

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary
EDITION

Northeast USD 246
Making Success Our Business



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Bringing Lessons to Life

It's April: Hold a class poetry slam!



"To have great poets," said Walt Whitman, "there must be great audiences, too."

During National Poetry Month, why not stage a class poetry slam? Let your students shine as poets, members of a poetry audience and even poetry performers.

Poetry slams represent every facet of language arts—writing, reading and oral language. In traditional slams, the audience judges each poet, but you don't have to incorporate this into your classroom slam. You can create a rubric to have students rate one another or simply grade students yourself.

Take the whole month to work on the project. Here are some ideas:

- **Week 1.** Start by reading a variety of age-appropriate poems each day. Have lots of poetry books in your class library and encourage students to read them independently.
- **Week 2.** Have students begin working on their own poems. Ask them

to write at least five lines, but emphasize that the poems are their own creations. Encourage them to use their imaginations about topics and formats. Tell them the poems *don't have to rhyme*. Some students get so worried about rhyming that they have difficulty writing a poem.

- **Week 3.** Have students prepare for their performances. They should practice reading their poems aloud with as much expression as possible. Talk with students about props they may want to use.
- **Week 4.** This is performance week. You can hold your slam over the course of one day or several days. Ask students if they would like to invite other members of the school community or keep the slam within the classroom only.

Source: Gary Hopkins, "Stage a Poetry Slam!" Education World, www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/02/1p262-04.shtml.

Improving Study Skills

Help students learn ways to recall facts



Elementary school students need to master many basic facts—in math, spelling and social studies. For some students, memorizing facts comes easily. Others need to be taught the skill.

The techniques that are most effective depend on a student's individual learning style.

Visual learners make up about 65 percent of a student body. To help visual learners recall facts, teach them to:

- **Create mental pictures.** Say, "Look at this map in the textbook. Take a picture of it in your brain." Later, students can call up that image.
- **Use color.** Help students use colored markers or highlighters to make content stand out.
- **Create their own visual symbols and diagrams.**

Auditory learners make up about 30 percent of students. They will listen intently to what you have to say, but might have trouble making notes. To help auditory learners, have them:

- **Repeat their spelling words or math facts aloud.** Creating a "rap" or poem with basic facts can be helpful to auditory learners.
- **Rewrite their notes.** The act of copying something over again will let them "hear" themselves dictate the facts and make them "stick" in their minds.
- **Teach the material** to a partner—or to a parent.

Source: "Strategies for Success: Memory Techniques," www.accd.edu/sac/history/keller/ACCDitg/SSMT.htm.

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Building Responsibility

Build responsibility for health & fitness



A healthy child is more likely to attend school with the stamina and alertness required for learning. Emphasize to students that keeping their minds and bodies sound is an important responsibility.

Here are some ideas:

- **Model good habits.** (You knew that was coming.) Students may emulate your brisk walk around the school grounds at recess and the healthy lunch you bring to school.
- **Encourage students** to set goals. Reward students who meet their goals to have a fruit or vegetable every day for lunch. Make the reward extra free reading time, not food.
- **Have students group foods** into categories such as: “Eat all the time.” “Eat sometimes.” “Eat once or twice a week.”
- **Give students time to move.** Participate with them on the playground and encourage active play. Do not withhold recess or P. E. for poor behavior or missed assignments.

Source: Caralee Adams, “50 ways to motivate kids,” *Instructor*, September 2006 (Scholastic, Inc., 1-866-436-2455, www.scholastic.com/instructor).

Motivating Students: Part Four of a Four-Part Series

Motivate students with positive thinking



A familiar business motto is: “The customer is always right.” At school, the “customer” is the student. The following ideas for motivating students to think positively about school, love school and love to learn are straight from one such customer—a fourth-grade boy:

- **Work on projects.** It’s fun because students can really show what they’ve learned. Projects are also great because several kinds of learning are going on at the same time.
- **Work in groups.** This is better than working alone. Change groups often so students get to know all their classmates.
- **Give choices.** Give two or three choices on assignments. Then students can do assignments in the ways they learn best. It also makes

them feel like the assignments are theirs, not the teacher’s.

