



Educator Update – May, 2021

Keeping Huron County Educators Informed



No Instructional Minute Wasted

Take advantage of these last 6 weeks of school and get the most out of your time with students!

From: Online June 2020 | Volume **77**, **Time Well-Managed** Pages 56-60, by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

To avoid wasting learning time, the best teachers do three things differently.

How much time is spent in your classroom or school on *instructions* versus *instruction*? Let's do some math. If a middle or high school teacher spends 10 minutes every 50-minute period on instructions for 180 days, then 36 full class periods were spent on delivering directions. If an elementary teacher spends 5 minutes explaining what will happen during the day, 10 minutes explaining what students will do in their centers or stations, and then another 5 minutes reviewing various tasks during math, science, and social studies, this would result in about 45 minutes per day (or more) on instructions, which equates to 22 days *each school year*. Individually, these minutes don't seem like a lot, but when you add them up, providing instructions consumes valuable minutes dedicated to tasks other than learning.

Of course, students deserve to know what is expected of them and it is necessary to spend some time explaining tasks and expectations. If all the instructions were totally understood by students on the first go-around, then this might be a good investment of time. But how often do students ask clarifying questions right after the teacher has just finished explaining a task? And how many students need additional information about the instructions as they complete a task, activity, or assignment?

Doug once observed a 3rd grade class in which the teacher spent 13 minutes explaining what students would do at each of the learning stations. She didn't start these instructions until four minutes after the students returned from recess. These were all new tasks that the students had not completed before. When the teacher released them to start working, Marco asked which center he was supposed to go to, Giovanni raised his hand because he did not understand the vocabulary task, and Karina wandered around the room looking for her journal. By the time the students started the tasks, 17 minutes had elapsed.

Yet in another class, the teacher immediately went into action when the students entered the classroom. She reminded them of their tasks, all of which were familiar. She asked them to move to their stations

and begin work. She then called four students by name and had them meet her at her desk. The students were engaged in their learning task within two minutes of entering the room.

To maximize the amount of time students have for learning, highly accomplished teachers, like the one in the example just described, do three things differently. First, they start on time. Second, they use every minute allocated for instruction. And third, they rely on a set of instructional practices that students know and understand.

1. Start on Time

This seems easy enough in principle, but it can be hard to implement. In a study of high school teachers' use of time, Doug documented that students spent 17 percent of their instructional minutes waiting for something to happen (Fisher, 2009). Teachers spent valuable time taking attendance, organizing materials, or just waiting for the bell to ring after they'd finished teaching. Students had learned that it was OK to be late—"nothing happens for the first five minutes at least," more than one student told Doug.

Highly accomplished teachers know that every minute is valuable and thus start as soon as possible. These teachers demonstrate a sense of urgency for learning, and their students notice it. Based on our observations, there are a number of tasks that teachers can apply to ensure that minutes are used well, even if they have to take attendance. For example:

- In a 5th grade classroom, students start each learning block with a "do now" task or problem. The teacher circulates around the room looking over students' shoulders as they complete the task so she knows what to model when they come back together. She identifies errors, based on their work, to focus her instruction.
- In an algebra classroom, students start with a challenge task. They can work individually or collaboratively to solve the problem written on the board, which is based on previously learned content but applied in a way that is somewhat unfamiliar to them.
- Following lunch, a class of 2nd grade students know to always get out their writing journals and look to the image displayed on the whiteboard. Their teacher uses this time to develop students' descriptive writing.

These are samples of tools that we have observed teachers using to ensure that students are engaged in learning tasks from the start. It is easy for busy educators to forget about these types of routines. We could all use a little reminder to ensure that students are not just waiting around, but rather are engaged in instruction.

2. Soak Up Every Minute

Sometimes lessons run short. It happens to all of us. But when it does and there aren't any plans, instructional time is squandered. Educator Madeline Hunter had a solution for this. She coined the term "sponge activity" to describe "learning activities that soak up precious time that would otherwise be lost" (Hunter, 2004, p. 117). She believed that sponge activities should (1) focus on review of previously learned material, and (2) provide distributed practice opportunities. Accomplished teachers have a collection of strategies at their disposal that they can use to "sponge up" any remaining minutes. For instance:

- In one kindergarten classroom, when there are a few minutes remaining in a lesson, a teacher leads students in familiar rhyming songs, letter games, and practice at blending sounds.
- In a 3rd grade class, students play "Stump the Teacher" by asking her questions about the content, which can include spelling certain words. The trick here is that the student must be able to furnish an answer. Because it is a familiar sponge routine, students have questions prepared in advance to use when there are a few extra minutes.
- In their biology class, a group of students plays "Survivor" at the end of each period. Some days, students write down three new vocabulary words they learned, other days they focus on three things they learned in general, and still other days they jot down questions they have related to the content. When they have their three items ready, each student stands up. The teacher calls on students at random, and they share one item and cross it off their list. There are no repeats, so students have to listen to know which of their items has already been shared. The last person to have an idea is the survivor for the day.
- In a middle school history class, students practice identifying states with the abbreviations used by the postal service. The teacher has laminated copies of a map of the United States at the ready and students use markers to write down the abbreviations. They've turned this into a competition and like to race each other to see who can identify the most states correctly in one minute. The mathematics teacher heard about this practice and liked it so much that she has her students complete as many math facts as possible in a game she calls "a minute of math madness."

Again, these are examples of tools that teachers have used to ensure that time is spent learning. There are countless other options that meet Hunter's definition of a "sponge activity," and all of them are a better use of time than students packing backpacks and waiting to be dismissed.

