

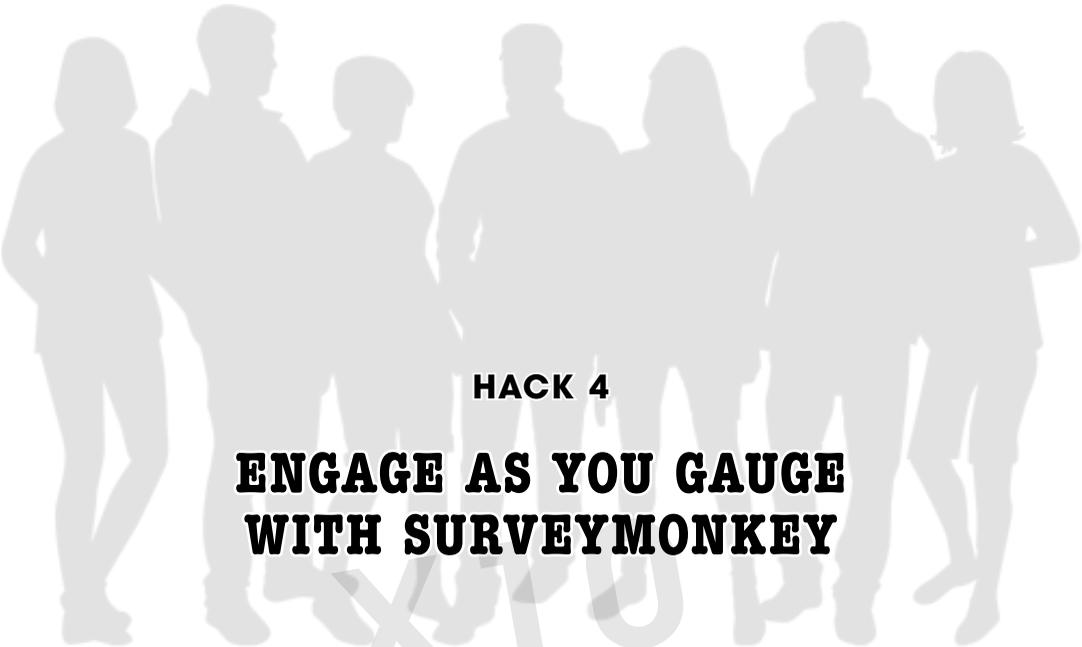
# HACKING ENGAGEMENT



**To Engage Teachers and  
Learners Daily**

**James Alan Sturtevant**





## HACK 4

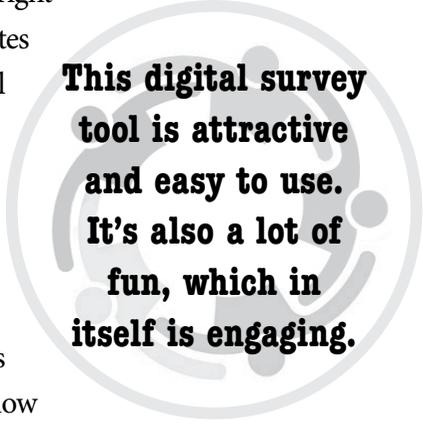
# ENGAGE AS YOU GAUGE WITH SURVEYMONKEY

### THE PROBLEM: TEACHERS DON'T KNOW STUDENT PREFERENCES

**T**RYING TO DETERMINE what someone else is thinking is one of life's great challenges. You may have spent the majority of a first date wondering just what was going on behind an unreadable face. Political candidates, advertisers, social scientists, product developers, and tech marketers place tremendous emphasis on gauging public sentiment. Understanding another's preferences can save time, effort, and money. When it comes to our students, let's become detective-like and solve the mysteries of their preferences. Once we know what appeals to the kids we teach, we can take advantage of this knowledge to engage them in learning.

