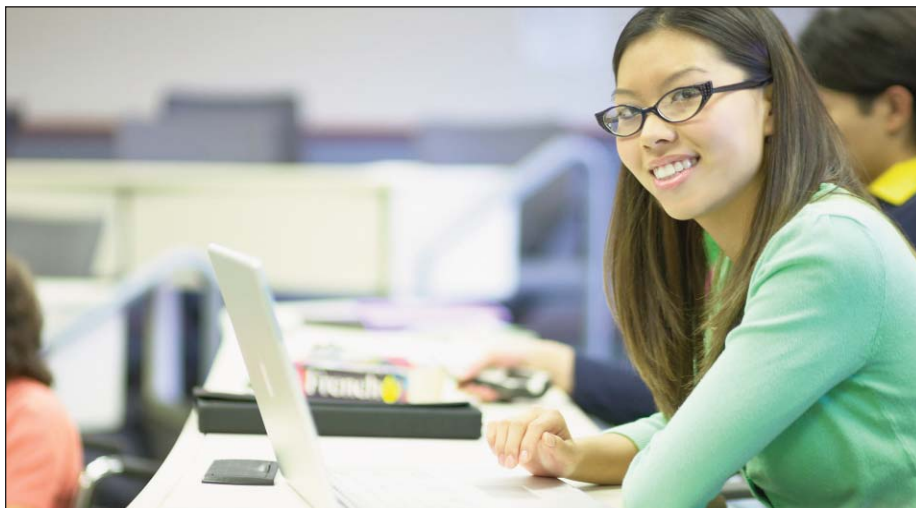


Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary
EDITION

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Technology

Start to publish—in five easy steps



A blog (short for web log) can be a great tool for boosting students' writing skills.

In fact, many of your students may have their own blogs already. You can capture their attention while giving them an easy way to publish.

Blogs are easy to use. You don't need to know a programming language or have design skills since there are plenty of ready-to-use templates available. Best of all, they're free!

You can use blogs in a number of ways. Some teachers focus primarily on classroom management—what's due when. The interactive feature allows students to ask questions ("Do we have to bring in our props for the play tomorrow?") or offer their thoughts on assignments ("This is REALLY HARD!!").

Blogs also give students a chance to practice their writing and thinking skills. Writers get better by writing and

reading what others have written. Blogs give students a chance to "publish" their work and learn how others react.

Blogs can also extend class discussions. You can ask a question about a reading assignment, giving students the chance to reflect on what they have read before class. (See some examples at <http://litteraturedragon.blogspot.com>).

So how do you get started? Here are five easy steps:

1. **Start** with one of the available free blogging sites. Blogger (www.blogger.com/start) is an easy one to use and popular.
2. **Provide** the necessary information requested (user name, password).
3. **Create** a title for your blog.
4. **Select** a template to create your blog's look.
5. **Publish!**

Source: Diane Penrod, *Using Blogs to Enhance Literacy*, ISBN: 1-578-86565-4 (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 1-800-462-6420, www.rowmaneducation.com).

Connecting With Parents

Show parents ways to monitor progress



Looking for a surefire way to boost student achievement?

Research says: Engage parents! And the best way is to have them monitor both the academic progress and the social lives of their students.

Unfortunately, some parents don't understand the role they can play in their student's success. For example:

- **Parents worry** because they were poor students themselves or they don't speak English well. They think they don't have the skills to help.
- **Parents think** education is solely the responsibility of the school.
- **Parents are so focused** on success that *they* do their children's work.

How can you counteract these attitudes? Remind parents to:

- **Ask to see homework.** Even parents with limited education can ask students to go over a math problem or explain a scientific process. A student who sees that parents truly care will become more motivated.
- **Avoid doing homework** for their kids. Monitoring doesn't mean doing. Many students struggle in college because parents were too "helpful" in secondary school.
- **Supervise social activities.** Research shows that students whose parents monitor their social lives behave more responsibly and are more focused in class.

Source: Holly Kreider et al., "Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education," Harvard Family Research Project, www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/adolescent.html.

IN THIS ISSUE: Teach students to pace themselves, page 2 • Keep neural pathways open, boost memory, page 3 • Use matrix to help with questions, page 4

Differentiated Instruction

Don't leave students on the lower rungs



Are gifted students having all the fun? They get to go beyond learning skills and memorizing facts and actually apply them. Why not allow *all* students to have similar learning experiences?

Some experts question the value of relegating lower-achieving students to the lower rungs of the “ladder of learning.”

Current research indicates that students don't always learn by mastering skills piece by piece. Think of a toddler learning to speak. He doesn't need to learn the rules of grammar first. And your students don't have to master every skill and memorize lists of facts to be engaged in exciting learning experiences.

