

FOCUS ON INCLUSION

SCHEDULING FOR READING AND WRITING SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION USING LEARNING CENTER DESIGNS

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Organizing and designing Learning Center activities requires planning so that students are engaged in meaningful learning tasks and the tasks are differentiated for varied learning levels. In this article, suggestions for designing and managing Learning Centers, including a Center for small group instruction, are described. Finally, ideas for monitoring student performance on Learning Center tasks are provided.

Students' reading and writing skills provide instructional challenges for general and special educators because the students' skill levels vary, their pace of acquisition of new skills differs, and the range of practice opportunities to promote fluency fluctuates. Consequently, teachers need to devise explicit instruction and guided practice activities for learners that match their skill levels. Vaughn, Gersten, and Chard (2000) noted that students with learning disabilities benefit from explicit and intensive instruction that maximizes instructional learning time. In particular, they noted that basic skills, such as handwriting, speed of writing, speed of reading, and decoding words, are areas that—when combined with metacognitive or strategy instruction—promote impressive achievement gains for students who have the most difficulty learning how to read and write well. Large-group instruction as the *primary* method of demonstrating new skills and strategies—whether in a special or general education setting—is not

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the most efficient way to differentiate. Teachers need to conduct small-group instruction. In order to provide small-group instruction, part of the class needs to be engaged in alternative practice tasks so that teachers' attention can be with the small group.

Many special and general educators have creative ideas for how students could practice reading and writing skills. The dilemma can be how to work these creative ideas into manageable learning situations so that small-group instruction occurs. Some teachers realize they need to implement more small-group instruction but are not sure how to organize it (Moody, Vaughn, Hughes, & Fischer, 2000). One solution is to set up classroom Learning Centers.

Learning Centers are not a new instructional or organizational design; however, some teachers are unsure where to begin in creating one. Three areas are key for Learning Center design and implementation. First, Learning Centers need to feature tasks that students can complete independently and with increasing proficiency. Second, designing Learning Center sequences and practicing how students move to and from Centers is essential. Third, monitoring how well students accomplish tasks at Learning Centers is important for students' accountability and for teachers' awareness of when tasks need to change.

DESIGNING THE CONTENT FOR READING AND WRITING LEARNING CENTERS

Reading and writing instruction generally features explicit instruction (demonstration of new skills and strategies) on content for which students need multiple practice opportunities to firmly learn, practice, and use—and of course, some students need more practice opportunities than others. Such practice opportunities are content for Learning Centers. Because student groupings for Learning Centers may be heterogeneous or same/similar skill, student groupings are flexible and vary across time. Initially it may be easier for teachers to use one type of activity that all students complete at a Learning Center. For differentiation, the teachers can vary the activity requirements.

For example, a "Read, then Write" Learning Center can have tasks and directions that remain essentially the same for all students, but the content is differentiated based on appropriately challenging tasks for individual students. All students "Read, then Write"—but what each student reads and then writes will vary. All students can read passages and write a summary of the passage that contains a main idea, details, and closing sentence—but the complexity of the passages are differentiated as well as the guidance for writing. Some

students read more difficult passages, and some will use prompts for their writing (e.g., “The main idea is——.”). The type of content read as well as the writing components can also be varied. Some students may be assigned content based on interests and reading level, while others may be assigned content based on vocabulary they are learning. The variations of content that can be used in one Learning Center are endless; the primary task for teachers is ensuring that each student who uses the Learning Center has appropriately challenging content to practice and use.

ASSIGNING STUDENTS FOR LEARNING CENTER ROTATIONS

Scheduling for Learning Center activities is easiest to conceptualize by breaking the entire learning session into specific time increments. For example, if there are ninety minutes scheduled each day for Reading and Language Arts, consider that there are six fifteen-minute “sessions” to be scheduled. Some of these fifteen-minute increments may be large-group instruction and some are small-group instruction. When small-group instruction occurs with one set of students, the other students are rotating through Learning Center activities.

