



Published: July 22, 2009

Teaching Secrets: How to Use Leftover Class Time Wisely

By Larry Ferlazzo

One of the first lessons I learned when I began teaching was to “overplan.”

Assume that your lesson is going to be done early and have a related activity ready to go.

However, like many important lessons—exercise daily, don’t eat sweets in abundance, practice patience—it’s not something I always manage to make a priority.

But I do have the next best thing—a list of constructive learning activities that I can use anytime I finish my lesson early and have a few minutes in need of wise investment. To beef up my list, I also asked readers of **my blog** to share ideas of their own.

My thoughts (and theirs) fall into seven categories: Review, Summarize, Relate, Reflect, Intellectually Challenge, Technologically Engage, and (a student favorite) Chill.

Review

Research has shown that you have to see a new word five to 16 times (and in different contexts) to really learn it. Studies differ on the number of times we need to review a new piece of information before it’s ours—but it’s more than a few. Review is one good use of those extra minutes. Teachers review in a variety of ways. Math teachers who left comments on my blog like to play quick games on the whiteboard that require little or no extra planning. Second language teachers (myself included) talked about having students sing vocabulary songs. Sometimes I’ll just have students break into pairs and quiz each other. To add a little intrigue, you might have Student A give the answer and ask Student B to supply the question, Jeopardy-style.

Summarize

Rick Wormeli has written an excellent book called ***Summarization In Any Subject: 50 Techniques to Improve Student Learning***, which provides a wealth of research (with plenty of practical suggestions) that demonstrates the



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importance of having students summarize what they've been studying. Here are a few activities (mine and his) that I have students complete in a learning log:

- What are three things you learned?
- What is the most interesting thing you've learned?
- Imagine a simile or a metaphor about what we learned today.



This excerpt from Wormeli's book charts all 50 of his techniques and indicates which techniques are short "sponge" activities that soak up transitional time.

Relate

Gladys Baya, an English teacher in Argentina, usually has students review the lesson on their own during any extra time, but she also sets a priority for herself. She has brief chats with students with whom she hasn't had much interaction that day.

I think this kind of relationship-building is a critical part of what turns a classroom of students into a community of learners, but it's easy to neglect in the midst of covering the curriculum. I also have students in my classes ask each other a series of questions about their preferences, goals, families, and the like. In the first few months of class, I make sure all students have had the opportunity to have these kinds of conversations with everyone else. Those few spare moments after the lesson has ended are great opportunities to do so.

Reflect

When Hannah Arendt observed the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, she wrote that she had expected to see a monster. Instead, she was shocked to see a man who was mechanical, bureaucratic, and thoughtless. Might evil, she wondered, often be the result of the absence of thought and reflection? The everyday lesson I take from this story is that if we don't learn to think and reflect as we're growing up, we can become mechanical and live our life by a formula.

So it's important, I believe, to regularly reinforce the value of reflection with our students. It's not something that comes naturally to most people, and certainly not to children. The way that I've gotten my students to reflect is by asking questions like:

- What, if anything, would you like to change about yourself and what is one thing you can do tomorrow to start?
- Describe one moment in your life when you felt you learned something important (practically no student of mine has ever written about something that happened in school).
- What do you do well, and what helps you be successful in doing it?

Of course, you never know what you're going to hear when you pose these kinds of questions. When I asked my students, "How would your parents describe you?," one student responded: "My mom would want to know why my teacher was asking about her daughter."

Reflective questions, of course, can also directly relate to what happened in the classroom

that day. One teacher, who only left the name “Edna” on my blog, said she takes what’s she learned from **Project Zero**, a Harvard program that studies multiple intelligences, and asks her students:

- How does today’s learning connect to what you already knew?
- How did it extend your thinking further?
- What questions do you still have?

Intellectually Challenge

Kelly Hines, a 4th grade teacher in North Carolina, uses a book of five—minute mysteries to challenge her students to use their inductive and deductive reasoning skills to solve a mystery.

I’ve used similar activities called “lateral thinking puzzles”—a term coined by Edward de Bono to describe indirect approaches to problem solving. These are very short mysteries that require students to think outside the box. A quick search on Google will uncover many examples that you can use in your classroom.

Technologically Engage

If you happen to be in the computer lab (or if you’re teaching a class where all students have Web access), many teachers have created Web sites that have links to engaging and reinforcing learning activities. Students can be easily directed to specific sites or given freedom to roam links on a page you’ve created or previewed.

Learning games are always useful, and you can find a listing of my favorite **Online Educational Games** on my web site. Another technology-related activity that’s a winner is having students create something that can be posted on the Web. You might review my choices for **The Best Ways To Create Online Content Easily & Quickly — 2008**. Two criteria I used in creating that list were that (1) it allowed students to create something in just minutes, and (2) it required little explanation.

Just Chill

Teachers are only human, and there are a few days that I’m done early and just need a few minutes to catch my breath and prepare for the next class. On those rare occasions, a you-may-stay-seated-and-talk-with-your-neighbors-until-the-bell-rings is always an option. Your students might appreciate a breather, too.

I was never a Boy Scout, but their motto— “Be Prepared” —has been good advice for 100 years and more.

I’d love to hear from readers how you prepare yourself to make good use of those leftover minutes, however infrequent they may be.

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