
Multiple Activity Literacy Centers: Promoting Choice and Learning Differentiation

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Introduction

Over the past several years, there has been a decrease in independent activities associated with literacy learning in schools I've worked in or visited in Illinois, California, and New Mexico. It was once common to see elementary students working at centers set up in different areas of the room. In talking to teachers since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act*, they have noted the heavy emphasis on "being accountable" through "research-based" practices and high-stakes testing. This has led these teachers to feeling pressured to teach only what is proscribed in the reading program purchased by their school districts (R. Martinez, September 2003; J. Gold, January 2004; L. Bonales, April 2006, personal communications). As a result, independent learning practices, such as traditional classroom learning centers, often are underutilized, or even abandoned. Yet, centers are developmentally appropriate and are a type of activity suggested by both the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Centers Can Be a Part of Your Research-Based Practice

Developmentally appropriate practices for the teaching of reading that are research based were articulated in the joint position statement adopted in May 1998 by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Practices that include whole group instruction and drills focusing on isolated skills (often found in pre-packaged language arts curricula) are "not particularly effective for primary-grade children, [and] are even less suitable and effective with preschool and kindergarten children" (IRA and NAEYC, 1998).

Recently, the tendency has been for schools to concentrate on the five areas that *NCLB* focuses on: (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) vocabulary, (4) fluency, and (5) comprehension. Unfortunately, left out of the emphasis are the important areas of oral language, literacy experiences, and connections between reading and writing (Stewart, 2004). A result of this legislation in the schools in which I've worked and visited is to do the opposite of what the joint position statement outlines: namely, there has been an increasing emphasis on teaching discreet skills, often to large groups with reinforcing activities done by individual students via worksheets.

How can teachers continue to make sure they cover mandated curriculum without narrowing their teaching focus to the areas on standardized, high-stakes tests? One way is to use literacy centers that can provide reinforcement or skills, choice of activities, and can enable the teacher to work with small groups for direct, differentiated teaching.

Literacy Centers for All Grades

Using multiple activities in each literacy center when teaching reading and the language arts can provide students with practice in a rich variety of literacy skills, including, but not limited to,

the five areas emphasized by the *NCLB* legislation. Students who work in such centers are motivated by being given a variety of interesting, developmentally appropriate literacy activities to choose from at each center.

Literacy centers can be used at nearly any level, not just early primary grades. Centers can provide extra language arts support for students for whom English is a second or additional language. Children work with their peers in the centers, and they have the opportunity to use more oral language than they often do in a regular classroom setting. They also have the chance to choose from a variety of tasks, and to work independently, with a partner, or in a small group.

During language arts instruction, the teacher instructs a small group of students while the other students go to one or more centers instead of more traditional reinforcement activities in isolation at their desks. The difference with this model of centers versus single activity centers is that each center provides a variety of activities that focus on specific areas of the language arts. Developing the initial center takes more planning time than using a worksheet-driven curriculum, but once a literacy center is in place, it is easy to keep fresh by using common classroom activities and materials.

Activity Variety Keeps Centers Easy to Manage

The biggest obstacle for most teachers when developing centers is coming up with ideas for activities. Often, teachers will place one activity in each center and expect all students to do that activity. This can be problematic for several reasons. First, children in a typical classroom are at different learning levels. A single activity in a center will not reach all the learning levels in a class. The second problem is that the teacher is burdened with figuring out a new idea every week, or even every few days, as students rotate through the centers.

Literacy centers need not be complicated or require lots of time for upkeep. They can

be easily developed using common classroom materials and activities. The key elements that make literacy centers easy to create, maintain, and monitor follow.

Top Ten List for Developing Literacy Centers

1. Use activities that have been practiced with the whole class several times.
2. Introduce each activity to the whole class before putting it in a center.
3. Have a few clear rules that you reinforce every time you demonstrate an activity for a center.
4. Have a “one strike and you are out” rule (Diller, 2003) in which students know that if they break a rule, they will have to return to their seats.
5. Most of the activities should be active, thinking activities, not worksheets from your proscribed curriculum.
6. Have a variety of activities and materials available at each center, but do not put out more than one new activity at a time. Try including three to six different activities per center, depending on space constraints and student abilities. Include activities that are at different learning levels and include a mix of individual and pair work.
7. Rotate activities in and out of a center, one or two a week, to keep things interesting, or add different props, pens, stamp pads, etc.
8. Limit the number of children at a center to four.
9. Have a monitoring system in place. You do not want to have to get up from the small group you are instructing to check that kids are on task. Some advocate using specific, regulated time blocks (King-Sears, 2005), but others find that a simple in-box for finished work at each center is sufficient. Just make sure that children are accountable in some way for the work they do during center time.

10. Centers are for all students at all levels—not just for kindergarteners or children who finish early. They are not extra; they are a part of the regular curriculum.

Teaching Independence and Encouraging Choice

One of the benefits of using centers with your regular language arts curriculum is an increase in independence and giving children choice, which is useful for differentiating instruction. If there are a variety of activities in a center, all levels can participate—from gifted to special needs children (Morrow, 2005).