I'm always amazed (and a little unnerved) when I'm on Facebook and I'm drawn to a compelling Amazon advertisement in the upper right-hand corner of the page. This image unfailingly promotes a product that Amazon has determined will appeal to me—it's targeted to my individual inclinations to make me feel I cannot do without it.

Sometimes, I take the bait. It's hard to resist when the ad has been tailored to push my buttons. The worlds of business and politics have long understood the motivational power of targeting a person's preferences. Successful presidential campaigns know exactly which voters, in which crucial districts, have to be



**This digital survey  
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contacted and then motivated to vote. Wouldn't it be cool if teachers could take their students' preference pulse? Learning kids' buttons, like Amazon diagnosed mine, has epic engagement potential.

**THE HACK: GAUGE STUDENT INTERESTS WITH A POLL**

One outstanding way to poll your students is through SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com). This digital survey tool is attractive and easy to use. It's also a lot of fun, which in itself is engaging. You simply create the poll and then give your students the link. I post mine on Google Classroom. Student responses in SurveyMonkey are anonymous. Hence, peer pressure is mitigated. When kids don't fear ridicule, they participate and express accurately.

**HERE ARE THREE WAYS TO USE SURVEYMONKEY:**

- Use polls to build relationships. You could ask students to rate their favorite food or music genres. Prompt them to help you with a tough purchasing decision: "Should I buy this, or this?" Or perhaps, they can help you choose between four potential vacation destinations. Surveys, like the one in Image 4.1, make for interesting brief detours from ultra-serious academics.

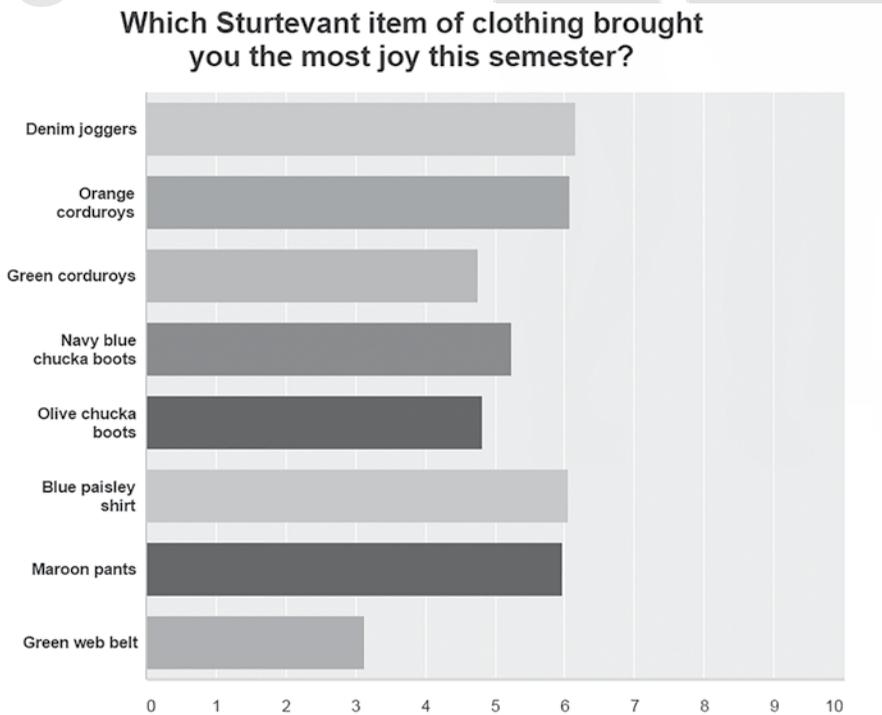


Image 4.1

- Commission students to be your engagement coaches. Ask kids to rank class activities from most to least desirable. You'll learn what they like and what they don't. Build more of their preferred activities into your repertoire and develop new ones based on the trends you notice. The more kids enjoy your class, the more engaged they'll be.
- Use SurveyMonkey to captivate students in the first five minutes of class. Preview a lesson with a dilemma-type multiple-choice question. Confront students with a number of controversial quotations and force them to advocate for one.
- Conduct a weekly presidential preference poll. Students then analyze trends.



