May 2008
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Better Teaching®

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement **Elementary EDITION**

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Bringing Lessons to Life

Link students' love of pets to learning

Your students probably have a diverse set of interests, but it's a safe bet that they all like at least one kind of pet. They will likely be enthusiastic about celebrating National Pet Week this month, and you can turn that enthusiasm into memorable and meaningful learning experiences.

Here are some ideas:

- **Perfect match.** Ask students to choose three people—a friend, classmate, teacher, young sibling or other family member. Have each student create a project—writing, drawing, building or using the computer—that matches each of those people with a "perfect pet." It can be any kind of animal. The project should communicate and persuade why that pet is such a perfect match for that person.
- **Pet proposal.** Have students create a proposal for acquiring a class pet. This can be a group project. Again, it can be any kind of animal, but students will need to convince you why this pet should be part of the classroom. Outline some important points to include in the proposal: What kind of care will the pet need? Who is going to provide the care? What will it cost?
- **A day in the life.** Assign a different type of pet to each student or group of students. Ask students to pretend to be that pet for a day. What does the pet see? Think? Wish for? Enjoy? Dislike? Encourage students to be creative with this project—make a poster, collage, cartoon or act out a skit.
- **Pet predictions.** Does the class have more dogs or cats as pets? Have groups of students survey members of their groups. Collect the surveys and chart the results on the board.

Source: Cara Bafile, "Pet Week Lessons for Every Grade," Education World, www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson311.shtml.

Improving Study Skills

Prepare students for tests—go beyond the bubble sheet

Helping students prepare for standardized tests doesn't mean just teaching them how to fill in the bubbles on an answer sheet. You can also prepare student with activities you use in your classroom every day.

Here are some activities to try:

- **Teach students to apply** what they have just read. Give students a short reading assignment. Then ask questions that extend their thinking. How does this story relate to their lives? Have they ever seen or done something like this?
- **Ask students to explain** their thinking. How did they come up with their answers?
- **Ask students to write down** all the steps of *how* they solved a math problem.
- **Brainstorm possible answers.** Help students see that their first idea might not be the only correct response.
- **Have students write** their own questions. This will help you see what *they* think is important.
- **Use flash cards.** Have students quiz one another on vocabulary, facts, times tables, states and capitals.
- **Play logic games.** Put logic puzzles on the board for students to solve.
- **Set time limits.** One big challenge for students is to finish in a specified amount of time. Make it a game—who can get five correct math answers in five minutes?

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Homework

Students continue learning from their assignments

It's not always necessary to read through and grade each and every piece of homework your students complete. You may want to reserve this for a few select assignments.

Instead, give students opportunities to continue learning from their assignments. For example:

- **Group students into pairs.** Have them explain to each other at least one thing they learned from the assignment.
- **Check reading assignments** by having students read short passages from their books aloud.
- **Ask students to check** their own homework, working from the textbook or from material you put on the board.
- **Have students exchange** and check each other's homework. This works especially well for assignments like spelling.
- **Be available** during independent work time to allow students to bring their homework up to your desk and look it over with you.

Source: Merrill Harmin with Melanie Toth, *Inspiring Active Learning*, ISBN: 1-4166-0155-4 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

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Working With ELL Students: Part One of a Three-Part Series

Respond to the stages of language learning

Teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) involves two critical questions: What is the student's present ability to speak and use English? How do I tailor responses and instruction to meet and advance the student's needs?

Here are some guidelines on tailoring your instruction, depending on students' experience with English:

- **Fewer than six months.** Students have few words and little comprehension. They communicate mostly by pointing, drawing, nodding or shaking their heads to indicate *yes* or *no*. Use short, direct phrases that call for action, such as "Show me."
- **Six months to a year.** Students usually speak one word at a time or use two-word phrases. Comprehension is improved but still limited. Ask *yes/no* questions. Use props such as word walls. Make labels for objects in the classroom.
- **One to three years.** Students speak in short sentences, but may have trouble with grammar and pronunciation. Comprehension is much improved. Abstract concepts may be difficult. Ask *why* or *how* questions. Ask for short explanations.
- **Three to five years.** Students have very good comprehension. Some abstractions may still need explanation. Sentence structure is very good with few errors. Ask students to make predictions and to explain their answers and thinking.

