

Better Teaching[®]

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary
EDITION

Wilderness Trail Educational Cooperative



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Bringing Lessons to Life

Trial integrates literature, government



Too often, students don't see how what they learn in one subject might apply in another subject. But two teachers—an English teacher and a government teacher—found that, by teaming up, they could teach the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and help students understand more about the justice system at the same time.

The teachers focused on two crimes that were reported in the novel—but had not yet come to trial. They created scenarios for a civil and a criminal trial for their students.

In the criminal trial, a case was brought against Boo Radley for the alleged murder of Bob Ewell. In the civil trial, the widow of Tom Robinson sued Mayella Ewell and family for a loss of reputation and standing in the community.

In each case, students acted as attorneys, witnesses and members of the jury. The only facts allowed to be

presented as evidence were those that were found in the novel. So in preparing for their testimony (or their cross-examination), students had to study the novel and refer to it to support their arguments and develop questions to ask their witnesses.

In the days leading up to the trial:

- **The “attorneys”** used class time to identify and depose witnesses, and to discuss and decide the order in which to call their witnesses.
- **The “witnesses”** talked with attorneys and brushed up on the facts of the case.
- **The “jury”** studied the novel so they could follow the proceedings.

The trial took place one day, with deliberations and a verdict announced the following day.

Source: Lori Kumler and Rina Palchick, “Integrating Government and Literature: Mock Civil and Criminal Trials Based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Social Education*, May/June 2008 (National Council for the Social Studies, 1-800-683-0812, www.socialstudies.org).

Motivating Students

Use a word wall to maximize learning in your classroom



Word wall—every elementary classroom has one. But a word wall can be a powerful interactive learning tool for secondary students, too, especially for students with a limited command of English.

To make a word wall work for you:

- **Put students in charge.** Allow them to choose the words, set up the wall and maintain it.
- **Set limits.** Have the class determine a set of guidelines for the wall.
- **Accommodate needs.** Do you share your classroom? Will you need a wall for each class? Consider posting each word wall on paper that can be hung from a pants hanger. Or make a word wall digital and post it on a screen. Have students figure out what works best.
- **Individualize it.** Ask students to create their own personal word walls. These could be kept on flip charts, laptops or in notebooks.
- **Use it.** Once you have created a word wall, refer to it during class.
- **Keep it current.** Have students evaluate how to improve it. Ask them to assess how useful it is for them.

A word wall can work in any content area classroom. And when students are in charge, you can maximize learning without wearing yourself out!

Source: Scott Elias, “Word Up,” Leader Talk, www.leadertalk.org/2007/08/word-up.html.

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Discipline

Don't let defiance disrupt your class



You want to teach Shakespeare, but the student won't sit down. And when you ask politely, you get a disrespectful response. One disrespectful, defiant student can "torment you with [a] bitter tongue."

Research supports these strategies for dealing with defiance:

- **Ignore the behavior** if it won't cause physical or psychological harm to other students. Many defiant students back down when they don't have an audience.
- **Get the student alone.** Taking on a defiant student in class can often escalate the problem and undermine your authority.
- **Establish appropriate consequences.** Explain the behavior you expect and the consequences if the student does or does not comply. Anticipate difficult encounters and have a list of consequences ready.
- **Be fair.** It's never appropriate to punish an entire class for the misbehavior of one student.
- **Have a plan** for getting additional adult help quickly.

Source: Nancy Protheroe et al., "Strategic Responses to Defiant Behavior," *Helping Struggling Learners in the Elementary and Middle Grades* (Educational Research Service, 1-800-791-9308, www.ers.org).

Technology: Part Three of a Four-Part Series

Ask questions before using Internet resources



Do a Google search for "teacher websites" and you'll find more than two million. Clearly, there is a wealth of Internet material for teachers to use when developing lesson plans.

Websites can allow students to view a primary source document housed in a far-away museum. They can give students a chance to watch open heart surgery or see a live shot from outer space.

But just because the sites are available doesn't mean they're the best educational choices for your classroom. Before you create a link, download a video or send your students to the computer, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- **What educational goal** do I want my students to achieve? How does this fit into my instructional goals for this class? Design your lesson exactly as you think you can teach

the subject best. When you think, "Boy, I wish I could ..." then it might be time to think about using technology.

