

"Blocking" Lessons: A Classroom Choreography

"How do I spend ninety minutes with students in a way that maximizes opportunity to learn, keeps students on-task, and doesn't drive me nuts in the process?"

These are some questions teachers typically ask when they make the transition from shorter class periods (40-50 minutes) to longer periods (80-120 minutes) of learning time. Below are some practical tools, tips, and techniques for getting the most out of block of time learning.

1. *Save your voice for the important things.* Use your voice for clear explanations and giving good examples of the ideas you are trying to convey. Write instructions for individual or group work on the board or overhead projector.
2. *Post a daily class agenda on a newsprint sheet or chalkboard.* Your daily class agenda may include:
 - o 30 minutes--teacher introduces a new idea, topic, or skill.
 - o 30 minutes--students work in small groups to review concept, skill, or issue presented.
 - o 30 minutes--teacher introduces another new idea or holds whole group discussion.
3. *Use learning stations as the basis for organizing time.* Divide the class into learning teams and rotate the teams through a series of learning stations that require them to perform a key task related to the topic under study.
 - o 15 minutes--introducing and directing the work.
 - o 20 minutes--Station 1
 - o 20 minutes--Station 2
 - o 20 minutes--Station 3
 - o 15 minutes--reviewing and refining learning
4. *Use the "workshop way" in your discipline.*
 - o 15 minutes--sustaining silent reading (everybody reads)
 - o 15 minutes--reader response forms (everybody writes in response to an analysis of the reading selection)
 - o 30 minutes--choices (everybody must do one of the following):

journal reflections

peer review or a required essay/product

research (including pass to library/media center to do multi media searches)

conference with the teacher (oral discussion of work in progress)

publishing center (final print-out of work in progress)

presentation rehearsal (practice/feedback with peer or performance)

- o 30 minutes--whole group instruction (may include teacher reading to class, class reading to teacher, discussion of story/themes, critical review of stories, read, etc.)

5. *Employ cooperative learning strategies.* Dividing classes into smaller groups that work on the same or different tasks provides several benefits. Students learn the skills of group work by using roles, following rules, keeping records, and focusing on results. They can review what the teacher has just taught, or they can build on prior knowledge by pursuing something new. The teacher introduces or reviews the group work fundamentals: positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, social skill development, and face-to-face interaction. Learning stations can also optimize use of scarce equipment or resources. Both cooperative learning tasks and learning stations provide hands-on learning experiences, require practice of essential knowledge and skills, free up the teacher to observe and assess learning, and are more likely to meet individual student needs.

Jigsaw

Students work in teams. Each member of a team chooses one of the reading assignments (Selections A, B, C, D, and E.) The teacher provides time for each "assignment alike" group to meet, read their selection, and discuss its main ideas. The teacher has the teams get together and each none teaches the others, using the ideas from the reading selection. Finally, the teacher brings all of the teams together to review key ideas, terms, or operations. In a block scheduled class, the daily agenda might look like this:

- 15 minutes--attendance, introduction to the process, organization of teams, distribution of readings.
- 30 minutes--students meet in assignment alike groups ("expert" groups) to read and discuss key ideas, facts, principles, etc.
- 30 minutes--students meet in home teams to review each section. Each member teaches the others the key ideas.
- 15 minutes--the teacher convenes the whole class to reinforce main ideas, give homework assignment building on the reading and discussion.

Cooperative Logic

Students are assigned to teams and each team is given an envelope containing clue cards. Each person receives one or more clue cards. From the information provided, the team must determine the problem and use the facts provided to reach a solution. An example of a cooperative logic problem follows: Who is Standing Next To Whom?

1. Keisha is almost the tallest. Otis is almost the shortest.
2. Jose was disappointed that he couldn't stand next to John.
3. Kevin has three kids on each side of him in the line-up.
4. John and Luanne are standing at the ends of the line-up.
5. Jose and Angela are not next to each other.
6. Otis is the only boy that is standing between two girls.
7. Angela didn't get to stand next to her best friend.
8. The students are lined up from tallest to shortest.
9. There are seven students in the line-up.
10. Angela and Luanne are best friends.

Source: Get It Together: Math Problems for Groups, Grades 4-12 Lawrence Hall of Science Berkeley, California: 1989.