Instructional sessions on how to use Learning Centers and make fluid transitions are necessary. Practicing the use of Learning Centers is critical for ensuring students know what to do. Reinforcing appropriate behavior is also important. Self-management checklists or learning contracts can be used to identify which Learning Center the students are to use and when. Bulletin boards can also be used to guide students for the order in which they complete Learning Center activities and for when they receive small-group instruction.

Figure 1 illustrates a bulletin board display depicting individual Learning Centers for a large group of students for Reading and Language Arts. Large index cards (5 inches \times 8 inches) at the bottom of the bulletin board note students’ names. Smaller pictures that correspond to each Learning Center are clipped to the bottom of the index cards. These pictures show students the sequence for which Centers they go to first, second, etc. Rotations from Center to Center can occur on a prescribed basis, such as fifteen-minute sessions with all four Centers used in one day. Teachers incorporate small-group instruction at a Learning Center (the star in Fig. 1), enabling them to provide more demonstration or practice sessions for select students. When the group completes the Center tasks, the small pictures can be removed from the paper clip so that the next Center sequence shows. With the sequence shown in Fig. 1, the teacher is

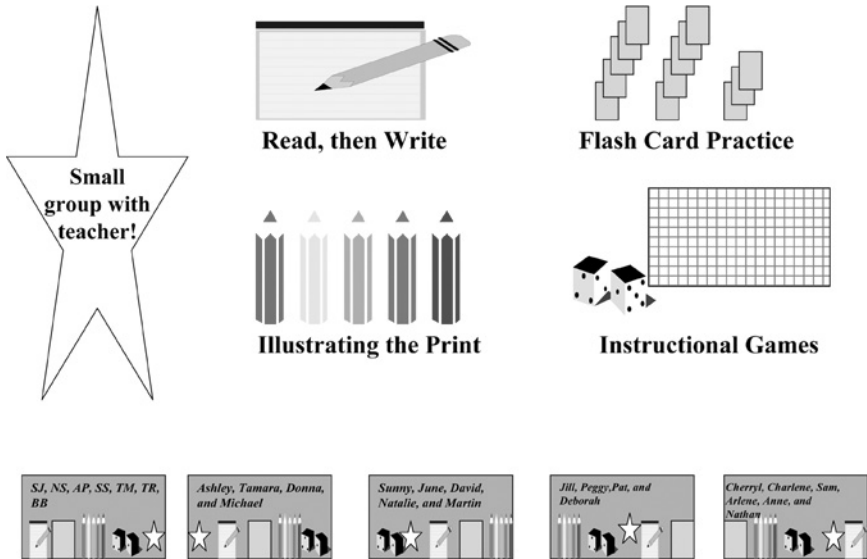


Figure 1. Bulletin board design for sequencing large groups of students at Learning Centers.

scheduled to meet with all students in small groups for at least one brief session. If the teacher wants to meet with one group for a longer period, two stars can be placed in the sequence for that group.

Learning Centers can be used one day per week, several days per week, or every day. Center activities can be ongoing in nature (e.g., writing a research paper) across days, or the activity can be brief. Regardless of the length of the activity, it must promote learning. To that end, monitoring students' progress is necessary.

MONITORING STUDENT PROGRESS

Some Learning Center activities can be evaluated using curriculum-based measurement, such as probes of words read correctly in a minute (Linan-Thompson & Hickman-Davis, 2002). Other activities can be self-correcting, such as a student recording the number of vocabulary words read correctly from flash cards and then checked by the student using a language master. Students might check their own work or assist others in checking their work. Checking work may occur immediately after task completion or at another time of the day.

Teachers' examination of writing, for example, could occur using the Spelling Progress Rating Scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 7 (e.g., 0 = uses random letters to spell words; 2 = uses correct initial phonemes; 7 = correct spelling used) (Gregg & Mather, 2002). Using assessments that are formative and yield data enable teachers and students to monitor progress across time. Monitoring student performance on Center activities is important for noting when activities need to change (e.g., more complex content is needed) or when more explicit instruction should occur (e.g., students are making many errors).

Teachers who use Learning Centers find they take considerable time initially to design and implement. However, the time investment pays off throughout the school year because students learn how to work independently on meaningful tasks at Learning Centers, and teachers have an organized format for providing small-group instruction.

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