- **Focus on positive consequences.** Students usually think consequences mean something bad. Give examples of positive consequences—such as, if you choose to study a little bit each day, you won’t have to “cram” the night before a test.
- **Be nice!** The way you act teaches students how to act toward each other, toward you and other adults. It makes them want to be on their best behavior because *you* always demonstrate your best behavior. When a teacher has a pleasant tone of voice and smiles a lot, it makes the classroom a place that students want to come to each day.

Source: Bob Sullo, *Activating the Desire to Learn*, ISBN: 1-4166-0423-5 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Connecting With Students

Encourage routines for autistic students



Teachers are seeing increasing numbers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in their classrooms. The number of children diagnosed with ASD has jumped more than 50 percent in the past three years alone. How can you create a positive learning environment?

Routines are important for all students, but in particular for children with autism. When the classroom day is predictable and organized, students with autism will find it easier to make transitions.

Here are some ideas that will work for *every* child in your class:

- **Create labels** for each classroom activity. With younger children, you can use pictures (a computer for computer time, books for

reading). At the start of each day, use these labels to create a schedule. Post it in the front of the room where everyone can see it.

- **Focus on transitions.** Children with autism can have a difficult time moving from one activity to another. An easy way to signal that a change is coming is to play music. Use the same song to signal each transition.
- **Give advance warning.** Gently tell a child with autism that it is almost time to stop an activity.
- **Avoid flashing lights on and off.** Too much sensory stimulation for a student with autism may be overwhelming.

Source: Clarissa Willis, *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, ISBN: 978-0-87659-008-9 (Gryphon House Books, 1-800-638-0928, www.gryphonhouse.com).

Capturing Attention

Refocus & clarify if spring fever takes over



You're trying to tell your students how to do their math assignment. But they're doodling on their hands, gazing at a spot on the ceiling or looking out the window.

When spring fever begins to take hold, it can be hard to get students to follow your directions. Here are some tips on capturing attention:

- **Use both written and verbal** directions if more than two steps are involved.
- **Do not talk over students.** If step one is to take out their math books, WAIT until all math books are out on their desks.
- **Think about the steps** that have caused problems in the past.

Review or clarify your directions for these steps.

- **Stress sequence by using** the words *first*, *second* and *third*. These are clearer for students than *1, 2, 3* or *a, b, c*.
- **Do not wait to assign homework** as students are about to walk out the door. Many students won't hear you and some of them will think it's optional.
- **Make sure your directions** are clear. If more than two students ask you to clarify, you know your directions were *not* clear.

Source: Paula Rutherford, *Why Didn't I Learn This in College? Teaching and Learning In the 21st Century*, ISBN: 0-966-33361-6 (Just ASK Publications, 1-800-940-5434, <http://askeducation.com>).

Resources



Although brain science is still sorting things out, it's becoming increasingly clear that boys and girls process information differently. Boys who may not be succeeding in school are not necessarily unable to learn. But they may learn in very different ways from students in a typical classroom. *Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School* helps teachers recognize learning differences, and design success strategies for boys and girls. (ISBN: 978-1-4129-3663-7, Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com.)



Before Arbor Day (April 25) comes around, visit the National Arbor Day Foundation's website at www.arborday.org/kids. It's filled with fun activities to help your students learn the importance of planting and preserving trees. Try a game of Tree-vial Pursuit. Play "Who Wants to be a Tree-llionaire" (in which students can use their "leaf-lines" to answer questions. The site also includes more traditional classroom activities, hands-on activity kits, posters and videos.

Building Reading Skills

Use self-stick notes to boost comprehension



Not all textbooks are written in a way that is clear and inviting. For many students it's a struggle to work their way through difficult vocabulary, new concepts and confusing ideas.