3. Establish Routines and Use Them

There is no one right way to teach and there are no instructional strategies that guarantee all students will learn. Having said that, it is important to note that changing instructional routines too often is confusing for students. In addition, valuable minutes have to be spent letting students know what is expected of them. This is all too common in elementary classrooms when teachers introduce new centers or stations. In an effort to "keep it fresh," they change the tasks weekly or biweekly. As a result, students rarely get good at them.

Consider the time savings when a 2nd grade teacher introduced a listening station and then used it every day, changing the content but not the task. She set expectations for the listening station and invested time up-front so that students would understand how to use the equipment and the products expected of them. But then she never had to do that again. For weeks, her students engaged with content at the listening station without any additional time spent on the instructions for completing tasks.

Similarly, consider the high school teacher whose students needed practice with reading for information. He developed a routine that involved students logging into the learning management system, choosing an article, reading it, answering a few comprehension questions, and then responding in writing. He modeled each step in the process and demonstrated what success looked like. Then he had his students practice while he observed them. He noted and addressed some errors. The whole thing took about 25 minutes. Now every day, students know that they are expected to read for information and write from the source. The novelty is not in the task, but rather in the readings.

In some cases, routines are established schoolwide and thus, once taught, can be used by others. The teachers at an elementary school we are familiar with agreed on three collaborative learning routines *per*

grade level. They agreed that every teacher at a given grade level would teach his or her students how to apply the three new routines and that students would have extensive practice with these routines. Teachers could teach other routines, but these three were nonnegotiable. For example, the kindergarten team agreed to use the following routines:

- *Busy bees*: Students mimic the buzzing sound and slow movement of bumblebees as they buzz around the room to find a partner. When the teacher says, "Busy bees, fly!" students move around the room and buzz until they hear, "Busy bees, land!" The "bee" they are standing next to becomes their partner for a brief learning activity such as giving an opinion, answering a question, or solving a math problem.
- *Language experience*: Students brainstorm words and phrases to describe a picture or a common experience—and the teacher writes the words on a chart. Partners create sentences using those words and then the teacher records them. Next, the teacher guides the group in organizing the sentences into a logical paragraph, and students practice pronunciation, reading aloud, and copying the co-constructed paragraph. Students can write the sentences on sentences strips and put the paragraph back together, or they can cut up the sentences into words and phrases before reassembling them or creating new paragraphs.
- *Inside/outside circles*: Two concentric circles of students stand or sit to face one another. The teacher poses a question to the class, and the partners (one inside and one outside the circle) respond briefly to one another. At the signal, the outer circle rotates one position to the left so each student faces a new partner. The conversation continues for several rounds. For each rotation, students may respond to the same prompt or to a different but related one on the same topic, depending on the goals of the teacher.

Because students learned and practiced these three routines, the kindergarten team at this school found that instruction was seamless, *even* when there was a substitute. Further, the media specialist and art teacher were able to use these routines as well. Over time, the team realized that the first day of 1st grade next year would be more efficient because their students already understood ways for collaborating, regardless of which teacher they had.

In another example, the teachers at Health Sciences High in San Diego agreed to five collaborative routines that all students would know. Of course, teachers could use other routines, but doing so would waste valuable time on instructions. They identified:

- *Reciprocal teaching*: Students work in groups of four with a common text. Each member has a role: summarizer, questioner, clarifier, and predictor (Palincsar & Brown, 1986). These roles closely mirror the kinds of reading comprehension strategies necessary for understanding expository text. The reading is chunked into shorter passages so that the group can stop to discuss periodically.
- *Jigsaw*: Each student in the class has two memberships: a home group and an expert group. Each home group of four members meets to discuss the text and divide the selection according to the teacher's directions. After each home group member has their task, they move to expert groups made up of members with the same task. The expert groups meet to read and discuss their portion of the assignment and practice how they will teach it when they return to their home groups. Students then teach their expert portion to home group members and learn about the other sections of the reading. Finally, they return once more to their expert groups to discuss how their topic fits into the larger subject.
- *Discussion roundtable*: Students assemble into groups of four, then fold a piece of paper into quadrants and record their thinking in the upper left quadrant. This could be reflections on a reading or video. They then take notes in the other three quadrants as their peers share their thinking. The final product is a record of the viewpoints of each member of the group.
- *Text rendering*: Students read a piece of text, focusing on key points. When their group members have finished reading, each student shares a sentence they found to be valuable for understanding the text. On the second round, each student shares a significant phrase, which does not need to be within the sentence

they chose (and they record these). During the third round, each student shares a word from the reading that resonated with them (and they record these words). The group then discusses the ideas generated.

- *Five-word summary*: Students read a piece of text and choose five words that summarize the reading. They then talk with a partner to reach consensus on five words before joining another partnership. Now the four students reach agreements on the five words that best represent the text. From there, they create their own summary of the text, using the five words agreed upon by the group.

The point is not to replicate these specific routines, but rather to consider the impact of routines on the balance between instruction and instructions. When students know what is expected of them, they are more likely to focus on *what* they are being taught rather than *how* they are being taught.

Deceptively Simple

We recognize that there are lots of bright and shiny ideas for improving student learning outcomes. The ideas in this article may seem simple, but they are invaluable. Skilled teachers understand that time is precious and that decisions about how to use time reflect their values and expectations. Spending too much time on instructions, or, worse, having students wait for something to happen, does not send the message that learning is important or that we value every allotted minute. Highly accomplished teachers understand that they can use time to their advantage and that their students will learn more as a result.

References

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