Image 4.2

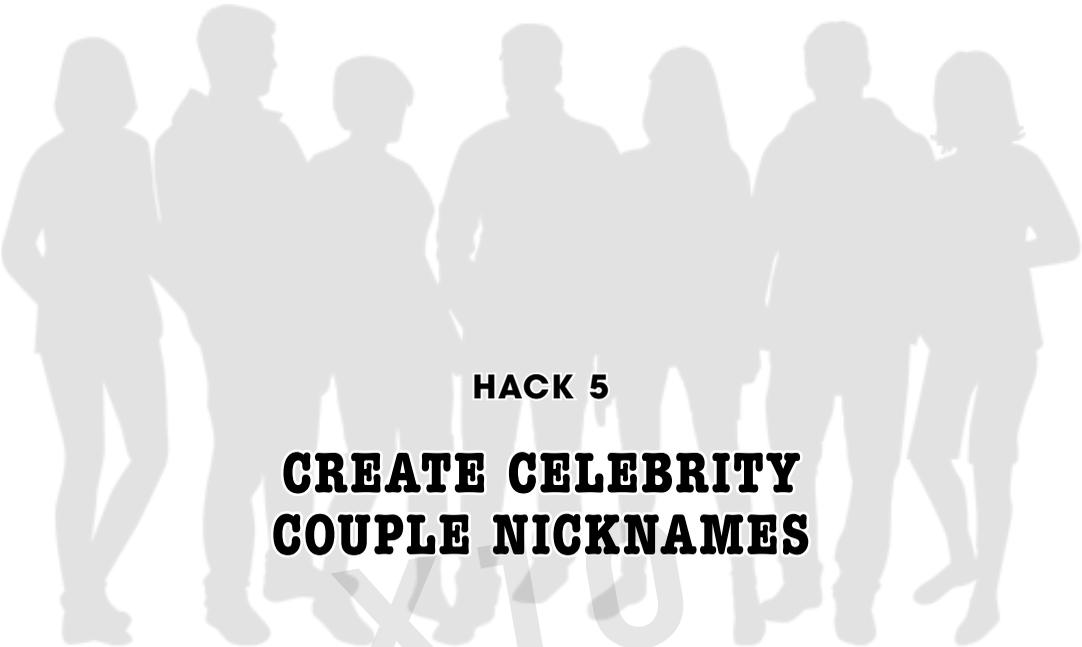
Listen to the episode of the *Hacking Engagement* podcast in Image 4.2 to learn more about engaging with SurveyMonkey.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Sign up for SurveyMonkey.** I've conducted all my surveys with the free version.
- **Create a poll.** Try a multiple-choice or ranking question.
- **Insert a hook.** At the beginning of a lesson, challenge students to take a stand, make a prediction, or provoke them with a deep question.

If you understand student preferences, you can create a more engaging class. SurveyMonkey will help in this endeavor.

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## HACK 5

# CREATE CELEBRITY COUPLE NICKNAMES

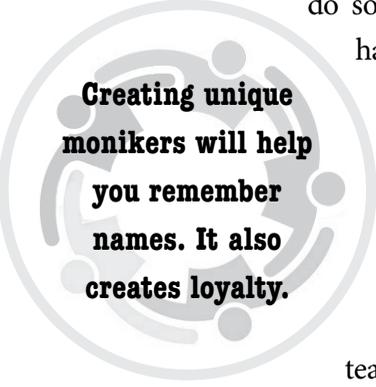
### THE PROBLEM: TEACHERS HAVE A HARD TIME REMEMBERING STUDENTS' NAMES

**W**HEN I WAS in college, I endured a miserable date. I had a big crush on a girl on campus. I knew she had a boyfriend, but I thought I'd make a superior romantic partner. When I learned they'd broken up, I sprang into action. Unfortunately, on our date she called me by her ex-boyfriend's first name three times. I felt miserable. *Does she even know my name? Why am I not making an impression? Is she obsessed with her ex?* There was not a second date.