Self-stick notes can be especially helpful to struggling readers. When students can make a physical response to the text they are reading—marking words they don't know or jotting down questions they want answered—they are more likely to stay focused on what they are reading, process it and remember what they have just read.

Get a supply of self-stick notes in different colors. Then show students some ideas on how to use them. For example, they can:

- **Mark a big question mark** on a note and place it beside text they don't understand.

- **Mark a W** on a note and stick it beside a word they want to look up later.
- **Mark an exclamation point** on a note and place it next to something that makes them say, "Aha! Now I get it!"

You can develop other symbols that will help students focus on the text while they are reading it. The notes should last through two or three reading assignments, so they can be reused.

Sticky notes are not magic. But they will help students stay focused, which is critical to building reading comprehension.

Source: Elaine McEwan, *40 Ways to Support Struggling Readers in Content Classrooms, Grades 6–12*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-5206-4 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Tell us what you think!

We'd love to hear your ideas on how we might make your *Better Teaching* newsletter even better at helping you improve student achievement.

Which topics would you like to see covered more/less? Are there issues we are not addressing now that you would like to see included?

Other suggestions? We'd like to hear from you. Send your ideas to *The Teacher Institute, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039*, 1-800-216-3667 (fax), or email betterteaching@teacher-institute.com.

Focus : Differentiated Instruction

Working With Mathematics

Differentiate math instruction for your students



Learning about number systems is a basic part of the elementary math curriculum. Here are four fun ways you can differentiate instruction in your class. Have students select one (or more) of these activities:

- 1. Research other number systems.** Have students learn about Roman numerals. Examine how the Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese and Mayans represented number concepts. Explore the Braille system.
- 2. Compare and contrast** two number systems using a Venn diagram. Older students can define the characteristics on which to compare the two systems.
- 3. Predict how our number system** will look in the future. Research how the Arabic-Hindu numerals have changed over time.
- 4. Create a unique system** of numbers. Decide whether it will be a place-value system or a counting system. Show important numbers (0 to 10, 100, 1,000 and 100,000) in their number system. Show how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. Give the system a creative name.

Source: Ann Maccagnano, *Identifying and Enhancing the Strengths of Gifted Learners*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-4253-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Teaching Every Student

Use a roadmap for gifted, talented



The SCAMPER method, developed by Robert F. Eberle, is a place to start when thinking about the best way to differentiate for your gifted and talented students. To SCAMPER:

- S Substitute.** Replace material students have mastered with material that will challenge them.
- C Combine.** Make sure students have the chance to use the content learned along with critical and creative thinking skills.
- A Adapt.** Change the curriculum, allowing students to move on.
- M Modify.** Provide opportunities for students to explore material in a deeper or more abstract way.
- P Put to other use.** Provide specific enrichment projects.
- E Eliminate.** Remove parts of the curriculum students have mastered.



Illustration by Bob George

- R Rearrange or reorganize.** Spend less time on standards you are required to cover and allow more time for students to create and work on original projects based on the curriculum.

Source: Diane Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, ISBN: 1-57542-105-4 (Free Spirit Publishing, 1-800-735-7323, www.freespirit.com).

Teaching Tips

Differentiate in content, process, product



Depending on your students' needs you may have to differentiate in one area of instruction or select strategies from several areas. Here are a few areas to consider.

For content:

Provide materials for different levels of learners. Some math students do well with mental math; others may need manipulatives to help them learn. Have learning stations where students can select from activities according to their abilities.

For process:

Use tiered assignments. Give more abstract tasks to learners who are

ready to tackle them. Group students by level, but move students in and out of groups. Permanent grouping may be considered tracking and is usually discouraged.

For product:

Allow some students to demonstrate learning orally, others by writing. Allow students to choose assignments according to their preferred learning styles—an oral report, a visual presentation or creation of a model.

Source: Michelle A. Langa and Janice L. Yost, *Curriculum Mapping for Differentiated Instruction, K-8*, ISBN: 1-4129-1495-7 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).