

Inside the School

Block Schedule Teaching Strategies

A Toolbox of Effective Teaching Ideas

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Special Report

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BLOCK SCHEDULE TEACHING STRATEGIES

School districts are re-arranging bell schedules to accommodate student learning styles and multiple intelligences as well as state education standards. Block scheduling decreases passing time between classes, decreases time teachers spend beginning and ending classes, and increases time for instruction, cooperative learning, and activities that appeal to students' learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Teachers sometimes worry about covering all of the information in the curriculum and wonder where the time to include block schedule teaching strategies will come from. According to *Thinking inside the Block Schedule* (2000), authors Pam Robbins, Gayle Gregory, and Lynne E. Herndon advocate refining curriculum to meet state and district standards and fit on the new schedule. On the block, the focus shifts from the breadth of the curriculum to the depth of student knowledge. With an eye on state and district standards, take a look at your curriculum and choose the units important to student knowledge and success. Pare the units down so you can cover what you teach in depth with your students. Student recall and learning benefit from this approach.

The first part of this printable report is an exclusive interview with block scheduling expert Robert Lynn Canady. Canady shares his current thinking about block scheduling as well as practical advice for planning lessons and activities.

The second part is the toolbox of teaching ideas. The fifteen teaching strategies match up with Canady's lesson plan and are

ready to use with little advance planning. The strategies are fun and appeal to student learning styles and multiple intelligences. They work well for block scheduling, but can be adapted to traditional schedules as well.

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LYNN CANADY

Robert Lynn Canady, co-author of *Teaching in the Block* and other block scheduling books, is busy consulting with school districts to make sure students have enough time to learn and learn enough to graduate.

Canady, 76, wishes that he'd not coined the term *block scheduling* 23 years ago. Instead, he'd call it *intensive scheduling*.

Block scheduling is the model where classes increase in time from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and meet either every day for a semester (4x4 block) or every other day all year (alternating or AB block).

Intensive scheduling is Canady's new model to address the needs of students who lack the skills and support systems to graduate.

"A lot of these youngsters fail their classes by October and they sit in class until June," Canady said. "They become an attendance and discipline problem because they don't have the skills to do well."

One of the urban districts where Canady has been consulting has over 30 students who are homeless. At the end of the school day, these kids ask teachers to call a church or shelter so they'll have a place to sleep. Homework isn't a priority for these students when the final bell rings.

The ordinary seven-period day just doesn't work for these kids, or for the majority of kids, Canady said. Instead of block scheduling, Canady now advocates a school day and year with more flexibility.

"Some of these youngsters aren't ready for English 9," Canady said. "We need to build schedules around student data and schedule around student needs. If the youngsters have a lot of problems, no

support system at home, poor organizational skills, poor reading skills, put them in reading classes first before they fail English 9.”

Canady said that schools are set up for the upper 50% of kids who achieve well and have normal homes. The current model just isn’t working for inner city and urban students.

“We need to look at the time variable,” Canady said. “We can’t control families or home life. So how do we best use that time factor?”

Canady recommends teachers work with high-need students all day, every day, for a month. It works out to be the same as an entire credit’s worth of time and catches the students up to the rest of the school population. “The teachers keep up with the youngsters better,” Canady said. “They get a relationship with the students first, get all of the work done in class, and make sure the students learn.”

Canady suggests a series of electives to help these students improve their competencies and graduate from high school.

Along with the increased accountability that schools are seeing to make sure that students are learning, we need to increase the level of support we give students. We need to build in tutorials during the day to make sure students succeed, Canady said.

For more information about Robert Lynn Canady’s work on block scheduling, check out his website:

<http://www.schoolschedulingassociates.com/>

CANADY'S THREE-STEP LESSON PLAN

Block Scheduling expert Robert Lynn Canady recommends that teachers on the block schedule spend their days coaching instead of lecturing. Canady co-edited the book *Teaching in the Block: Strategies for Engaging Active Learners*, in which he advocates teachers shift from talking all day to students to planning for students to work all day.