When teachers don't know student names, it can be just as catastrophic:

- I'm insignificant.
- Mr. S doesn't notice me.
- I'm not important.
- Mr. S doesn't like me.
- I'm invisible.
- Mr. S knows other students' names. He must like them better.

If you want your students engaged, you simply have to know their names. It's essential. Here's the bad news: Learning student names is a huge challenge. Not only



**Creating unique monikers will help you remember names. It also creates loyalty.**

do some educators struggle remembering names, but they have many names to remember.

I interact with 150 students daily. It's also important to master the name recall process promptly. Ten days into class, you don't want to be saying, "Hey, you in the brown shirt, what's the answer to number ten?" Engagement will not materialize if students feel marginalized. And students *will* feel marginalized if teachers don't know their names.

### **THE HACK: CREATE NICKNAMES FOR YOUR STUDENTS**

Brad Pitt plus Angelina Jolie equals Brangelina is a solid example of a celebrity couple nickname. Morphing two names into one can be done with most students' first and last names:

- Merri Buckles becomes Merckles.
- Christopher Ward becomes Wardopher.

Sometimes you can take elements of each name, mainly hard consonant sounds, and then combine them to create familiar and expressive words:

- Samantha Bickley becomes Smack.
- Josey Burdge becomes the Surge.

And finally, some names transform into something truly creative:

- Trevor Ambrose becomes Trambrosia.
- Alexandrina Hernandez becomes Alehendrines.

Creating unique monikers will help you remember names. It'll also create loyalty to your class: *Mr. S calls me Trambrosia. That's cool.* And student loyalty equals engagement.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Take your seating chart and create celebrity nicknames out of the first and last names.** Just the creation of the nickname itself will significantly help you in the name recall process.
- **Challenge kids to morph your name.** My favorite kid concoction was James Sturtevant equals The Vant Jam.
- **Deputize your students to create their own celebrity nicknames.** A few students may decline and that's perfectly their right. My experience has been that students really enjoy this challenge.
- **Make it a game.** Flash some images of celebrity couples up on your Smart Board and challenge students to guess their couple nickname. Alternatively, you can put the names on a social channel like Twitter, Snapchat, or Pinterest, or a digital pin board like Wordle or Note.ly. You could even have kids put their names on posters or butcher paper. No matter how you do it, kids will love it, and you'll learn their names in no time.

You can't engage kids if you don't know their names. Creating celebrity nicknames will transform this tedious chore into a fun game that students will love, and it will help you connect with them immediately.

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## HACK 6

# CLASS PROCEDURES NIGHT AT THE IMPROV

### **THE PROBLEM: CLASSROOM RULES PRESENTATIONS TORMENT STUDENTS ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL**

**T**EACHERS NEED TO think of the first day of school like opening night. What's true for Broadway and Hollywood is also true in the classroom: Opening night can make you or break you. If audiences and critics are not engaged, a show will have a short life. If students aren't engaged on day one, everyone could be in for a long semester.

Some educators approach opening classes as a time to lay down the law. They drone about the rules, the consequences, the expectations. They may be the same educators who buy into the ridiculous old adage, "Don't let them see you smile 'til Thanksgiving." *Really?* If you don't smile much before Thanksgiving, you're probably not going to smile much after.

Paranoia about anarchy is not a reason to ignore the massive engagement potential of the first classes. If you're able to grab them by the virtual lapels on day one, you'll generate significant enthusiasm for your class. Expectations must be communicated, but make certain to warmly embrace engagement too.

