

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary
EDITION

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Social Studies

Tell class history with totem poles



History tells a story. A totem pole is made to tell the story of the carver, his family and his tribe. Totem poles use symbols for handing down messages and beliefs from one generation to another.

Use the following activity to introduce your students to the study of history. Students will learn about totem poles as documents of Native American history. They will also create symbols that are unique to themselves—and create their own totem histories.

For this activity:

1. **Talk about symbols.** Explain how symbols are used to represent ideas, events and cultures.
2. **Examine totem poles** and their symbols. Review books like *The First Totem Pole* by Rosa Bell. Find explanations of symbolism and lesson ideas at: <http://users.imag.net/~sry.jkramer/nativetotems/default.html>, www.btigerlily.net/BTTotem.html and

www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1985/6/85.06.01.x.html.

3. **Have students brainstorm symbols** unique to themselves, their families, their school, state and country. For example: the Liberty Bell, the state flower, the school mascot, etc.
4. **Give each student a paper towel** or wrapping paper tube to decorate. Have students draw and color symbols to put on their rolls after wrapping them with construction paper. Use clay to mold and paint faces and figures for a 3-D totem. (Check these sites for more ideas: www.kinderart.com/multic/mtotems.shtml and www.enchantedlearning.com/crafts/na/totempole/.)
5. **Arrange or stack the totem tubes** to build larger group or class totems. For information on the creation of National American Indian Heritage Month, visit www.ih.gov/PublicAffairs/Heritage/Index.cfm.

Ideas to Share

Give students starter prompts to identify what they've learned



Students take more responsibility for their learning when they are asked to *think* about their lessons.

Maryann Spafford, a second-grade teacher at Ravine Drive School in Matawan, New Jersey, gets her students thinking by wrapping up her lessons with a “Complete the Sentence” activity.

Spafford posts a chart in her classroom titled, “Complete the Sentence.” The chart displays a number of sentence starters. For example:

- I learned that ...
- I now understand ...
- I'd like to know more about ...

Following a lesson, each student is responsible for selecting a starter and completing it in writing by applying information learned in the lesson.

The visual starters help students who have writing apprehension or writing difficulties to focus more easily and record their thoughts.

Immediately applying what they've learned helps her students with retention. And Spafford can determine if more instruction is needed to meet a lesson's objective.

Spafford says that sentence starters can also promote higher-order thinking. Try prompts such as:

- I'm beginning to wonder if ...
- This reminds me of ...

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Working Together

Ease isolation with help of coworkers



It's no surprise that a common complaint of teachers—who spend all day in classrooms full of children—is professional isolation. Here's what you can do to remedy this:

- **Seek out up-beat**, energized teachers for conversations before and after school. Avoid complainers. The attitude can be contagious.
- **Organize a study group** or book club for other interested teachers.
- **Identify a teacher** in your grade with whom you would like to collaborate.
- **Work together to plan** special units or prepare lesson plans and special materials.
- **Take turns** taking the lead or split responsibilities equally.
- **Share ideas** on how to streamline classroom routines and procedures.
- **Use your buddy teacher** as a sounding board when you're dealing with a difficult parent or a tricky discipline problem—or just to let off steam after a particularly difficult day.

Source: Barbara Gruber and Sue Gruber, "Instant Ideas for Busy Teachers ...," *The Teachers.Net Gazette*, <http://teachers.net/gazette/APR02/gruber.html>.

Surviving the First Year: Part Two of a Four-Part Series

Plan ahead, reduce stress at report card time



Report card time can be very trying. Even experienced teachers devote considerable amounts of time on last-minute grading, averaging, decision-making, and writing comments and observations.

While filling out report cards thoroughly and thoughtfully will always be a time-consuming endeavor, there are things you can do throughout the grading period to record your observations and document the progress of your students. For example:

- **Write each student's name** on the bottom line of a 5" x 7" card. Tape the top of each card to a legal-sized clipboard. Tape the cards one just below the other so student names are visible and you can flip each card up on its taped edge.