- **Am I making my goal conform** to the technology? Or am I using technology as a tool to achieve the goal? Remember—your goal is not to teach students to use technology. Your goal is to teach them content.
- **Does this electronic tool** offer the best way to teach the content I am teaching? Or could I achieve my objectives just as effectively using a more low-tech source?

In a foreign language class, hearing a native speaker is a superb teaching tool. But looking at pictures of the Champs Élysées may not be a productive use of time.

Source: Gary G. Bitter, *Using Technology in the Classroom*, ISBN: 9780-2055-0894-5 (Allyn and Bacon, 1-800-666-9433, www.ablongman.com).

Teaching Tips

Use variations of Goethe's three questions



It's important to engage students in critical thinking and nudge them beyond giving one-word answers in class or limited responses on exams.

To guide them to higher-level responses, try using Goethe's three questions:

1. **What did the author say?**
2. **How well did he say it?**
3. **Was it worth saying?**

These questions work well for critical discourse about novels, poetry, short stories and even film.

The questions should be asked and answered in order. This way the students are engaged in restating, understanding and examining the original text on its own terms before

moving on to a more subjective analysis of the work.

You can also adapt the questions for your particular content area. For example, in a history or government class the questions might be:

1. **What did the person do?**
2. **How well did he do it?**
3. **Was it worth doing?**

After introducing your students to Goethe's three questions, invite them to come up with variations of their own. You may even decide to use some of their questions on an upcoming quiz or exam.

Refer to the questions often. You'll be giving your students a structure for critical thinking they can use for years to come.

Building Reading Skills

'I can read it, but I don't understand it!'



By middle school, most students have the ability to decode the words on a page. But many are still not able to understand what they read. Bill Bintz, an education professor at Kent State University, offers these tips for helping at-risk students increase their understanding in any subject area:

- **Read aloud.** Anyone teaching Chaucer will tell you there's a difference between asking students to read the text themselves or hear it while they read along. But reading aloud can be helpful in any subject area. Try reading aloud a challenging passage introducing new science vocabulary. Stop occasionally to discuss the meaning of a new word.

- **Choose high-interest materials.** Textbooks don't always offer the best way to introduce challenging material. Look for magazine articles or other high-interest writing that can convey the information. Students are more likely to finish the reading and develop better attitudes toward the subject.
- **Teach reading strategies.** Create graphic organizers. Help students learn how to take notes.
- **Build vocabulary.** Reading is the best way to build a larger vocabulary. So take every opportunity to build students' word base before they read challenging material.

Source: Bill Bintz, "Middle School Intervention Strategies for At-Risk Youth," National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Newsletter (Clemson University, 864-656-2599, www.dropoutprevention.org).

Resources



Writing well is one skill that contributes to student achievement in all content areas. To boost your students' writing skills, celebrate the birthday of Peter Roget, author of *Roget's Thesaurus*, on January 18th. Schedule some class time to show students how a thesaurus can be a valuable resource. You'll find information, tips, grammar resources, a style guide, a word of the day and more at <http://thesaurus.reference.com>.



"With malice toward none; with charity for all . . ." Thus begins the final paragraph of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. As the United States prepares for inauguration day, review this historic address with your students. The National Endowment for the Humanities has an excellent guide on their Edsitement page (http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=246) including learning objectives, background information, an audio recording and standards' alignment.



A teacher website is a must. Here are some free resources to check out. Homepage Startup (www.homepagestartup.com) offers a fill-in-the-blanks way to create a home page. Google Sites (www.google.com/sites/help/intl/en/overview.html) is free and integrates with Gmail and Google Calendar. Portaportal (www.portaportal.com) lets you give students easy access to web-based resources.

Classroom Management

Set lofty expectations for student behavior



Many teachers subscribe to the theory that cracking down on minor infractions, such as chewing gum in class, can head off more disruptive student behaviors. This strategy comes from the "broken-windows theory" which has been credited for reducing crime in some neighborhoods.