"The teachers lead it; the students do it," Canady said.

Canady has based a three-step lesson plan on Bloom's Taxonomy and adapted it for teachers on block schedules. The steps are not a strict 30 minutes – 30 minutes – 30 minutes formula; it's more flexible and adaptable to the teacher's and students' needs.

LESSON PLAN STEP ONE: EXPLANATION

In this step, the teacher is in charge and on stage and lectures in a traditional teaching manner. Students are more passive; it's the knowledge step on Bloom's Taxonomy of learning and it's essential for moving up the knowledge hierarchy.

LESSON PLAN STEP TWO: APPLICATION

This is the heart of teaching on the block schedule and should take the most class time, Canady said. In the Application step, the students become the workers and the teacher becomes the coach. Students are more active, perhaps working in pairs, on computers, in a simulation, or in a circle discussion.

"The teacher moves to the sidelines," Canady said. "The flow changes from teacher as the center to the teacher as facilitator, answering questions, and coaching."

LESSON PLAN STEP THREE: SYNTHESIS

The synthesis step builds on Madeline Hunter's work, Canady said. "Never let a class end without a class understanding the essential elements."

Take Hunter's ideas and convert them into note taking, he said. Make sure the students have the most critical elements from the classroom application and can summarize the lesson in their notes before they leave the room.

CANADY'S IDEAS FOR SYNTHESIS: THE SIX RS

Block scheduling expert Robert Lynn Canady offers these six options for the synthesis portion of the lesson plan, which he calls "The Six Rs of Synthesis."

REFLECTION

This isn't a tool to use everyday, Canady said. It's good to use often though, because it gives students a opportunity to personalize the learning, adapt it, and make it their own.

Reflection increases the retention of a lesson, Canady said.

In the reflection step, students ask themselves these questions:

- What can I do with this learning?
- Is the learning something I can adopt to what I do?
- How can I, personally, use this?

REVIEW

Canady suggests having students begin on their homework before class is over as a review.

Pairs/check is a method Canady recommends. Two students begin their work together. One works a problem and then the other checks the work.

During a review, the teacher should circulate around the room to check for student understanding.

RETEACH

Canady said that reteaching is not the same as doing the whole lesson over. "Correct misunderstandings or anything students have done wrong," he said.

After starting the review, note what students are doing well and what they're struggling with. Take a few minutes before the end of class to share what you've seen with students and make sure that they understand what's working and what's not before they leave.

RELEVANCY

Explain to students why we learn something, Canady said. Is it just to pass a test? Show students how the real world uses classroom concepts.

He offers these ideas:

- Did you know an engineer uses geometry to do his work?
- Can you calculate the angle of the ball for a basketball free throw?

RECORD NOTES

Along the lines of Madeline Hunter's lesson plan model, summarize and pull together critical elements of the lesson. Post large sheets of presentation paper or butcher paper around the room. At the top of each piece, write a topic from the day's lesson. Break students into groups and give each group a different color marker. Students travel from paper to paper and record what they've learned about each topic. When groups have visited all topics, students sit down and take notes based on the class's work.

RECALL FOR TOMORROW

Canady suggests closing class with a hook that will make students want to find out more about the subject the next class period.

As an example, Canady suggested showing an algebra class eight different marbles. They all look similar, but they have different weights. How can the marbles be sorted using the scale only once?

For social studies, Canady posed this question: From 1937 – 1938 the sale of shampoo almost doubled. Why do you think this happened?

This strategy whets student's appetites for learning and gets them thinking about content in a different way.

A TOOLBOX OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING IDEAS

Lesson Plan Part One: The Explanation Phase and Teaching Techniques

Part of what makes teaching on the block so much fun and more effective is the time you take to connect students to the explanations you give. Before a mini-lecture, use these activities to mine your students' prior knowledge and encourage interest in the information you'll be giving them. The time you spend connecting students to the information will pay off when it comes to the lecture and practice.

