

Study Guide

# BEAT BOREDOM

**ENGAGING  
TUNED-OUT  
TEENAGERS**

**MARTHA  
SEVETSON RUSH**  
FOREWORD BY  
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## Summary

Are your students bored?

According to research, a majority of American high school students report being bored in class, and fewer than 5 percent claimed that they were rarely bored during a typical day in school.

Former journalist and veteran teacher Martha Rush decided this would not do for her Minnesota students. Moving beyond asking open-ended questions and making connections to their own lives, Martha began to engage her government, journalism, psychology, and economics classes in meaty discussions, competitions, simulations, and authentic work like running a newspaper or starting a business.

Building on her survey of more than 800 high school graduates, Martha offers up strategies in all subject areas for active engagement, moving way beyond traditional passive memorization of information. She describes how to create innovative experiences in the classroom and shares her own lessons and her students' work. *Beat Boredom* will help you join the ranks of teachers who have challenged the status quo and found ways to motivate even the most reluctant learners.

The following are suggestions to help groups of educators read, write about, and discuss *Beat Boredom*, as well as extend the book's ideas into classrooms. These ideas will come to life as teachers are given opportunities to put them into practice themselves and with their own students. This guide is formatted for a study group. It could be used either with a group of teachers or individually as a reflective structure for those reading the book alone.

With that in mind, we have developed discussion questions and pulled provocative quotes and professional development ideas from each chapter that will enable participants to reflect on the text as well as the writing lives of their students. We encourage groups to try out some new practices in their own classrooms. The suggestions offered in the guide are designed to foster collaboration and spark new thinking.

## Introduction

### Boredom Is a Barrier

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Think back to your high school experience. What do you remember about the presentation of material? What was the role of the teacher? What was your role as student?
- How would you describe the level of engagement of students in your classes today? Do you see boredom when looking at your students?
- What do you hope to achieve by exploring this book?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read the introductory story, focusing on Peter Bohacek’s classroom (1–4).
- What do you notice? What do you wonder?
- How is Peter’s classroom similar to yours? How is it different?

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Boredom causes students to lose focus and motivation, and it disconnects them from what we are trying to teach them. (4)*

*If we want better outcomes for our students, we need to stop seeing boredom as a harmless corollary to schooling or a given, something teenagers will have to endure, like we did. (4)*

*Teaching with high-engagement strategies takes more planning, more thought, and more energy than forcing students to sit still and listen, and sometimes it means pushing back against administrators and other forces, trying to make us do “more of the same.” (8)*

#### Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

What is one idea or concept that you will continue to think about after today and might integrate into your classroom?

## Chapter 1

### Engage the Students Who Need It Most

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- What is your thinking around engagement, motivation, and boredom in schools?
- Do you see student motivation as a challenge?
- What challenges do you face in keeping students engaged during class?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read “Why Is the Impact Magnified for Some Students?” (17–21), focusing on Figure 1.1.
- What do you notice? What do you wonder?
- Martha points out her interest in what happens when highly engaging, motivating teachers encounter less motivated (or unmotivated) students. Can they overcome the deficits of the students' own motivation?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

- Martha talks about the challenge of learning discrete, difficult facts and how, if facts are not stored in our long-term memory, we will not be able to retrieve them. Read the passage from the *New England Journal of Medicine* on page 14.
- Do you feel confident in your understanding of the procedure described in the passage? Did you absorb the information or did it flow past you?
- Keep this experience in mind as you work through the rest of the book.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Boredom, described as an emotional state, is attracting the attention of psychologists and education researchers, who have linked it to drug use, truancy, delinquency, decreased achievement, and dropout rates. (11)*

*Vogel-Walcutt agrees that when instruction is that disconnected from student engagement, students are unlikely to retain much of the information presented. (15)*

*The impact of boredom is the same whether students fall asleep, distract themselves, or even skip class entirely. (16)*

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What is one idea or concept related to the planning process that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?



