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**How TikTok and YouTube Made Me a Better Teacher**

***Teachers, we need to steal back our students’ hearts from social media***

We’ve all had students who just won’t stay off their phones. In recent years, platforms like YouTube and TikTok have exploited student attention – robbing them of valuable learning time. Here’s what I figured out, and how we teachers will win them back.

In recent months, I’ve dabbled in social media. First with TikTok and [now with YouTube where I post 5- to 10-minute videos](https://www.youtube.com/@artistic-off-road) of camping and hiking excursions with my wife. I’ve also uploaded a few YouTube shorts. These are less than 60-second clips of often cute, exciting, or meaningless content that the viewer clicks through at random. They “like” or don’t and move on.

My shorts of a fighter-jet flyby, a bear devouring trash, a close-up of a red-tailed hawk average 2,000 views. That’s not a lot. The longer videos of our trips – ones I’ve spent five or 10 hours editing to semi-professional quality – average only about 200 or 300 views.

Late one night this week, that difference led me to a revelation. But it wasn’t about how I can be a better YouTuber. The revelation was about how to be a better teacher.

The YouTube algorithm (like other social media algorithms) is intended to draw views. The more views, the more advertisers will pay to get their products noticed. So, of course, YouTube incentivizes creators to post stimulating videos.

My longer travel videos are well-produced but uninteresting. Even at 2,000 views, my shorts are barely more interesting but get more views because they are shorter. It was obvious why when these reached 1,500 views, views started to slow down: the algorithm. YouTube knows if your post is getting engagement (comments, likes, subscribers). If the algorithm sees that your video isn’t picking up speed, your views go dark.

The human brain – especially the brain of a young person – absorbs vast quantities of information about the surrounding world, and it wants to be engaged. Whether they know it or not, students are looking for something to be interested in – something stimulating.

It’s why so many love social media that offers up a never-ending stream of exciting, stupid, scary, hilarious, racy, and, yes, sometimes even thought-provoking content. It is this same principle that YouTube and TikTok exploit and which we, too, must harness if we are going to compete for our students’ attention. Teachers must create personally engaging and stimulating lessons that allow students to feel ownership over the curriculum. What makes students love swiping through videos is the same thing that makes them love learning – the same thing that makes them put their phones down and pick up a book or join a conversation. It’s why even my most disengaged student will gladly join a Kahoot! trivia quiz.

Even movie days, that once reliable treat for students, are losing relevance in the face of the TikTok feed. The TikTok algorithm uses search history to feed users personally relevant content at a remarkably fast clip. If a user gets bored, they can immediately go to the next video (down an infinite rabbit hole) – potentially scrolling through hundreds of videos within minutes in their search for more. Much like traditional classroom instruction, movies have broad, content-specific appeal, are not individually tailored, and require a far longer attention span.

Academically motivated students don’t need to be as entertained when they value traditional public education as an end in itself – if you have some of them, consider yourself lucky. Though they undoubtedly appreciate and benefit from thoughtful lessons and critical engagement, students motivated by grades, class rank, and college admissions will do their work with gusto, regardless.

Therein lies the solution – or perhaps the question: How can we make the classroom more engaging than TikTok, especially for our least motivated students? Just as YouTube must steal viewers from TikTok to stay relevant, so, too, must teachers battle for the heart of the viewer. We’ve already been doing it for years, and the conflict is only growing.

I think of one student, let’s call him “A” – who had his phone out in class almost every day last semester. I threatened (and gave) detention for breaking the class cellphone rule; I called his home, I spoke with him one-on-one about the importance of doing well in school, and I tried to personally connect with him. Although he clearly didn’t want to disappoint me, he nonetheless returned to TikTok time and again.

But during our debate unit, something changed. When the day came for his group’s presentation, A took the lead, maintained focus, and developed powerful, authentic arguments. He was present, active, engaged, and his intellect took center stage. The learner within him emerged. All the while, the phone remained out of sight – if only for that day. It was a minor victory but an important one.

Creating consistently engaging lessons that allow students to own the curriculum may be a Herculean feat, but it’s not impossible. We will have our failures. But with patience and a steadfast resolve, we will also have our successes engaging our students.

Whether we wish to acknowledge it, social media platforms are winning with a simple algorithm that harnesses human psychology. We need an algorithm of our own. We need to steal back our viewers. TikTok and YouTube cannot take the place of good teaching. Nor can these attention-grabbing, algorithmically controlled platforms prepare students for the world beyond our classrooms.

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*https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-how-tiktok-and-youtube-made-me-a-better-teacher/2023/01*