6. *Make assessment part of the instructional process.* Build into your instructional time opportunities for students to:
 - Add materials to their portfolios.
 - Have a personal conference with the teacher.
 - Review a videotape of their performance to assess how well they execute a procedure, using an agreed upon rubric.
 - "Qualify" for points or credit by completing a performance (may be a demonstration to a group of elementary students, a presentation to another class, or a community service project).
 - Work on independent or group projects resulting in some tangible product (poster, diorama, working model, construction, report, multimedia presentation, video, database).

7. *Emphasized the importance of dialogue in learning.* One way to accommodate this to divide your class in half. While one half of the class works on independent projects or assignments, the other half sits with you in a circle or semi-circle to discuss a reading assignment. The reading selection should be an original source of work--a novel, play, or essay--not an excerpt from an anthology. The purpose of the dialogue is for students to articulate their own ideas about the meaning and value of the work. The teacher elicits both opinion and questions through open-ended inquiries. Some dialogue starters are illustrated below:
- Evidence--How does the author back up his or her claims? Can you cite specific evidence that the main character was trustworthy/fair/disloyal.
 - Perspective--Who wrote this? How do you know? What were the conditions at the time the author expressed these ideas.
 - Connections--Where have you encountered this theme/issue before? Does this relate to anything that is happening in the world/in your life/in your family right now?
 - Consequence--What is the importance and significance of these ideas?
8. *Establish a set of routines and standards.* If all of your classes are the same length, you may start out the day with a set of short whole group "warm ups" and close with a set of whole group "cool downs." Math classes often start out with a problem of the day for which individuals or teams may earn "points." If your block schedule classes are of different lengths or different days, you may do your planning around the length of time available, such that the shorter sessions are used for review, exhibitions of performance, or formal testing. The routines should reflect the rhythm and language of the discipline. Laboratory investigations generally follow some introductory experiences or explorations, providing students with practical opportunities to observe scientific principles in action. These activities typically allow students to gather, use, and manage sets of data to draw generalizations and conclusions. Student hypothesis, tests, and conclusions are documented and summarized in a laboratory report, which becomes part of the students' science portfolios.

The standards a teacher may set for scientific thinking include:

- Student can define a problem
- Student can write a hypothesis
- Student can devise a research plan
- Student can carry out research Student can gather data accurately
- Student can organize data
- Student can analyze and interpret data
- Student uses a variety of sources
- Student can write a conclusion
- Student can present the findings visually and orally
- Student chooses a relevant problem
- Student can plan and adhere to a timeline

Source: The Grady Profile, Software for Teachers, Aurbach & Associates, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri.

9. *Put problems in the center of the classroom.* Most adult occupations deal with resolving problems faced by society--in law, medicine, agriculture, industry, business, finance, and government. By putting students in the roles of scientists, reporters, writers, artists, historians, mathematicians, and judges, schools can integrate the acquisition of basic skills with career exploration and the development of life long learning interests. Teachers who use real world problems let students address a concept, problem, or issue that they are likely to encounter in life beyond the classroom. The problem situation challenges students to think more deeply, apply learnings to real-life situations, examine the information they discover, and use their knowledge to construct ethical solutions to problems.

Example: (from an individual mathematics task)

"We are making a bookcase to hold our new stereo. We need to have three shelves. The top shelf must contain three compartments; the second shelf, two compartments; the bottom shelf, one compartment. We also have 6 boards that are 60" long, 2.5" wide, and 1" thick. You may use only the materials provided. Draw a diagram of what the bookcase will look like when finished. Use fractions to show how you will cut the boards to make the compartments."

10. *Encourage student dialogue.* Teachers who emphasize logic, reasoning, and effective communication require students to engage in substantive conversation with the teacher and/or peers in a way that builds improved and shared understanding of ideas and topics. Conversations are characterized by discussing different points of view openly, seeking solutions mutually, creating positive and productive relationships. Socratic Seminars are a specialized format for generating critical thinking and essential questioning. While the rest of the class works on individual projects or rehearsals, a teacher might work with 10 to 15 students who have completed a major reading (a novel, case, or essay) in a seminar format. The teacher prepares for the seminar by constructing questions for which:
0. there could be many possible responses;
 1. the leader does not have all the answers;
 2. all participants can respond (round robin, voting);
 3. questions are based on the reading assignment. Example: (from an English class)
 - What did the author mean by "_____?"
 - How would you rate "_____?"
 - Can you find a passage in the text that supports that position?
 - How is "_____" different from "_____?"
 - How does this relate to today?
 - What two or three themes have come up repeatedly in this discussion?

