

More Bang for Your Buck: Increase Learning in Short Lessons

By Sarah Culp Searles

West High School, Knoxville ♦ sarah.searles@knoxschools.org

Prepared for Camp TASL July 2012

As librarians, particularly in upper grades, we often have very little time to grab kids' oh-so-precious attention and engagement. This session consists of a mock lesson in which I model a variety of techniques that have worked for me. Below are descriptions of those strategies, which are quick add-ins that can be adapted to whatever you're teaching. Obviously, in real life these don't all get lumped into one lesson; just pick one or a couple that best go with your daily plan.

Arrange furniture at class change

- If your furniture needs tweaked for a particular plan, or if you're teaching in someone else's classroom and their desk arrangements aren't conducive to your activities, move them! (Just be sure to put them back, of course.) When students walk into a space that is clearly arranged for a purpose, they'll immediately start to think and move with a purpose instead of on their usual autopilot. Doing this before they arrive saves instructional time.

Have instructions projected or written on board as bell-ringer

- Classroom teachers can set expectations and routines for how students start their lessons every day, but we lack that advantage. Cut down on as many small transitions as possible by posting important instructions (where to sit, remind them to get out a pencil, we're working on X assignment that they've already started, etc.) where they can see them and prepare as soon as they enter the room. I like to use Prezi <http://prezi.com/> to do my directions and embed them onto the webpage I'm using for my lesson, because it's easy to make them ahead of time, edit for different classes if needed, and pop to full screen to display.

Greet students at the door

- Whenever possible, speak to students as they enter. They're naturally suspicious of what a complete stranger says to them; even a tiny step to let them get to know you will help break through this barrier and make them more open to what you're teaching.

Overflow with enthusiasm! Abandon dignity!

- If we don't love what we're doing, why should they? Kids often see us as guest speakers (at best). We have about sixty seconds to break down that mental wall before they turn into smile-and-nod drones (again, at best). If they're laughing at something goofy we said, hey, that means they heard what we said!

Indulge quirks

- We don't have the luxury of time to build relationships, so we have to make ourselves relatable in a hurry, and quirky personal touches can help break the ice. I find every available excuse to use cat pictures. Stories about my car and the cake I made for my mom's birthday are also great stand-bys. Build your own quirky brand; again, if the students know me as the crazy cat lady, at least that means they remember seeing me.

Use “lovely assistants”

- Give students a chance to help you. They want to, even if their posture says “surly teenager” loud and clear. This gets tasks off your hands, but more importantly, when students have a job they have ownership in the lesson. If what I’m teaching is a demonstration of some sort, I’ll sometimes ask a kid to do the whole demo while I stand at the back of the room and give instructions; this works well to control behavior problems.

Organize class content on a page on your website

- Obviously you want to keep an offline backup for outages, but putting everything online a) makes it available anywhere you’ve got internet, which is most classrooms, and you don’t have to remember your jump drive; b) lets you mix any different media you want into a single, organized location to present from; and c) makes your lessons transparent for your stakeholders to find and be impressed at. If you don’t already have a website, Weebly for Education <http://education.weebly.com/> is a great place to build one.

Objectives in kid-friendly language

- It can feel like circus theater for the evaluations to carefully state our objectives at the beginning of each lesson, but I like it for two reasons: a) it gives me a chance to make a pattern in my instruction sessions, which hopefully both creates familiarity between different times they see me and reflects what they see from their classroom teachers, and b) it’s just fair to let kids know what’s expected of them, right? No need to keep expectations a secret. This can go on your webpage, on a Prezi or PowerPoint, on a handout, and/or any other visual you’re using.

Common Prezi for standards

- I put my district’s library curriculum standards (in kid-friendly language) into a Prezi and embedded it on my library homepage. Popping this up on the screen at the beginning of each lesson makes an easy visual cue for students to remember that they’ve seen me before. After we read the standard, I like to ask “what class do you do that in?” and prod them into admitting that they need that skill in all their classes, to emphasize relevance of the day’s lesson.

Use video clips for direct instruction

- For whatever reason, students seem to listen WAY better to a video than a lecture, so take advantage of it when possible. Keep clips short, 3-5 minutes, so as not to lose that advantage. When I couldn’t find an introductory catalog searching video I liked, I just made my own with my cell phone camera and a little iMovie editing; there was some work involved, but I’ve used it 21 times in two years and find it well worth the investment of labor. Videos work great when you have to teach one lesson a lot of times (like my catalog orientation there) because you can make sure every class covers all the same information. I put videos on SchoolTube to make them easy to access and embed: <http://www.schooltube.com/>.

Set up analogies in pictures to illustrate complex concepts

- A picture is worth a thousand words, so it’s definitely the way to go to show concepts that need a lot of words to explain. It’s very hard to tell my kids about how a structured database search is different from a web search, but when I show them pictures of a walled garden versus a jungle and talk about how structure would help you find a certain plant, the light bulbs go off immediately. It also gives them a visual

to imprint in their memory that's easy to refer to later. We subscribe to Britannica ImageQuest and find it VERY worth it, for teachers' purposes as well as student projects.