## Chapter 2

### Solutions Are Within Our Reach

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Chapter 1 cites the research of Jeannie Oakes, a professor at UCLA who writes about how low-income and nonwhite children are tracked into less-engaging, less-stimulating classes under the guise of addressing individual needs. How might this play into boredom?
- What is your thinking so far about boredom and how it plays out in our classrooms?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read the section “Where to Start” on pages 27–29.
- What are your thoughts about the techniques described?
- How are the methods shared similar to what one might see in your classroom? How are they different?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

We will start building our toolbox. The remaining chapters of this book are dedicated to sharing and explaining six active-learning strategies. Read “Let’s Get Started” on pages 32–34. This section addresses pitfalls to be aware of as we look to shift instructional methods. What do you notice? What do you wonder?

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Teachers may not get to create the state standards for our curriculum or write the high-stakes tests or determine the length of the school year or decide how the money gets spent, and we certainly cannot change our students’ home lives and economic circumstances. But most of us can control our instructional strategies in the classrooms. (24)*

*Psychology research suggests that we lose 70 percent of what we hear in a lecture as soon as we walk out the door (Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel 2014). (26)*



*“You learn better when you wrestle with new problems before being shown the solution, rather than the other way around” (Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel 2014, 226). (31)*

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

What is one idea or concept related to the planning process that you will continue to think about after today and might try out in your classroom?





## Chapter 3

### Storytelling: Give Students Someone (or Something) to Care About

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Skim the introductory story of this chapter (35–36). What did you notice about your own engagement as you read the story?
- Do you know someone who is a strong storyteller? What makes their stories so memorable?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 39–41, the first pages of “Why Use Stories?”
- Review Bennett’s list of seven reasons why stories engage listeners more effectively than straight facts. What reasons jump out at you?
- How might you incorporate storytelling into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate storytelling into the classroom. Review pages 46–50. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 51–52. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Listening to a story activates six additional brain areas—the visual cortex, olfactory cortex, auditory cortex, motor cortex, sensory cortex, and cerebellum—as you visualize and emotionally connect to the events (Porter 2016). (37)*

*“Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything at all” (Schank and Abelson 1995). (38)*

*When we share stories and listen to students’ stories, we open a new pathway for engaging and motivating our students. (45)*

#### Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

Before the next meeting, try out the storytelling strategy in your classroom.

## Chapter 4

### Discussion and Debate: Trust Students to Drive Meaningful Conversations

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Did you try out the storytelling strategy? Share successes and challenges.
- Skim the introductory story of this chapter on pages 53–54. What did you notice about your own engagement as you read the story?
- Do you know someone who is a strong storyteller? What makes their stories so memorable?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 55–58, “What Are Discussion and Debate?”
- Review Judith Langer’s list of reasons to use discussion and debate in the classroom. What reasons jump out at you?
- How might you incorporate discussion and debate into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate discussion and debate into the classroom. Review pages 67–71. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 75–76. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*The key is to ask thoughtful questions and create expansive opportunities for students to exchange ideas and build their own understanding. (57)*

*Teachers can also use the principles of effective discussion and debate to make even routine classroom conversations more substantive. (70)*

*Fostering discussion and debate is a skill, just as participating in discussion and debate is a skill, and both teachers and students need practice to become experts. (74)*

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

Before the next meeting, try out the discussion and debate strategy in your classroom.



## Chapter 5

### Problem-Based Learning: Let Students Struggle with Real (Unsolved) Problems

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Did you try out the discussion and debate strategy? Share successes and challenges.
- Skim the introductory story of this chapter on pages 77–78. What did you notice about your own engagement as you read the story?
- Have you experienced problem-based learning in the classroom? What made the experience memorable?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 78–81, “What Is Problem-Based Learning?”
- Review John Savery’s list of what should be included in problem-based learning lessons. What elements jump out at you?
- How might you incorporate problem-based learning into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate problem-based learning into the classroom. Review pages 91–97. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 101–102. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*The best kinds of problems are ones that require students to learn and apply both theory and knowledge, but also allow creativity and the exploration of multiple solutions (Jonassen and Hung 2008). (81)*

*What’s important is that students learn to ask questions and figure out their own solutions, rather than merely memorizing and applying what we, “the experts,” tell them. (81)*

*“When telling occurs without readiness, the primary recourse for students is to treat the new information as ends to be memorized rather than as tools to help them perceive and think” (Schwartz and Bransford 1998, 477). (88)*

### **Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

Before the next meeting, try out the problem-based learning strategy in your classroom.