Source: Jane D. Hill and Kathleen M. Flynn, *Classroom Instruction that Works with English Language Learners*, ISBN: 1-4166-0390-5 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Deserved Praise

'Good' praise can sometimes be inadequate

"Good job!" Like most teachers, you probably utter that phrase several times a day. But researcher Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer says that "good" isn't always good enough. It doesn't give students enough information to try harder.

A teacher's praise is a primary motivator for students to keep trying. So remember these points as you offer praise to your students:

- **Increase your vocabulary.** Instead of saying, "Good job," tell students *what* was good. Say that they made a "strong and persuasive argument" or wrote an "insightful" poem. One side benefit—students will pick up your example and start using more descriptive words as they analyze their performances.
- **Don't wait for the finish line.** If you want students to participate in class discussions, offer quick feedback regularly. A simple "Wow" or a high five won't take much time—but will encourage a student to join in again.
- **Help students take pride** in their *own* work. One of kids' least favorite phrases is: "I'm so proud of you." Let your students take responsibility themselves.
- **Don't ignore failure.** Point out what needs to be changed. If you do this privately and in a positive way, you can help students learn from their mistakes.
- **Praise individual effort.** Avoid comparisons with other students.

Source: Emily Richards, "The Best & Worst in Praise," *Instructor*, May 2006 (Scholastic, Inc., 1-800-632-1586, www.scholastic.com/instructor).

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Connecting With Parents

Survey parents to create effective policies

As the school year starts to wind down, you may want to reach out to parents for help in evaluating some of your policies. A good place to start is with your homework policy.

Asking parents to get involved with their child's homework can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, studies show that parent involvement in homework leads to improved student achievement. On the other hand, parents can get too involved, and teachers receive wonderful essays clearly written by 37-year-olds.

Tell parents you want to design a homework policy for next year and that you need their help. Here are some questions you might ask:

- **Do parents have a good idea** of how often homework is assigned in your class?
- **Do parents know how long** each assignment should take?
- **Are parents generally aware** of the purpose of the homework?
- **Do parents see your feedback** on their child's homework?
- **Do parents feel they have** enough information to be helpful?
- **Were parents (or their child)** ever frustrated by an assignment?
- **How much time,** on average, does their child spend on homework each evening?

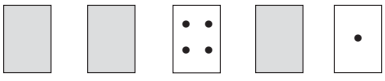
Source: Harris Cooper, *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, ISBN: 1-412-93713-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Building Math Skills

Domino cards can introduce binary numbers

Looking for a way to introduce binary numbers? Try this method:

1. **Lay out five cards**, each with a specific number of dots. The first card on the right has one dot. The next card has two dots. The third card has four dots. The fourth card has eight dots and the final card on the left has 16 dots.
2. **Hold up the cards *in order*** and ask students what they notice. Students should observe that each card has twice as many dots as the previous card. Then ask students how many dots would be on the next card in the sequence (32).
3. **Show students how to create** other numbers. With the cards laid out *in order*, demonstrate the number 3. (The 2-dot and the 1-dot cards face up and the rest face down.) Ask students how they would show 15. (The 8-, 4-, 2-, and 1-dot cards face up and the rest face down.)
4. **Have students count** from zero upwards, flipping cards face up or face down. For zero, they would place all cards face down. The number 5 would look like this:



0 0 1 0 1

5. **Tell students to assign** the number 1 to each face-up card (no matter how many dots are showing) and a 0 to each face-down card. In this case, the number 5 would be written 00101.

This is the binary number system. Let students continue to practice until they understand the concept.

Source: Tim Bell et al, "Computer Science Unplugged," www.google.com/educators/k_5.html.