Why not put this to work in your classroom? But move the focus from reprimanding behavior *problems* to a focus on *excellent* behavior—from an emphasis on "broken windows" to highlighting "stained-glass windows." When educators set—and enforce—high standards, students will respond.

Consider the following chart:

Broken-Window approach	Stained-Glass Window approach
Reprimand students for talking in class.	Focus students on learning for every minute they are in class.
Don't allow students to sleep at their desks.	Expect students to sit up straight, maintain eye contact and listen.
Discourage profanity.	Expect students to speak respectfully using complete sentences and correct grammar.
Discourage inappropriate clothing.	Expect students to wear clothing appropriately (e.g. tuck in shirts).

Source: David Hill, "The 'Stained-Glass Window' Theory," *Education Week*, August 13, 2008 (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., 1-800-346-1834, www.edweek.org).

Share an Idea!

Do you have an idea to improve student learning that should be in this newsletter?

Send your ideas to **Better Teaching**, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, fax to 1-800-216-3667 or go to www.teacher-institute.com/ideas.

Full credit will be given with each article published. Materials sent cannot be returned.

Focus n: Improving Study Skills

Taking Notes

'I do it, we do it ... now you do it!'



Middle and high school teachers know that students often arrive in class without any idea of how to take notes.

Here's a simple three-step process that can teach students the important the note-taking skills they need:

- 1. I do it.** Use an overhead projector or the board. Tell students you will show them how to take notes during a lecture. Then, while you are talking, write sample notes for students to see. You can occasionally stop to comment on what you are doing. "Look at the abbreviations I have used here. They make note-taking faster."
- 2. We do it.** This time, invite students to help you as you continue to act as the note-taker. Stop occasionally to check if students are on the right track. Ask questions. "What are the three key words you just wrote down?"
- 3. You do it.** Give students a chance to take their own notes as you talk. After you are finished, have students check and compare their notes with a partner's notes. After this practice, students should be able to take lecture notes on their own.

Source: Elaine K. McEwan, *40 Ways to Support Struggling Readers in Content Classrooms, Grades 6–12*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5206-4 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Using Study Aids

Flap organizer makes great study aid



A flap organizer can be a great study aid in any content area. All students need is a piece of construction paper and a series of facts they want to memorize. It will work as well for math formulas, vocabulary words, foreign language vocabulary or history facts.

Have students:

- 1. Fold the paper** in half.
- 2. Cut the top half** of the paper into as many equal flaps as needed.
- 3. Write the item** to be studied on the outside of each flap. For example, a student learning the names of the colors in Spanish could write *red, blue, green, black* and *white* on the outside flaps.
- 4. Write the correct answer** inside (under the flap). Students may

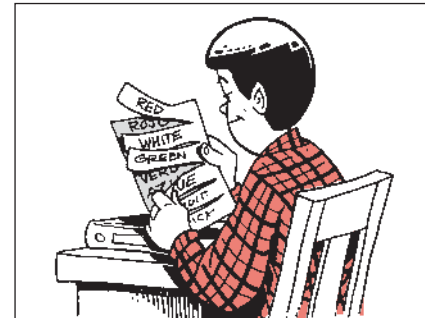


Illustration by Bob George

also want to add a graphic to make it easier to remember the answer. Have students keep the flap organizers and reuse them when they are studying for a test at the end of the unit or grading period.

Source: Amy Schwed and Janice Melichar-Utter, *Brain Friendly Study Strategies Grades 2–8*, ISBN: 9781-4129-4251-5 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Getting Organized

Make the most of student planners



The holidays were great, but now it's time to get your students back in the groove. Motivate them with a short discussion on using a planner.

Try these steps:

- 1. Ask students to bring** their planners to class. A school organization or business partner could provide planners for students who don't have them.
- 2. Divide students into pairs** or small groups and have them list all the entries they make in their planners: homework, sports activities, long-range project dates, days they work, test dates and more.
- 3. Talk about using the planner** to make a daily to-do list.
- 4. Ask students to check** their penmanship. Can they actually read what's written in their planners?
- 5. Bring in a selection** of highlighters, colored stickers, tabs and other "planner extras" that students can borrow. Talk about how they can make using their planners even more effective.
- 6. Review how the planner** is used when you have conferences with parents, especially with students who are struggling.