Arrange the cards in the order that works best for you—alphabetically or by seating arrangement. As you monitor student work and

behavior, write down significant observations on the appropriate card. Be sure to include the date.

- **Put students in charge** of their own portfolios. Give students colored file folders labeled with their names. Each day, or as appropriate, have students insert additional papers in their portfolios. One day it might be a math paper, another day a writing paper or a science paper.

Have students write one sentence that tells what they learned, what they liked about the assignment, etc., on a large sticky note attached to each paper. At the end of the grading period, refer to the notes as you fill out report cards. Then share the portfolios with parents.

Source: "Alternative Assessment Tools," Inspiring Teachers Publishing Inc., www.inspiringteachers.com/tips/assessment/alternative.html; "Grading," *A New Teacher's Survival Guide*, <http://hannahmeans.bizland.com/grading.htm>.

Discipline

Positive approach deflects discipline issues



Deflect potential discipline problems by creating a positive classroom climate

where students are motivated and ready to learn. You can do this by simply reaching out and making a personal connection with each of your students.

Once you've made that connection, your students will know that you care and they'll be more likely to feel that they are an integral part of your class. That means they will be more willing to follow the rules, too.

Here are a few simple things you can do to connect with each of your students, including those who may be more likely to act up in class:

- **Smile.** Everyone feels better on the receiving end of a friendly smile.
- **Greet your students** as they arrive in class each day. It's harder to pretend you're invisible if you've just been greeted by name.
- **Let students know** that you believe in them and that you expect each one to be successful—especially on days when they don't seem to believe in themselves.
- **Look for opportunities** to laugh with your students. It can become contagious!

Source: "Connecting with students, high expectations are hallmarks of Teacher of the Year," *Education Minnesota*, www.educationminnesota.org/index.cfm?PAGE_ID=16072.

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Building Reading Skills

Take students on a guided 'picture walk'



Teachers often tell their students to “look at the picture” to help them figure out words as they read.

Giving students a guided tour of a book's illustrations *before* they start reading can engage their brains right from the start—helping them comprehend more of what they read and retain it longer.

To do a “picture walk”:

1. **Introduce the book.** Tell students what the book is about and what they will learn from it. Explore its title, cover, blurbs, chapters and table of contents. Discuss its genre. Say something about its author.
2. **Limit your walk.** Talk only about the pictures in the chapter or part of the book that students will read

that day—not the entire book. Keep your discussion brief.

3. **Discuss each illustration.** Ask students, “What do you see?”
4. **Focus on character traits** and aspects of setting and action. “Look at the boy's expression.” “What is he doing?” “What do you notice about the cave?”
5. **Encourage students to relate** what they see to their own experiences and understandings. “Have you ever felt that way?”
6. **Build anticipation.** Entice students to want to read the book with comments like, “You won't believe what Anna does later!”

Source: Gail Saunders-Smith, *The Ultimate Small-Group Reading How-To Book: Building Comprehension Through Small-Group Instruction*, ISBN: 1-56976-195-7, (Zephyr Press, 1-800-888-4741, www.ipgbook.com).

Resources



To support your efforts to raise the achievement levels of all students (according to NCLB), the U.S. Department of Education has launched a new web-based “Toolkit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities.” At www.osepideasthatwork.org, you'll find regularly-updated, research-based strategies for instructing, monitoring and assessing students with disabilities in regular classes.

Current resources address behavioral management, use of accommodations, communicating with severely disabled students, and strategies for parents and teachers to develop children's reading skills. You can also order a CD-ROM by calling 1-877-4ED-PUBS with identification #EHE0110C.



Help students understand and avoid bullying with the “Bully Frog” color storybook and teaching materials by Roni Benson and Ginger Lieberman.

Big, mean and lonely Bully Frog wreaks havoc at Leapfrog Elementary School until students learn to solve the bullying problem by caring, acting responsibly and being inclusive. The 8 ½" x 11" book is \$9.99. You can also get a Bully Frog poster of “Rules for School Behavior” and picture/story cards with lesson plans to promote vocabulary building, questioning and understanding. Order at www.bullyfrog.com.