You can use these activities to break up mini-lectures, too. Instead of calling on individual students to check for understanding, get the kids out of their seats and moving around. It's fun, it's time-on-task, and it's interactive.

THE MINI-LECTURE

Block scheduling's extended periods should encourage more student involvement, not less. However, as a teacher, you know that the foundation of Bloom's Taxonomy is knowledge. Without the base of facts, students can't go on to swap ideas and create masterpieces. We have to provide students with this crucial knowledge step in a way that's interesting, but not overwhelming.

The mini-lecture tries to meet both the need for the teacher to teach traditionally and the student to absorb knowledge and participate.

MINI-LECTURE TECHNIQUES

- **Keep it short.** A mini-lecture should not stretch beyond 15 minutes. If you know it will run long, split it up into two chunks with an out-of-seat activity or a think-pair-share activity (see page 23) in between.
- **Use advance organizers.** David Ausubel's 1960 research showed that giving students a list of objectives for the lecture in the beginning, an organizer to place information during the lecture, and then an opportunity to practice the knowledge, enhances learning.
- **Give an opportunity for a class set of notes.** Students can record the notes on the overhead projector on a guided note taking transparency. At the end of the mini-lecture, use think-pair-share (see page 23) for students to discuss the three most interesting or important things they learned from the mini-lecture. Invite a representative from each pair to write down one of her group's observations on the board. Ask your students to fill in the gaps in their own notes with the information from the board.

PIPE CLEANER SCULPTURES

This is a terrific activity to use at the beginning of a unit or lesson to connect the information to students prior knowledge in a meaningful way. You can also use this at the end of a lesson to summarize what the lesson was about.

MATERIALS:

- pipe cleaners or chenille wires (they're the same thing)

METHOD:

Let's say I'm teaching a class about algebraic equations for the first time. My overall concept for the unit is balance. Offer the pipe cleaners to the students and give them 5 minutes (my kids usually took 7) to create a sculpture whose title will be *Balance*. Many students will come up with scales, but someone might come up with a gymnast on a balance beam. Talk about the sculptures and then relate them to equations.

At the end of a lesson spent with the Capulets and Montagues, I might distribute the pipe cleaners and have students sculpt what they thought the lesson was about. Again, we'd share. Fate, honor, and love in twisted pipe cleaners is always a treat.

SCULPTING TIPS:

Don't use scissors to make wires shorter – you'll have a set of dented scissors. Bend the pipe cleaners back and forth on the same spot and the wire will break.

PHUN WITH PHOTOS

Photos, mounted on construction paper, can become conversation starters at the beginning of class. You can also use postcards for this same activity.

MATERIALS:

- Make it your Sunday morning project to leaf through an old magazine and tear out interesting or artistic photos. Avoid photos that show current events or pop culture. You're looking for *evergreen* photos – photos that are useful this year and in ten years.
- Mount the photos on construction paper with plain ol' white glue.

METHOD:

- Foreign language: select a photo and ask students to describe it in the target language. Give students photos and ask them to work in pairs.
- Language arts: distribute photos on students' desks. Students write creatively for five minutes about the photos. Post the photos and the paragraphs on the bulletin board.
- Art: select a photo and dissect it according to design principles.
- Social studies: distribute photos and ask students to make a connection between the photo and yesterday's lesson.

VOTE WITH YOUR FEET

This activity connects lecture material with student prior knowledge. Long lectures are not a fabulous way to teach in the block, but sometimes your lecture lasts beyond 15 minutes. Shake it up a bit by encouraging movement during a short, on-task intermission.

MATERIALS:

- Optional: tape signs on the walls with the following words: *Yes, No, True, False*. Space out the signs so each one is in a different region of the room. You can leave these up on the walls for the entire school year.
- Optional: create custom signs for multiple choice answers. Save these and include them in your unit binder for the next time you teach the lesson.