### **THE HACK: CREATE A CLASS PROCEDURES NIGHT AT THE IMPROV**

Teachers often think in terms of rules. Rules tend to be punitive. How about replacing "rules" with "procedures"? Rather than setting rigid regulations that students must

adhere to or risk being disciplined, procedures offer concrete actions that can easily be followed. Framing student behavior in these terms feels more positive and empowering. Once teachers embrace procedures, they need to communicate them in a more engaging way than presenting students with a list on a sheet of paper or bullets on PowerPoint slides.

Follow the improv recipe described below and make day one a blast. You'll empower kids to come up with remarkable improvs. They'll frequently create hilarious scenarios with slacker rule breakers and stern authority figures. Sure, there'll be some pushback on some of your procedures, but you should embrace the dialogue. Perhaps if you're struggling to defend a policy, you may want to rethink it. When it comes to your policies, the combination of performing an improv and participating

in a debriefing discussion may lead to more student buy-in. Regardless, *Class Procedures Night at the Improv* will be an engaging, active, hilarious first day experience for your students. Expect lots of opening night five-star reviews.

If you're thinking this sounds amazing, listen to the episode of the *Hacking Engagement* podcast devoted to student improvs, linked in Image 6.1.



Image 6.1

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Identify class procedures that would be suitable to improv.** You can then provide student groups a brief prompt like, “Demonstrate the importance of arriving on time.”
- **Demonstrate an improv.** This could be a YouTube video, or perhaps you could pull aside some dramatic students before class and ask them to show how it's done.
- **Organize your student groups.** Do this before class. Allocate your dramatic kids to various groups. You want at least one ham in each acting troupe. Also distribute diligent students. It's nice for a play to have a director.

- **Give them two jobs.** They must depict the procedure and explain why it's important.
- **Display a large stopwatch or timer.** Give them one minute to come up with their improv. The large ticking numbers will add urgency and focus.
- **Prepare a class procedures handout.** This will be distributed after the improvs. It'll reinforce the performances and hopefully lead to some engaging class discussion. You'll be afforded the chance to defend policies, while at the same time, offer students a chance to be heard.

Students are often struck comatose by long, boring, repetitive rules presentations on the first day of school. The *Class Procedures Night at the Improv* will communicate important information in a highly engaging way.

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## HACK 7

# CREATE A MOVIE TRAILER FOR YOUR CLASS

### THE PROBLEM: YOU NEED A NEW WAY TO GENERATE CURIOSITY AND ENTHUSIASM FOR YOUR CLASS

**E**VERY YEAR YOU do the same things on the first day. You hand out a syllabus and go over the class rules. Students probably have remarkably similar experiences in their other classes. By seventh period on the first day of school, many overly indoctrinated students are ready for Christmas break. How about trying something new?

On your last movie date with your significant other, the theater probably ran some previews prior to the main feature. Your significant other probably remarked, “I can’t wait to see that when it comes out.” People are supremely engaged by trailers—that’s the purpose of having a trailer to begin with. Try applying the same marketing tactics to your classroom.

### THE HACK: CREATE A MOVIE TRAILER FOR YOUR CLASS

Instead of being part of the predictable teacher herd on day one, craft an engaging trailer for your class. Yes, this trailer can include classroom procedures, but the main focus should be on building curiosity and enthusiasm. An additional wonderful benefit of the class movie trailer is that it can be easily shown to parents. Forcing busy parents to watch your class trailer may indeed be a bridge too far, but how about if you could entice Mom or Dad to watch? Maybe you could send a promotional email, or enlist your students’ help. The goal is to generate significant parent engagement and