Both teachers and students can sometimes have trouble using literacy centers effectively. In my experiences, both as an elementary teacher implementing centers in my own classroom and as a teacher educator observing in classrooms, it is sometimes difficult for teachers to keep centers fresh and give up control. Students are often used to being directed in all learning activities, and they might have trouble making choices and working independently. By using the Top Ten List, you can avoid these problems. It is especially important to introduce each activity before putting it in a center, remind students of center rules frequently, use known activities so that students do not keep coming to you for help, and follow the “one strike and you are out” rule.

Activities and Materials: Keep Them Simple!

The absolute key to developing literacy centers that will benefit your students’ literacy learning is to avoid making your centers teacher intensive. If you have only included one activity per center in the past, you know you constantly had to come up with a new center idea every week. Having a choice of activities available in each center can help. Include clear, simple written directions for each activity in a center as a reminder, and go over them as you introduce each activity. Be sure all students can see the

directions, and write them at the lowest reading level possible.

If you keep your activities simple and use common classroom materials, you will not encounter the well-known pitfalls of starting a center only to have students bicker over the interesting pens you bought, or run out of something you have to go buy yourself. It can help students become more motivated to use a center if there are interesting materials, but this doesn’t mean you have to go out and buy lots of glitzy supplies.

Classroom Space

Keeping in mind the idea of keeping things simple, you don’t need to dedicate a section of your classroom for the centers area. The bookshelves where you keep free-choice books can form the basis of your reading center, and the Word Wall should be part of your writing center. Which center should your classroom computer(s) go in? If you have several, designate some for the writing center and one for the reading center. A good center for the primary classroom uses Big Books, where children practice a variety of literacy work ranging from letter identification to alphabetizing. Try looking at your classroom with a fresh eye, asking yourself, “Where can I set up a set of directions and materials?” and “What areas of my classroom can I easily use in multiple ways?”

Activity Ideas

The following are ideas for multiple-activity literacy centers. Some teachers might wish to include a math and a science center as a way to encourage writing across the curriculum. Many of the ideas below can be adapted for different ability and grade levels.

Reading Center

Nothing beats reading to help develop reading! It makes sense that students will read more when

they can choose what they want to read, yet very little time is spent in free-choice reading in most proscribed reading programs. Keep a variety of trade books, comics, magazines, and newspapers available in your reading area. Consider doing individual interest surveys with each student so you know what they like to do, and put reading materials with these topics in your reading center.

The following are other tips that might be useful:

- Be sure to have some sort of accountability in place, but don't make it cumbersome. The main goal of this center is to have students read. A simple reading log, with date, book title, and number of pages read can suffice.
- Include a list of activities on a wall in the center such as read with a friend, write questions/words you don't know as you read, read something on a new topic, read a book by an author you've read before, etc.
- Make this center as comfortable as possible with rugs, soft furniture, and floor pillows. Think of where you read for pleasure. Very few of us sit in a hard, straight chair at a desk to read.
- Display a book of the day and/or read aloud a portion of an interesting book at the beginning of the day to stimulate interest.
- For poor readers, the visually impaired, English language learners, or any child interested in exploring reading in a different medium, try the International Children's Digital Library (2007). This free website has a variety of books from all over the world. Teachers or students can review a book, then download it for reading on a computer as an *Adobe* file. This is an excellent resource for locating children's books ranging from rare books in the Library of

Congress' collection to those published in other countries and in other languages.

Big Book Center

This idea came from Diller's (2003) excellent book, *Literacy Work Stations: Making Centers Work*. Diller separates Big Books from the reading center for kindergarten through 3rd grade and uses them for specific tasks such as the following:

- Reading aloud using a pointer
- Reading to a friend
- Finding known words, writing them on a list, framing them with a cut-out shape, and underlining them with Post-it® tape
- Finding unknown words and listing them—ask a friend what they mean, try to figure out what they mean, alphabetize them, etc.
- Using Big Books for dramatic play such as Readers' Theater or the felt board.

Listening Center

This center is a little different from the others in that unless you have several personal listening devices, you will need to have all participants listen to the same material. The familiar headphones and tape player with accompanying picture books still work, although there are more and more books available on CDs. Remember to keep activities active and not just have your students listen to a story. What do you want them to do as they listen? Do you want to focus on before, during, or after reading activities?

- Before reading, ask students to write one prediction on a card along with their name and then turn it over. After reading, have students compare their predictions with each other and the book.
- Have students set a timer for five minutes. When it goes off, students can pick question cards to answer some of the following

either orally or in written form: “Who is the main character?” “Where is the story taking place?” “What is the problem the main character has?”

- At the end of the story, listeners can do such activities as a character portrait of their favorite (or least favorite!) character, write an alternative ending, or compare the story with another one written by the same author. Post-reading activities can offer choice, even when students listen to the same story.
- Often, teachers tend to use the listening center for younger children, but audio books should be available for higher-grade students as well. This can be particularly helpful for older students who struggle with grade-level reading.
- If you are having trouble finding the books on tape or CDs that you want, you can build up your listening library by having volunteers make recordings of books or by using resources from your public library.
- A variation of the listening center is to have students tape-record and listen to their own recordings, with activities aimed at developing prosody or reading with expression.