Resources

Ever need to retrace your steps because you couldn't remember why you had headed down to the office? Or wonder why your students can't remember something you thought they had mastered yesterday? *Memory 101 for Educators* will help. Memory expert Marilee Sprenger combines research with practical tips for teachers and students on how to improve memory. The book also includes reproducible worksheets and student handouts. (ISBN: 1-412-92773-0, Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, *www.corwinpress.com.*)

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Teachers know that families play a critical role in children's literacy development. But they don't always know how to reach out to all families. That's the goal of *Children's Literacy Development: Making It Happen Through School, Family, and Community Involvement.* Patricia Edwards identifies the skills and strategies teachers need to reach all families. She also includes action steps to reach out to make more families a part of their child's learning. (ISBN: 0-205-32437-1, Pearson Education, 201-236-7000, *www.pearsoned.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.*

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Focus On: Critical Thinking

Encouraging Participation

Press conferences encourage higher-level thinking

After learning content, students should think about what they've learned, question it and make decisions based on their learning. Sharpen these skills with classroom "press conferences" following completion of a unit. Here's how it works:

1. **Select four or five students** to be the "expert panel" on the topic you have just finished studying.
2. **Assign the rest of the class** to be the corps of reporters.
3. **Have each reporter create** three questions to ask the experts. At least one of the questions must begin with *Why*.
4. **You play the role** of moderator and facilitator.
5. **Seat the panel at the front** of the class and group the reporters together a few feet away. Encourage reporters to raise their hands.
6. **Call on each reporter** to question the panel.
7. **Make sure each reporter** gets to ask at least one question and that different panelists answer questions. You can supplement with your own questions, too.

Choose different panelists each time you do this activity.

Source: Mark Reardon and Seth Derner, *Strategies for Great Teaching: Maximize Learning Moments*, ISBN: 1-56976-178-7 (Zephyr Press, 1-800-232-2187, www.zephyrpress.com).

Critical Thinking

Make connections with each concept

Acquiring isolated bits of knowledge is not really learning. Students must learn to link bits of information together by connecting and relating. This helps students understand, use, question and think critically about the knowledge they've acquired.

Here are some ways you can help students connect and relate:

- **Ask questions**—and more questions! "What does that remind you of?" "Can you think of any similarities between that and our previous lessons?" "Has that ever happened to you?"
- **Use Venn diagrams.** Among the easiest of graphic organizers, these are most useful for making connections. They show students how concepts are similar (those that overlap) and how they differ (those that are in their own circles).
- **Use the KWL graphic organizer:** K (what I Know), W (what I Want to know) and L (what I Learned.) This is a clear, concise way to help students link what they've already learned to their latest knowledge.

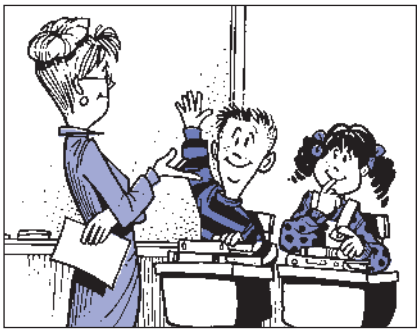

Illustration by Bob George

Source: R. Bruce Williams, *Higher Order Thinking Skills: Challenging All Students to Achieve*, ISBN: 0-9717332-5-2 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Problem Solving

Develop independent problem solving

Some students lack the confidence to work through problems without calling on you for help every step of the way.

To encourage independent learning, from time to time you can try turning your classroom into a "No Hands Up Zone."

Explain to students that your classroom will become a thinking zone. Have them create posters to show what a No Hands Up Zone is—and why it's important. (It gives students a chance to work in a quiet environment; it lets students think on their own.)

When you are introducing the idea, start with short sessions. Then have a discussion with your students. What did they like or not like? Did they encounter problems that just couldn't wait? How did they solve problems for themselves?

The goal is not to discourage students from asking questions. But as they gain experience solving problems for themselves, they will also gain the confidence to work on more challenging material.

Source: Gavin Reid, *Motivating Learners in the Classroom: Ideas and Strategies*, ISBN: 9781-4129-3097-0 (Paul Chapman Publishing, a Sage Publications Company, www.paulchapmanpublishing.co.uk).