White boards

- White boards are a great canvas for group as well as individual work, for any kind of response that you don't need to keep copies of, and gathering responses this way hits all kinds of points we're looking for on our evaluations: instant feedback, formative assessments, get a response from every single kid, build in wait time while everybody writes, draw for non-linguistic responses, use to spur whole-group discussions, race responses to build in a game-like atmosphere... You can buy these things, but I made them for \$12.67 by getting the Home Depot to cut a 32 square foot sheet of melamine shower board into 32 pieces. I got markers at the dollar store and cut up some undershirts for erasers (socks work well too). Yes, my students occasionally use them to color, but if they're coloring, they're not asleep.

Laminated nametag "tents"

- After I made the whiteboards and already had dry-erase markers in kids' hands, I realized it would be easy to also make reusable "tents", by laminating half-sheets of paper and folding them, that students can write their names on and stick on their desks where I can see them. Being able to call directly on Johnny or Suzy is MUCH more effective than asking for volunteers to answer questions, especially if classroom management is an issue or if the same two or three kids are dominating a lesson. I sometimes do these as team names instead of individual names if the lesson uses a lot of group work.

Structure handouts as advance organizers

- It's okay not to be paperless if you get a lot of student learning mileage out of it. Use handouts to reinforce your standards/objectives, "preview the structure of the lesson" (TEAM evals, anyone?), give students a vehicle for purposeful note-taking, get in written responses, ask higher-order questions, and gather for assessments. I like to put low-order tasks, like fact-based note taking, right next to higher-order tasks, like reflection questions. Make sure to design handouts as something students have to interact with, not as something for them to look at; the latter will get stuck in backpacks and lost pronto, but the former makes their brain work. I differentiate with my handouts, too, by creating different lesson paces and difficulties on separate honors, CP, and regular versions of my handouts. For very low classes, a short handout guide with "click on _____ and then go to _____" fill-in-the-blanks is a good attention aid for simple demonstrations, like which databases I recommend for an assignment.

Replace lecture with questioning

- I try to make it a mantra never to tell a student something they can tell me. This is the spoken equivalent of making handouts that are meant to be written on instead of read and looked at. The information we convey through questioning may not be greater than it would be if we presented; however, the more interactive kids are through spoken responses, the less asleep they are, which means the more likely they are to actually remember our information.

Use Bloom's Taxonomy to push thinking deeper

- When we don't know kids well, it's easy to let our questions slide into the low-level recall arena. But they'll process a lot more and remember the information better if we push them into analysis and evaluation. (I'll confess that I haven't yet figured out how to do a true creation/level 6 task in a one-shot instruction session.) I keep a copy of "Questions for the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy" handy any time I write handouts or reflection questions. And the easiest way to push up Bloom's a bit is just to follow up with "why?" when a student gives a response. It helps to ask a low question, then something in the middle, then something high-level on the same material.

Ask "Essential Questions" to make learning personal and powerful

- I like to give Essential Questions that ask the student to consider how my lesson matters to them personally, with a high Bloom's level if possible. I try to make this a place to get some thinking out of even the high-level kids, or the ones who really do already know how to do what I'm showing them. I'll ask these at the beginning of class, along going over with the standards and objective, and then usually ask them to answer as a reflection at the end.

Use a kitchen timer for tasks

- Cut down on their ability to waste time by giving them a clear deadline. I like a timer in my hands better than a computer timer so I can walk around with it.

Pretests and posttests

- A simple two-question pretest—like an exit ticket, only beforehand—not only gives you a valuable assessment tool, but it also helps combat students' view of us as outsiders rather than real teachers. When students are told they're taking a quiz, the "oh yeah I'm in school" switch in their brain flips on and they settle in to work more purposefully. Investing three minutes in a pretest can make the rest of instructional time much better used. In the posttest, I usually give the same questions as were in the pretest (to compare) plus the lesson's Essential Question. Copying pretests and posttests on different colors of paper makes it a LOT easier to make sure kids are in the right spot and to sort out their work later.
- I have also been known to do exit tickets online as Google Forms, which is great to gather responses because they feed straight into a spreadsheet and don't need paper, but I find it much harder to transition them and make sure I actually get the responses when I throw computers into the mix. I do this with honors or upperclassmen sometimes, and I also like the idea of loading the Google Form onto an iPad and walking around collecting their spoken responses as they work.

Group materials to cut down transitions

- If you have a lot of different materials to juggle (handouts, pre/posttests, assignment pages, etc.), it can save quite a bit of time and attention to group these into folders ahead of time so that you only have one object to pass out. If you have the luxury of an empty room ahead of time, it also works well to stack materials on desks, or at a table at the door for student to pick up as they enter the room. Even if I only have a single handout, I often like to ask the classroom teacher to copy it into their assignment packet so kids only have one thing to keep up with; this also helps kids see what I'm doing as something that matters to their assignment.

Use large-scale handouts to model

- When taking notes from a class discussion or modeling how to use a notes or assignment page, it's helpful if kids can see you writing on something that looks exactly like what they've got. It works really well to pull up your assignment file if you have a SmartBoard or Activboard; but if you don't have those, it also works very well to blow up a printed handout on a poster machine, laminate it, and write on it with dry erase markers so you can erase and use it again with the next class. I use a laminated chart even when I DO have a SmartBoard and projector when I teach website evaluation, so that I can do my writing without having to interrupt view of my sample websites.