METHOD:

Ask students a yes/no, true/false, multiple choice question, or open-ended question (agree/disagree/fence-sitter). Instead of calling on students to give their answers, have them vote with their feet and gather under the sign that best fits their answer. Give students a minute or two to discuss why they chose the answer they did and elect a spokesperson. The spokesperson from each group explains the group's rationale. Students return to their seats for another chunk of mini-lecture.

OPINION LINE-UP

Like Vote with your Feet, Opinion Line-up gets students out of their desks. Instead of a check for understanding, though, you're going for an expression of opinion.

MATERIALS

If you want, you can post the numbers from 1 – 5 on colored paper along your back wall, starting in the left corner and ending in the right. Leave the numbers on the wall so you can revisit this activity.

METHOD

Fate is a motif in *Romeo and Juliet*. You might ask your students to line up along the back wall. On a scale of one to five, have students line up according to how much of a role they believe fate plays in their lives. Those who believe that fate rules all aspects of life would be a 5 and should find themselves in the right corner. Those who believe that fate doesn't exist would be a 1 and should gather in the left corner. Ask students to pick their number and line up. Record how many students gather under each number and invite students to defend their opinions.

Lesson Plan Part Two: The Application Phase and Teaching Techniques

Open your book to page 185 and complete the questions at the end of the section.

Sometimes you assign practice of this nature, but it's more fun for everyone when students can practice their knowledge in new and unexpected ways. The brain loves novelty, so the more interesting and varied the practice, the more recall a student will have.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Socrates was really on to something with his Socratic seminars. In a Socratic seminar, teachers pose a question and students discuss it. Students use prior knowledge and facts to bolster their opinions. The teacher steps back and observes the process, but it's the students who are talking and, therefore, learning.

Studies show that students retain what they learn when they talk to one another about a concept. Robert Lynn Canady and Michael D. Rettig found that as students listen to one another, they begin to develop their own voice, too. Students focus on both the similarities and differences in opinion and compare other students' ideas to their own (Canady & Rettig, 30-31).

The Socratic seminar requires student and teacher preparation to be successful. The teacher will need to develop questions, create a seminar rubric, and correct essays after the seminar is finished.

The seminar is an ideal tool to use in language arts and social studies classes, where reading and discussion are common. However, the seminar can also be used to discuss scientific ethics or mathematical utility.

MATERIALS

- Reading selections and reading assignment
- Seminar rules
- Reading quiz
- Teacher-made set of seminar questions
- Seminar rubric
- Instructions and rubric for post-seminar essay

METHOD

1. Assign a selection for students to read closely. Ideally, the text will be on photocopies so students can make notes and highlight sections that they find interesting or have questions about.
2. When students come to the seminar, they take a short reading quiz. Students who pass the quiz are allowed seats in the Socratic seminar circle. Students who do not pass should sit in an outer circle and take notes. Leave a few seats in the inner circle open for outer students to join the circle and contribute, if they have an idea to share.
3. Begin the discussion with an open-ended question about the reading. Questions about theme are best here (Canady & Rettig, 35).
4. Students respond to the questions and the teacher records their participation on a chart. It's important to note that the students are the ones discussing the material. The teacher's role is to toss out the question, sit back, and record participation. Ideally, students will explain an idea, cite the passage in the text, and offer an opinion. Students gain fewer points for echoing others' ideas without offering anything new to the discussion. Weak, unsupported comments and talking just to get a grade earn students few points. It's wise to have rules for students before the seminar begins. Address things like talking too much, talking too little, talking without a point, side conversations, and unhelpful comments.
5. During the seminar, students should be taking notes about what their peers have said. They'll use these notes in the exit essay.
6. Have a closing question that brings the discussion back to the learner. (Canady & Rettig, 36). How is the concept useful to me? How can I apply this in my own life? What will I do differently?
7. Assign students and exit essay for them to reflect upon what they learned during the seminar.

INTERVIEWS

The block allows you time to bring in community members as original sources for your students to interview. This is a great tool to use in almost any subject. Math teachers can invite local accountants, architects, or engineers. Social studies teachers can ask veterans, politicians, and museum personnel to speak to their students. Language arts teachers can invite local journalists, poets, and writers to speak to their students.

