke deep and lasting changes in the students, providing students with activities that can solidify the momentous insight is fundamental. For this, teachers need to empower their students by giving them greater responsibility, involvement, or challenges that are aimed at increasing their agency and personal growth.

“Katie” is the protagonist of chapter 7. This college literature teacher exemplifies how all four steps can be integrated throughout an entire course. With this example and through the rest of the examples in the book, the authors aim to demonstrate the flexible applicability of this framework. It depends on the teacher’s purpose and organization whether to divide the stages into different lessons or to incorporate all four in a single plan. In any case, the book includes a worksheet to help guide planning, regardless of which of these two routes the professional decides to take.

In the concluding chapter, the authors offer some additional considerations on the applicability of the framework, based on teachers’ testimonies and their own personal experience as teachers. Being the best teacher, as described in this framework, does not just consist of a series of abilities, communicative capabilities, or performance. None of these would make sense if love was not present. For that reason, teachers, on the one hand, need to love the discipline they teach, and on the other hand, they must genuinely care for their students, despite their students’ initial disengagement, distraction, or acts of disturbance.

It is probable that while reading the book, many questions may arise among readers. In anticipation of this, the final chapter aims to address some frequently asked questions that one may have about the framework. What the authors want to make clear is that the application of this framework can contribute to the richest form of professionalism that a teacher can aspire to and increase their students’ own motivation. Engagement with the subject’s intrinsic value may result in better academic performance and lifelong learning. The transformational learning facilitated by applying this framework might address the increasing heterogeneity of classrooms. Precisely, the teacher’s responsibility to respond to each individuality could be better fulfilled through this flexible and reflective approach, which aims to connect academic disciplines with students’ personal lives.

Taken together, this book offers an organized but flexible orientation for teachers who desire to inspire and engage their students. The four-step framework is a concrete resource that brings together the main characteristics of the best teachers. The examples discussed and analyzed in the book facilitate understanding some of the abstract notions underlying the framework, and the guiding reflections for planning facilitate the teacher’s judgement, decision making, and resolve to try it. All in all, Jonas and Yacek’s ambitious book aims to transform education from within, starting with each individual teacher who strives, on a daily basis, to make their students sit on the edge of their seats.

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