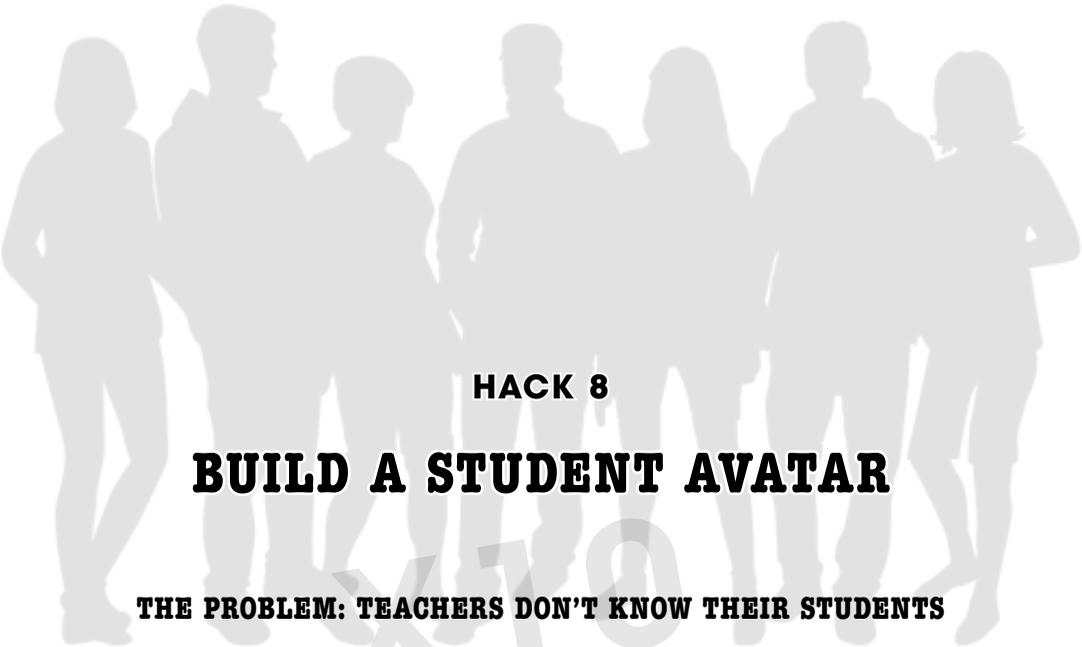
Image 7.1

enthusiasm for what you're doing with their tender offspring. Just make sure your class movie trailer is a good one. Image 7.1 transports you to my twelve-minute class trailer.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Create a class movie trailer.** You can screen record a PowerPoint or a Prezi and do a voice-over. I created mine on the Moovly platform. On both Moovly and Prezi, you can insert sound files. Once you've blended your voice with the presentation, upload the video file to YouTube. Then, anyone can access your trailer.
- **Create a leave-behind.** This handout would include relevant class information. But instead of you droning on about the obvious, students can simply read it for themselves.
- **Don't set the pace.** Kids watch videos constantly on their devices. Instead of showing the trailer to the entire class on the Smart Board, give students the link to the trailer and free them to watch it at their own convenience.
- **Create a buzz.** Promote your trailer on social media such as your Twitter and Facebook accounts and also your teacher website.
- **Concoct a method to entice parents to watch your trailer.** You can encourage them through an email, or perhaps you could offer students extra credit if they persuaded the parental unit to watch.

A great way to engage students and parents is to create a class movie trailer. Such a trailer affords a wonderful opportunity to build curiosity and enthusiasm for your class.



## HACK 8

# **BUILD A STUDENT AVATAR**

### **THE PROBLEM: TEACHERS DON'T KNOW THEIR STUDENTS**

**P**ICTURE THIS: YOU'RE driving on a Sunday afternoon, not thinking about school at all, and then suddenly, tomorrow's lesson plan forcefully presents itself. That's what happened to me last week. I was listening to a podcast about, of all things, creating a podcast. The host, John Lee Dumas, passionately promoted the idea that podcasters need to know their audience avatar. That got my attention.

Avatar is an engaging word. As soon as he said it, I immediately conjured up images of animated blue people, of Hindu gods and goddesses, of profile picture caricatures. John Lee Dumas challenges podcasters to create an avatar based on their typical listener. This creation then pilots the boat. All decisions are based on the needs of this imaginary, but very important, concoction. After listening to this segment, I knew exactly what I was going to do the next day: Build a student avatar.