MATERIALS:

- Invite the local experts
- Provide the experts with the materials you've been studying in class so they can answer the class's questions

METHOD:

Before your visitor or visitors arrive, make sure you and your class review questions you'd like the visitor to answer.

Ask the experts about their experiences with the unit's topic. Students should record the experts' answers and report on them in some way: poster project, essay, photo essay.

When I taught French in south east Texas, I had a fabulous line-up of Cajun grandparents. The first Tuesday of every month a student brought Grandmère to class. Grandmère showed us photos of the old days, cooked us some étouffée or gumbo, and taught us an old Acadian song. I usually asked the grandparent to speak a bit of Cajun French to the class in the context of our unit. Eventually, my principal put my Cajun Grandparent days on his calendar, too (he loved étouffée).

SHEET CAKE MAPS

Learning geography doesn't have to be dull. This activity has an instant connection with your students' stomachs and teaches them as well. You can adapt this to charts or graphs, too. Keep this one in mind for the day before a parent-teacher night.

MATERIALS:

- One sheet cake per two students (students bring these from home)
- Colored frosting (students can bring these from home or you can make some sort of deal with your home economics teacher.)
- Maps
- Research materials

EXTRA PREP:

- Reserve the lunch room and cover the tables with plastic. Make sure you have clean up materials on hand, too. Discuss your plan with the custodians, the lunch room personnel, and your principal.
- Bring your camera

METHOD:

Before you bake cakes, students should research their maps. If you're teaching about a war, assign a map to students. Have students research the map area and be able to explain how the geography influenced the battle or how the battle was important to the war.

Ask students to bring cakes and supplies. Spend a class period decorating. Assign a poster project where students explain the significance of their maps and justify their cake design.

Photograph the cakes and cover them. Display the cakes, posters, and photos along with plates, knives, and forks at a parent-teacher conference night, open house, or faculty meeting.

WHITEBOARD RACES

Splitting kids into pairs and distributing mini whiteboards and markers makes for a fun review activity. Do it for 15 minutes, max. The fumes from all of those dry erase markers will make everyone light headed.

MATERIALS:

- Mini whiteboards (online I found a set of 10 for \$32.50)
- Dry erase markers
- Tissues for wiping boards clean

METHOD:

Select a student from the crowd to be your line judge. I'd select the kid who is sometimes difficult in class and could use a small reward to feel part of the group or a connection to you. This kid is the line judge. Her job is to select the three fastest white boards and the slowest white board.

Have students take turns writing answers to questions on the whiteboard. Ask questions and have students display their whiteboard answers. Your line judge calls out the top three and the slowest. Instruct your line judge not to reward intentional slowness.

Award points for fastest correct answer and slowest correct answer. Give small rewards for the winners.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

This technique encourages discussion of the topic (especially a lecture) and incorporates the best part of cooperative learning: students supplementing students' understanding.

It's also a great technique for shy students or students who might not understand the concept of the lesson. It gives these students think time and discussion time without putting them on the spot.

THE METHOD

- Break your class into pairs. You might have already arranged seating to accommodate working in pairs if you use this activity often.
- Pose a question related to the lecture to the class or give them a problem to solve.
- Give the class a minute or two to think about the problem by themselves. Keep track of time.
- Ask students to discuss the problem and their answers with their partners.
- Call on pairs at random and ask one student to report the pair's findings to the class.
- It's useful to record the pairs' answers on the board. You can refer back to the answers as you continue your lesson.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

An experiential learning technique from Jennifer Stanchfield's book, *Tips & Tools: The Art of Experiential Group Facilitation*, this activity gets students out of their seats and reviewing in a kinesthetic way. The first time you do this exercise, start-up takes a few minutes. However, the more often you use it, the more it becomes a routine and your start-up time decreases.

It's a good exercise to use to break up long lectures, give your class a movement break, but also keep everyone on task and learning.