Confining lower-level students to drilling and memorizing can actually reduce motivation. So skip the basics? No. But keeping your students on the lower rungs of the ladder can keep them from experiencing the thrill that applying learning in a more complex way can provide.

Source: Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe, *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*, ISBN: 978-1-4166-0284-2 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org/books).

Discipline: Part One of a Three-Part Series

Case studies in discipline: Angry Andrew

a. _____ Andrew is angry. If someone gets “in his face,” he loses his temper. If a teacher disciplines him, he storms out of class. Luckily, he hasn't physically harmed anyone—yet.

Teachers today say that angry students like Andrew are a growing problem. Here are some ways you can deal with Andrew's anger and keep other students safe:

- **Don't take it personally.** Assume that Andrew has never learned the skills to deal with his anger.
- **Don't react with anger.** When Andrew has an outburst, it's imperative that you model the behavior you want him to display. Be professional and stay calm.
- **Talk with Andrew** about his behavior—when he isn't angry. Ask if he can feel an outburst coming on. Together, develop a signal that means, “I'm about to lose it.”

- **Have a backup plan.** Call the office to have someone escort Andrew to a quiet place where he can collect himself.
- **Teach alternatives.** Suggest articles and books that will help him learn better ways to handle his anger.
- **Focus on the future.** Angry kids have stored up a lot of old resentments. Keep them looking forward.
- **Enforce consequences** for angry outbursts. Those that disrupt learning or threaten others should be dealt with more severely than those creating a minor incident. If you learn to pick your battles, you can teach Andrew to do the same.
- **Be proactive.** Make sure *everyone* understands that you will simply not tolerate disruptive behavior.

Source: Vickie Gill, *The Ten Students You'll Meet in Your Classroom*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-4912-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Building Responsibility

Teach your students to pace themselves



Do you and your students have different goals? Do you want to control them? Do they want to be treated like adults and make decisions for themselves?

High school math teacher **Angela Vaughan** found herself striving for control and using the same teaching format day after day. Her students were bored, frustrated and acting out. They rarely completed homework; if they did, they often copied answers.

Student performance turned around when she started to guide individual students to set their own courses of study.

During the first 10 minutes of class students did warm-up problems and wrote in their math journals.

Ms. Vaughan then gave a short lecture including real-life applications of algebra skills. During the remaining class time students worked independently or in groups, used computer programs, read algebra books and took exams. Ms. Vaughan circulated, responding to student needs.

Students took exams when they decided they were ready. If a student scored below 70 percent, a retest was required.

Students responded favorably. They set high goals; they listened to lectures and behaved responsibly. By the end of the year, 95% of her self-paced students were passing math exams.

Source: Angela L. Vaughan, “The Self-Paced Student,” *Educational Leadership*, April 2005 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

Teaching Thinking Skills

Keep neural pathways open to boost memory



Students are bombarded with facts all day long. Which ones will they remember and which ones will be forgotten by day's end? Brain experts identify three types of memory:

1. **Short-term memory**, where students retain information for about thirty seconds.
2. **Working memory**, where students retain information for twenty to thirty minutes.
3. **Long-term memory**, where students can store information for days or even weeks.

Research says that while data can remain in the memory for a long time, neural debris can interfere with accessing the information.

Picture a neural "pathway" to a fact in a student's brain. The more often the student goes down the path, the easier it will be to recall the

fact again. If the student *doesn't* go down the path, it gets cluttered and the impulse to connect is limited.

So help your students beat pathways to important information. One strategy is to engage all students in oral responses. Here's how:

1. **Ask a student** to respond to a question.
2. **Ask if a second student** agrees or disagrees with the response.
3. **Ask a third student** to evaluate the first two responses.

When students know they may be called on, they listen more carefully. They hear important information repeated. And the more they access the information in their brains, and tread their neural pathways, the more likely they are to retain information.

Source: Rick Wormeli, *Meet Me in the Middle*, ISBN: 1-57110-328-7 (Stenhouse Publishers, 1-800-988-9812, www.stenhouse.com).

Resources



Technology, expectations and student demographics are all changing. But there is still one constant in education: Teachers remain the key to effective instruction in the classroom. In her book *Classroom Instruction from A to Z*, teacher Barbara Blackburn has collected 26 specific strategies that can help students achieve. Whether you are looking for options for successful homework or ways to add rigor to your lessons, this book can help. (ISBN: 1-5966-7038-X, Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyoneducation.com.)



It's inspiring to learn about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and to see the tremendous strides in the civil rights movement in America since the marches of the sixties. Celebrate his birthday on January 21, 2008. You'll find a selection of links at Surfing the Net with Kids at www.surfnetkids.com/king.htm. Be sure to have your students listen to recordings of Dr. King's speeches at www.thekingcenter.org.