## Chapter 6

### Simulation: Immerse Students in Thoughtful Role Plays

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Did you try out the problem-based learning strategy? Share successes and challenges.
- Skim the introductory story of this chapter (103–104). What did you notice about your own engagement as you read the story?
- Have you experienced simulation in the classroom? What made the experience memorable?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read page 105, “What Is Simulation?”
- What elements jump out at you? How is this similar to problem-based learning? How is it different?
- How might you incorporate simulation into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate simulation into the classroom. Review pages 112–117. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 121–122. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Simulation taps into our brain’s “seeking system,” giving students opportunities for play, firsthand learning, and collaboration, all in a relevant activity. (105)*

*Research has shown that when it’s used well—and debriefed effectively, so that students understand and can explain what they have experienced—simulation not only engages and motivates students, but [also] builds enduring factual knowledge and critical-thinking skills. (105)*

*An effective simulation creates a shared understanding that a teacher can refer to over and over during the semester, as we examine in turn each of the issues that came up. (116)*

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

Before the next meeting, try out a short simulation strategy in your classroom.





## Chapter 7

### Competition: Give Students a Chance to Prove Themselves

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Did you try out the simulation strategy? Share successes and challenges.
- Skim the introductory story of this chapter on pages 123–124. What do you see as the potential advantages of using competition in the classroom?
- Have you experienced competition as a student? What do you remember about this experience? What did you notice about your own engagement and motivation?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 124–127, “What Is Competition?”
- Martha talks about her experience of being on a speech team (125) and why the experience was meaningful to her. What reasons jump out at you?
- How might you incorporate useful competition into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate competition into the classroom. Review pages 134–144. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 146–148. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*The best competitions today involve leadership, teamwork, strategy, and purposeful activities that require deep critical thinking. (126)*

*Academic competitions also give students another opportunity to shine, especially students who might not excel in sports. (133)*

*Another challenge of incorporating competition is learning how to coach without overemphasizing winning. (144)*

#### Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

Before the next meeting, try out the competition strategy in your classroom.

## Chapter 8

### Authentic Tasks: Encourage Work That Matters Outside School

#### Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- Did you try out the competition strategy? Share successes and challenges.
- Skim the introductory story of this chapter on pages 149–150. What do you see as potential advantages to using authentic tasks in the classroom?
- Have you experienced being given authentic tasks as a student? What did you notice about your own engagement and motivation?

#### Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read “What Are Authentic Tasks?” (150–153)
- How might you incorporate authentic tasks into your instruction?

#### Toolbox Strategy (15 Minutes)

The strategy shared in this chapter shows how to incorporate authentic tasks into the classroom. Review pages 161–165. How might you try out this strategy? What do you see as potential advantages to this idea and possible challenges? Be sure to check out the teacher tips on pages 170–171. Talk about your thinking as a group.

#### Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

*Authentic tasks are important because they are deeply engaging and motivating to students. They give many students a reason to care about school and a taste of what they can do after high school. They can also be used to teach valuable academic content and skills as well as leadership, collaboration, creativity, and job skills—some of the critical 21st century skills. (155)*

*Another benefit of authentic tasks is that they foster creativity and divergent thinking, skills that are often lost when we overemphasize right answers and facts that can be memorized for multiple-choice tests. (160)*

*The key is for us to guide students toward appropriate, challenging tasks that require students to learn what we want them to know. (170)*

**Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)**

Before the next meeting, try out the authentic tasks strategy in your classroom.



## Afterword

In the afterword, Martha shares journal entries that she wrote years ago as a new teacher (172–175). Reflect on your own teaching journey. What were your hopes and dreams when you entered the profession of education as a classroom teacher? How have your hopes and dreams changed and morphed over the years? What do you see as possible next steps for instructional techniques as you move forward? Take time to reflect individually and/or discuss as a group.