11. *Require students to complete projects.* The project usually results in some tangible product- a written report, a display, a collection, a poster, a construction, or a performance. Teachers who expect their students to plan and carry out projects often demand that their students communicate their knowledge through a product or performance provided for an audience beyond the teacher, classroom, and school building. Projects help students learn to manage time in group work, solve problems together, integrate content, and develop lifelong work habits. Teachers use portfolios, exhibitions, and oral presentations to assess learning from project related work.

Example: (from a Social Studies class)

The Black Hills Debate There is a current political and sociological debate regarding the return of the Black Hills to the Lakota Sioux. The Lakota were the Native Americans who lived in the Black Hills before the United States took possession of the territory. Your task is to research the history of the possession of the Black Hills from the time of the Lakota and investigate the points of view of all those who were and are currently affected by this issue.

- Use at least three sources for your research (books, personal interviews, articles, newspaper reports)
- As a team, construct an argument for or against the return of the Black Hills to the Lakota, citing your sources as support.
- Present your argument to a public policy group studying the issue.
- You may present your argument using visuals, a pamphlet prepared for the public, an oral presentation, a slide show, etc.

Source: Jo Sue Whisler, *The High Success Network*, Eagle, Colorado, 1994.

12. *Develop authentic assignments.* Students perform the same activities that successful adults, such as scientists, musicians, business managers, novelists, nurses, and designers do. This serves to motivate as well as to deepen understanding by exploring concepts and skills with thoroughness. Teachers require students to demonstrate their knowledge in use, culminating in an observable performance or product. Teachers encourage students to self- assess, self-evaluate, and self-regulate their own work.

Example: (from a social studies class)

"Select one of the neighborhoods marked in the city map. Identify its current features by doing an inventory of its buildings, businesses, housing, and public facilities. Identify current transportation patterns and traffic flow. Describe any special problems this neighborhood is experiencing. As a group, consider various plans for changing and improving the neighborhood."

13. *Vary Questioning Techniques.* Teachers ask open-ended questions so that students manipulate information and ideas through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as well as recall, comprehension and application. The teacher's questions stimulate all forms of thinking, including higher order thought processes. Teachers respond to learning preferences, show students how to organize thinking about the content being learned and encourage students to think about their own thinking.

Example: (from an urban geography group task)

"After deciding on a plan, draw and label it on the overlay provided with your map. Indicate in a written narrative one possible plan you rejected, and explain why you rejected it. Explain how your plan will promote and achieve the neighborhood features you want."

14. *Integrate Technology.* By providing classroom opportunities to make and use a variety of tools to gather, analyze, and manipulate data, teachers help students make connections between what they are learning in school and workplace skills required in the world beyond school. One of the strategies for this is using computers, CD-ROM, laser disk, and multi-media to enhance project-based learning and authentic assessment. Another is requiring students to show the results of their work in a product or presentation.

Example of technology as an instructional support (from a social studies class using The Decisions, Decisions Series available for MAC, APPLE II, or MS-DOS, from Tom Synder Productions, Inc)

Students become presidents of countries faced with international relations dilemmas or massive immigration problems, and town mayors faced with environmental crises. "On-line advisors" point students to opinions, facts, precedents, and advice drawn from history and current events. Students are exposed to all sides of the issues and quickly learn the complexities involved in decision-making. Students learn to set priorities, think critically about what they read, make connections, and anticipate consequences.

0. Students uncover a real world dilemma through an on-line presentation and critical reading of the scenario in their reference books.
1. As a whole group, students prioritize their goals.
2. Online advisors point students to relevant historical references and offer multiple perspectives on the decisions students face.
3. Opposing viewpoints and examples from the past spark lively classroom discussions as students come to a consensus on what action to take.

The computer presents the actual consequences. Advisors reappear to offer additional help.