Teachers across the country will remember Christa McAuliffe on January 28th, the anniversary of the Challenger explosion. Keep her dream alive by motivating your future astronauts and scientists with activities offered on NASA's page for educators (www.nasa.gov/audiencelforeducators/9-12/features/index.htm).

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.

Setting High Expectations

Bigger vocabularies boost comprehension



Research consistently shows that as a student's vocabulary increases, so does reading comprehension. Teachers often look through reading assignments and extract relevant vocabulary words. But a strategy known as VSS (Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy) helps students create their own vocabulary lists.

Here's how it works:

- **General vocabulary development.** Have students share words they think the whole class should know. They can be from their reading or even from a TV show.

Then have students develop a definition. They can share their personal knowledge, use dictionaries or online resources. You can

also be a resource. Generate your class weekly vocabulary list from these student-selected words.

- **Content-area vocabulary.** Ask students to identify important words in a reading passage. Have them work in groups to assemble the list and determine definitions. Again, the vocabulary list is based on student-selected words.

A study of seventh and eighth graders using VSS found that when students had the opportunity to choose their own vocabulary words, they consistently chose challenging, important and interesting words.

Source: Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Reading at the Middle and High School Levels*, Educational Research Service, ASIN: B0006R7Y38 (Educational Research Service, 1-800-791-9308, www.ers.org).

Focus : Surviving the First Year

Teaching Tips

Use matrix to help with questions



At times, you may feel like a game show host in your class. You ask question after question. Sometimes students answer correctly; sometimes they just stare at you.

An interactive matrix puts the responsibility for questions and answers on your students. Developed by reading specialist, **Kathy Bumgardner**, it's a grid that crosses seven basic question words (*who, what, which, when, where, why, how*) with six verbs (*is, did, can, would, will, might*).

You can find an example at www.teacher-institute.com/bt/resources/matrix.pdf

The matrix helps students move from simple questions of fact (*Who is the nation's first President?*) to higher level questions (*How might you cope in a country faced with famine?*).

Here's one way to use the grid:

1. **Make copies** of the grid onto brightly-colored paper. Cut the squares apart. Put complete sets into plastic bags.
2. **Divide students** into groups, with a bag of question squares for each group.
3. **Have students draw** squares and create questions for the rest of the group to answer.
4. **Collect the questions** and answers and you will have a student-prepared review for an upcoming test!

Source: Barbara R. Blackburn, *Classroom Instruction from A to Z*, ISBN: 1-5966-7038-X (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, www.eyeoneducation.com).

Classroom Management

Develop ways to manage transitions



Whether students are moving from one activity to another or from one class to another, this is the time when things are most likely to fall apart in your classroom. Here are some tips on managing transitions:

- **Develop a "two-minute warning."** It works in football and it can work for students, as well. Develop a signal that tells students it's nearly time to change activities. Be sure to practice the signal and the appropriate response.
- **Be prepared.** Make sure you have everything ready for students *before* class starts. If you're rushing in from the copy machine or digging through your file drawer, your students will get involved with other activities.

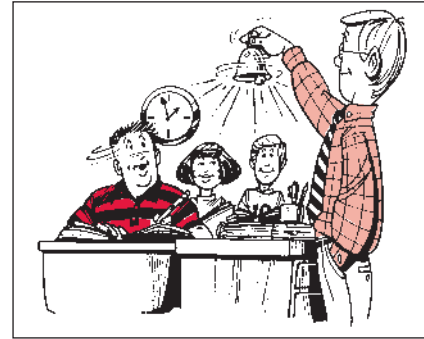


Illustration by Bob George

- **Develop sponges and fillers.** Have a set of short activities that can fill every available minute with learning. Prepare "bell work" so students will start working the minute class begins.

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

Wellness

Remedy headaches & fatigue—drink water!



Are you dragging yourself through the afternoon? Having trouble focusing on your fifth period class? It could be that you haven't had enough to drink—water that is!

Consider these statistics:

- **Many Americans** today are chronically dehydrated.
- **Lack of water** is the #1 cause of daytime fatigue.
- **Drinking water** can ease back and joint pain.
- **A 2% drop** in body water can impede memory and the ability to focus.

Water aids learning and thinking by carrying oxygen to the brain.

Drinking water can reduce problems with digestion, headaches and fatigue. And those who drink more water often have a better sense of general well-being.

So drink up. And encourage your students to have a drink, too. If they're bored or distracted, they may be dehydrated. Take an afternoon water break. You'll get an energy boost and be ready to tackle your next lesson.

Source: Dr. James J. Lehman, "Dehydration Headaches," About.com, http://nutrition.about.com/od/hydrationwater/a/Water_headaches.htm; "Interesting Facts About Not Drinking Water," Enviroalternatives, www.enviroalternatives.com/waterdrinking.html.