THE METHOD

- Divide your students evenly into two groups. Have the first group meet in the front of the room and create a circle with all people facing out.
- Ask the second group to find a partner from the first group and face their partner.
- Pose a question to the class and ask partners to discuss the question and come up with an answer.
- Instruct the inner circle to move four people to the left and pose a new question.
- It's fun sometimes to ask something off-topic as a treat. You might ask students to discuss the football team's chances in the game Friday night or the merits of knee socks versus ankle socks.

Lesson Plan Part Three: The Synthesis Phase and Teaching Techniques

The end of a lesson is almost as important as the beginning of the lesson. It's your opportunity to emphasize what's important to remember and what to do for the next class.

The activities in this section can be used as homework, but they are not practice. In other words, these activities don't go over the skills students need, but rather they challenge students to use the learning in a different way, to personalize it, and to play with it.

HAIKU

The deceptively simple 5-7-5 syllable formula can be a great way for students to manipulate both vocabulary words and concepts. Require three vocabulary words per poem and you've given your students a great thought exercise.

EXAMPLES:

Social Studies

The Civil War

Brother fought brother
Burnt homes and torn families
The uncivil war

Math

Radius

Halfway through the circle,
The radius takes a break.
An equation waits.

Pi

Three flavors to choose.
"One piece of cherry I'll have"
Four bites and it's gone.

(The first word of each line makes up 3.14.)

Integers

Ten fingers, two eyes.
Can be negative too, but
No halves or fractions

NAME THAT TUNE

If quadratic equations had a theme song, what would it be? This activity is a great lesson starter or ender. Assign for homework at the end of class and rest assured that they'll be thinking about it all night long. It's not easy.

Students can perform songs for extra credit. Those who rework the lyrics to match the lesson can receive a fabulous prize (a lunchroom cookie, a bottle of juice, etc., 30-second head start out of class).

EXAMPLE:

- **Language Arts:** *Romeo and Juliet*. If these star-crossed lovers had attended prom, their theme song from the '70s might have been "Stairway to Heaven."
- **Math:** If sine and cosine had a song, it might be "Good Vibrations" or "Surfin' USA" (Get it? Waves?)
- **Science:** DNA "The Twist"

BRING IT TO CLASS

Homework doesn't have to be written, but it can certainly can come from home. In this activity, students search their homes for examples of the unit's concept.

MATERIALS:

It's helpful to have one example to show students of this assignment before they leave class. Too many examples take the fun out of it, though.

METHOD:

For homework, ask students to bring in examples of the lesson's concept for class the next day. Students should be prepared to explain the item and its relevance to class.

EXAMPLES:

- **Math:** students are studying sine and cosine. Students must bring in examples of these two concepts. Items that students might bring are: a bicycle tire, a small water-filled toy that illustrates waves, or tsunami sushi.
- **Science:** students are studying enzymes. Their assignment is to find advertisements or products that use enzymes. Students bring to class detergents, contact lens solutions, and food products.
- **English:** students are studying the role of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*. Their assignment is to bring an example of fate to class (must be an object). Students bring in photos of their parents' wedding, a book off of their home bookshelf that has fate as a concept, a song that has fate as a concept.
- **Social Studies:** students are studying ancient civilizations. Students must bring in an example of ancient civilizations' modern influence. They might bring a DVD of the Olympics, an algebra book, or alphabet blocks.

ADVERTISEMENTS

Advertisers don't sell products, they sell *benefits*. This homework assignment has your students looking at the practical applications of the lesson.

MATERIALS:

Clip out some advertisements that stress the benefits of a product; large ads with images are best.

METHOD:

Let's say I have an advertisement for deodorant. I would show the ad to students and then ask them to list both deodorant's functions and its benefits. In the case of deodorant, the product's function is to reduce unpleasant odors; the benefit of which is to make a person more attractive and more confident.

Ask students to develop an advertisement for quadratic equations, keeping in mind the benefit of these equations. If you don't teach math, adapt this exercise to whatever subject you teach. Create a rubric with students so they can create a good product and they understand how the will be graded.

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