Classroom Management

'Brain breaks' can help students stay alert



It's hard to keep young students with short attention spans calm and focused. Research shows that “brain breaks”—in the form of physical stimulation—can help students be more alert for learning.

Movement brings increased oxygen to the bloodstream and leads to increased concentration. Students have enhanced fine and large motor skills, and become more energized.

A break can take just a minute. During math, students can simply stop to roll their shoulders. During spelling, they can use their fingers to write the spelling word in the air.

To plan a longer time-out from concentration:

- **Hang a sign on the door**—“Please Do Not Disturb.

Brain Break Underway”—to convey the message that the break is an important activity.

- **Explain to students**, “Brain researchers say we need to move so we can be more ready to learn.”
- **Take a five-minute break** between subjects—especially in the afternoons when lethargy can set in.
- **Let students walk around**, examine things on walls and shelves, chat, drink water, talk to you one-on-one, etc. (Students whose voices rise above a whisper must return to their seats.)
- **Don't allow students to read**, draw or do any kind of work that requires concentration.

Source: “Transition Techniques: Maximizing Time on Task,” Mrs. Powell's Management Ideas for Teachers, www.mspowell.com/awards.html.

Share an Idea?

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

Send your idea 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

Next Focus On:
Helping At-Risk Students

Getting Organized

Don't overlook use of flash cards as study aids



Flash cards are nothing new. These study aids have been around forever—probably because they work!

Using flash cards is a great way for students to organize information—math and science facts, vocabulary lists, important dates in history and so much more. And because the cards are so compact, your students can use them anywhere and at any time. They can use them while they are in the car or waiting to be picked up after school, for example.

Teach your students how to use flash cards. Distribute some index cards. Have them write the words or questions they need to study on one side of the cards and the definitions or answers on the other. Explain that they should divide the cards into two stacks as they go through them. One stack is for what they know and the other is for what they need to study.

Not only are flashcards a great tool for doing a quick review, but by encouraging their use, you can help your students learn how to manage their time wisely and put those small bits of extra time to good use.

Source: Sarah Richard, "How To Improve Study Skills," How To Do Things, www.howtodothings.com/education/a1893-how-to-improve-study-skills.html.

Homework

Study buddies boost study skills



Younger students can often use some extra support and reinforcement as they begin to build good homework and study habits.

Most teachers in the early grades take care to ensure that students understand their assignments and what they are expected to do each evening. One Minnesota teacher takes it a step further.

This is what she recommends:

- 1. Break students into pairs** (or groups of three if numbers are not even) and assign them to be study buddies.
- 2. Provide a few minutes of time** at the end of each day for the study buddies to get together.
- 3. Have the study buddies check** with one another to make sure



Illustration by Bob George

they know and understand the assignments.

Later, if they run into problems while doing their homework, they can check in with their study buddies for a little extra help and/or support.

Source: "Works4Me," National Education Association, www.nea.org/works4me/wm020828.html.

Improving Study Skills

Teach students to use 'memory makers'



Memorizing spelling words, definitions, math equations and other brief content can be a lot easier when students use "memory makers"—simple low-tech devices made out of manila folders.

Here's what to do:

- 1. Laminate a folder** for each student. Cut the front covers across horizontally to make four flaps, keeping them attached at the fold.
- 2. Give each student** a folder, a water-based wipe-off marker and a tissue.
- 3. Demonstrate its use.** Copy a spelling word under the first

flap, for example. Close the flap to cover the word. Fold back the second flap and write the word in the open space from memory. Check for accuracy by lifting the first flap. Repeat the procedure under the third and fourth flaps.

- 4. Wipe off the word** and repeat with the next spelling word. Students can also use folders that are not laminated by inserting a sheet of paper inside the folder to write on.

Source: Anne M. Beninghof, *Engage ALL Students Through Differentiation: K-8*, ISBN: 1-884548-79-2 (Crystal Springs Books, 1-800-321-0401, <http://crystal-springsbooks.com>).