### **THE HACK: CREATE AN AVATAR OF YOUR TYPICAL STUDENT**

I teach high school students. By the time they get to me, they've completed plenty of *Tell Me About You* surveys. I wanted this information too, but I wanted to procure it in a more engaging, attractive, interactive, and enjoyable way. Such knowledge would certainly guide me in creating engaging lessons. I also wanted students to be inspired. Perhaps, they could take the information from my survey and apply it in some cool ways. Maybe they would be motivated to create their own surveys and avatars. I crafted mine (Image 8.1) on SurveyMonkey. It consisted of ten questions

with drop-down menus. Half of the prompts were about demographics, the rest were about preferences.

Student Engagement Avatar

1. Do you have a job?
2. Do you play a sport?
3. Do you live with both of your parents?
4. How many people live in your house?
5. Which do you prefer?
6. Which form of social media do you like best?
7. How do you like to learn?
8. Which method of lecture do you prefer?
9. Which type of assessment do you prefer?
10. What's your favorite thing to do with your free time?

Done

Image 8.1

SurveyMonkey is perfect for collecting data to create an avatar because students can answer anonymously. I've found this leads to great honesty and increased participation. SurveyMonkey then presents results in an attractive and informative fashion with bar graphs and percentages. The most popular answers to my survey become

the building blocks of my student avatar. Once students submit, you'll have vital information on each learner. You can then draw on it when you personalize instruction. Perhaps a youngster loves lectures—you respond by providing this student with a podcast link. This student then joyfully listens to an expert regale her about the lesson topic. Such a learning vehicle would leave a different student cold, but not this youngster. She's in the zone. That's engagement.

You can learn even more about the power of student avatars in the *Hack Learning* podcast Episode 39 (use the QR code in Image 8.2 to get there).



Image 8.2

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

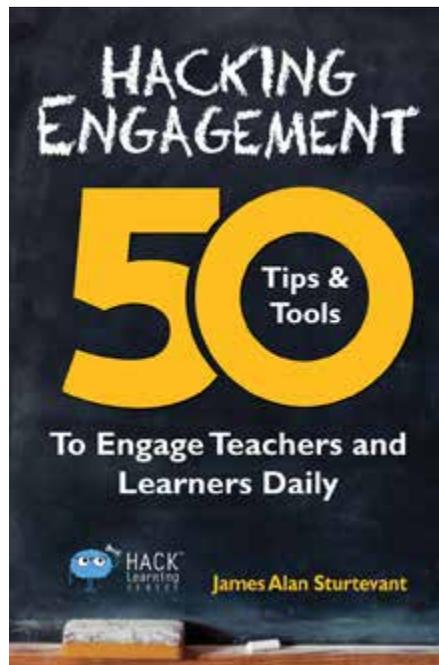
- **Introduce the concept of an avatar.** Explain what is meant by this term. You may wish to show the trailer from the movie *Avatar* and discuss why it was titled this way.
- **Create a SurveyMonkey survey.** Ask learners basic questions that will help you build the student avatar.
- **Review the results.** Display them on your Smart Board, blog, or social channel, and talk about responses to each question. Kids find this fascinating, because ultimately it's about them.
- **Create a student response Google Form.** Provide a link to the SurveyMonkey results. Ask them to compare themselves to the emerging avatar.
- **Challenge students to bring the avatar to life.** Students could write a biography of the avatar, draw a picture of the avatar, create a Facebook page or Twitter account for the avatar.
- **Challenge the avatar.** Being like the avatar is not necessarily desirable. Prompt students to take issue with the avatar. Challenge them to list ways that being like the avatar is undesirable. Challenge them

to find examples of when people challenged avatars and all of society benefitted.

- **Apply the concept outside of class.** Students could research examples of avatars in various professions, cultures, or time periods. Perhaps, students could create their own surveys and create their own avatars.

Knowing your student avatar will facilitate learner engagement. Have a blast finding your student avatar by following the directives in this hack.

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