Reading Plus Listening

For struggling readers, or to provide variety for other students, use a computer and invest in some *Living Books* so the computer can read to students. As with other listening activities, make them active, not passive. What do you want the students to focus on as they listen/read?

If you have Internet access, you may also wish to use a free resource, such as *Starfall* (Shultz, Shultz, & Polis, 2005), a website that includes a variety of interactive reading activities. For example, students can click on text to hear

a word with which they are having difficulty. There are many genres available on this site from folktales to plays, myths, and nonfiction.

Writing Center

As with all centers, activities can be short, focusing on specific skills. With older students, activities could also include some that are ongoing, such as a longer story or research project. Other ideas include the following:

- *Letter Writing:* Write letters to classmates or, for a class project, write to a city’s Chamber of Commerce for information. An interesting mailbox and a weekly, or daily, delivery of classroom mail by a designated student is a motivator.
- *Connect Writing to Reading*
 - Write the traditional book review, character comparison, or plot outline.
 - Write a book review and post it on Amazon.com.
 - Do an author study.
- *Poetry:* Practice different short forms of poetry such as haiku and cinquains.
- *Write Short Stories in Different Genres:* Try using story starter cards, which give minimal plot, setting, and character details.
- *Make a Book:* Bookmaking can be a center on its own as there are a variety of interesting forms for easy-to-make classroom books.
- *Using the Computer:* A problem with using the computer for writing in the elementary classroom is that children often do not know how to type. With all the advances in computer and informational technologies, children should begin learning to type by the end of 3rd or 4th grade. There are good

computerized typing tutors available, so if you are fortunate enough to have several computers in your classroom, you should consider a separate typing center for students if you teach 3rd grade or above.

ABC/Word Study Center

With very young children, you can cover a lot of phonics-related skills at this center. Much of the appeal of an ABC center is the rich variety of materials. You can have students do activities such as writing the alphabet, alphabetizing, writing vowels or spelling high-frequency words, or writing those with the same rime using different materials such as the following:

- Magnetic letters and felt
- Small chalk or dry-erase boards
- Letter stamps (upper- and lower-case)
- Writing on different types of paper, sentence strips, or the class board
- Magna-doodle boards
- Play-dough

Older students can use this center for vocabulary-building activities:

- Word sorts
- Word maps
- Working with synonyms, homophones, entomologies, etc.
- Analogies
- Making glossaries for crosscurricular projects
- Illustrating figurative (idiomatic) expressions and making a book
- Games such as Madlibs

Also consider how you wish to practice grammar, which can be a separate center.

Readers' Theater/Drama Center

The multiple readings used in Readers' Theater and drama increase fluency (Martinez, Roser, &

Strecker, 1998/1999) as well as provide support for struggling readers as they share texts with more capable peers. In this center, students can engage in Readers' Theater and dramatic interpretations of literature in a variety of ways. You might consider having students sign up to present their creations once a week. Some teachers have success organizing productions that travel to other classes or that are presented more formally to larger audiences.

Younger children can enjoy dramatizing a book or their own story, using the following methods:

- Puppets—both those they make and pre-made varieties
- Small plastic animals, buildings, or figures such as those you can find in a set of farm animals
- A felt board with simple cutouts to represent story characters, and letters for forming titles
- Masks and costumes

Older students can use some of the same materials listed above, but their focus could also be on rewriting prose into play format, then practicing and presenting their productions.

Conclusion

Using literacy centers is a good way to not only cover your language arts standards and the five core areas of *NCLB* but to move away from simply teaching to high-stakes standardized tests. Literacy centers enable you to have time to directly teach specific skills to small groups while the rest of your students are actively engaged in literacy work. By using common classroom materials, centers need not be difficult to start or maintain. By bringing choice back into your classroom, students of all grade and ability levels become motivated to do more reading, writing, listening, and speaking as they work independently or with their peers.

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I'd Like to Teach the World to Read

I'd like to give the world a book
And teach it how to read,
Read Hemingway and Dr. Seuss
And even Margaret Mead.
I'd read a recipe and for a better job apply.
I'd like to share all types, all times
From mysteries to rhymes.
I'd like to rap a poem or two
And search for Sherlock's clue.
Read Danielle Steel and Will Durant
And good old Shakespeare, too.
It's a gift I'd give to the world today
Of reading far and reading wide
And share the fun always.
Put a book in your hand,
Let's begin today.
Put a book in my hand
Let us find the way.
I'd like to give the world a book
and teach it how to care.
Meet Mary Poppins, Pink and Say,
And then the Big Brown Bear.
I'd like to hear the world for once
All reading side by side
And hear the echo through the hills
Of peace the whole world wide.

Adapted by Lucia Schroeder, PhD, Eastern Illinois University, from the words and rhythm of the Coke commercial "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing" by Baker, Davis, Cook, & Greenaway. [Written for a Reading Council Anniversary Celebration]

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