

Engaging

Anita Archer will present “Engaging All Learners” for the Utah Mentor Teacher Academy October 23rd and 24th, 2003. Contact Jim Curtice (jimc@updc.org or 801-272-3431).

Are your students riveted to your every word? Are they consistently attending during each lesson? The answer for all of us is “no.” In each of our settings, we must optimize the attention of students. The most effective procedure is to increase the opportunities to participate during the lesson. The following are some of the practices that you might use to increase participation.

Group Responses. Whether we are teaching math, reading, science, or social studies, there are times when the answers we are requesting are very short and the same across learners. This is a perfect time to have all the students respond simultaneously or “as one.” Utilizing group responses has many benefits. Foremost, it involves ALL students, not just one. Next, it is a very safe way for shy or reluctant students to participate. Many of us feel safer singing in the choir rather than singing the solo. Finally, you receive instant feedback on your students’ knowledge.

The greatest challenge with group responses is the designated “blurter”, the student who blurts out the answer before others have thought of the answer. To combat this challenge, the teacher must use some type of vocal command (“Everyone”), or a visual signal to cue the students. When I am teaching, I will ask a question, raise both of my hands to indicate a time to think, and then I will lower my hands signaling a response. Like an orchestra director, we can create beautiful music in our classrooms if we use signals to cue our students.

Partner Responses. Perhaps, one of the most effective ways to engage students is to have them share answers with their partner. Whether the answer is short or long, students can turn to their partner and share their answers. Like group responses, partner responses have many benefits. Once again, this procedure involves ALL children. Students also can benefit from the richness of their



partners’ ideas. They will also receive feedback from their partner. Perhaps, their answer is incorrect, or their answer is incomplete, or they are unaware of the question. In addition, the students will have an opportunity to interact socially, the major goal of intermediate and secondary students.

Following a few guidelines makes use of partners more effective. First, it is best if you select the partners. Children will tend to pick a “like” partner, not always the best classroom match. When selecting the partners, place the lowest performing students with middle performing students rather than with the highest performing students. The middle performing students will tend to be more supportive, allowing the lower performing student more opportunities to respond. Next, have the partners sit together and assign a designation such as “one” or “two”. If this is done, you can request one student to say the answer.



Anita Archer, PhD.

Them All

Of course, there are many ways that you can use partners in class. In many situations, you may wish the students to brainstorm ideas using the popular strategy of Think, Pair, Share. However, there are many other ways to use partners. Partners can tell each other answers, read to each other, edit each other's work, help their partner stay on task, and study material together. The uses are endless. The benefits are great.

Individual Responses. While group and partner responses are excellent procedures for engaging all students, sometimes you just want to call on one student. What would be best practice in that case? First, it would be useful to end our most common practice: asking a question, having students raise their hands, and calling on those eager students. When this practice is used, we end up calling on the highest performing, most assertive, most

answers quickly and others take an inordinate amount of time to write the same response. Thus, we have early finishers with a void that they may fill. So, the first thing that we must do during a lesson when using written responses is to gauge the length of the written response making it short rather than long. For example, when teaching a math lesson it would be better to have students complete ONE problem rather than six before giving them feedback. In this way, you will, reduce the amount of waiting time that students have.

In some cases, during the lesson, students have a worksheet in front of them. Often, one student will sneak ahead of the others. Instead of doing # 1 as directed and waiting for feedback, the student does #2, #3, and #4. Unfortunately, the "sneaker" may make errors without the benefit of feedback, or create a disturbance as he/she boasts of their item completion. A simple procedure can reduce the challenge of the "sneaker". Simply, give a directive, "When you are done, put your pencil down and look up." The sneaker generally wants to be the first finisher, thus, stopping after one item.

*To truly be effective,
instruction must be
very interactive.*

Other Responses. Of course, response opportunities are unlimited. Students could indicate agreement and disagreement with a thumb up or thumb down. They could act out a response or use appropriate gestures to indicate their answers. Students can also be asked to display their answers on response cards. For example, when reviewing the branches of the government, they could be asked to display cards labeled "legislative branch", "executive branch", or "judicial branch" in response to your questions. Even having students touch items as a response is very effective. In fact, you might make this your daily mantra. "Put your finger on the letter." "Put your finger on the title." "Put your finger on the first word." All with the hope that their awareness will join their fingers!

proficient in English students. This is a practice that I call, "reaching the best and leaving the rest."

What are our alternatives? There are two good practices that can be used to call on individual students. One is to have the students first share the answer with their partner, then randomly call on one student to share the answer. Another possibility is to ask a question, give everyone "thinking time", and then randomly call on a student. To insure that all students have access to individual turns, you might want to use one of these practices to distribute turns. One possibility would be to write each student's name on a card and place the cards in a container. During the lesson, draw a name and call on that student. Often, when I am teaching, I simply call on students in different sections of the room to distribute the turns.

Written Responses. In many subjects such as writing and math, the use of written responses are a given. However, written responses can increase management problems as some students write their

Conclusion. In the end, it is not so much which of these responses you select, rather, it is the number of opportunities to respond that is essential. To truly be effective, instruction must be very interactive. You say something. Your students say something. This constant involvement not only improves learning, but it also reduces management problems and makes instruction more fun for the students and the teacher.

Anita Archer, Ph.D., recipient of eight Outstanding Educator awards, has taught elementary and middle school students and has been a faculty member at San Diego State University, the University of Washington, and the University of Oregon. Currently, she serves as an educational consultant to school districts on effective instruction, classroom management, language arts instruction, and study skills instruction. ■