

It Is Time To Get Different

Mike Berdan, Teacher, Parkview Adventist Academy, Lacombe, AB

As educators, we constantly compete against interactive multimedia devices that the students are armed with. Why would a student want to come to my class when they could be sitting with a large group of their friends “sniping” each other while playing HALO 3 or Call Of Duty on their PS3’s or XBOX 360’s. Because of the available media, students have become what some have termed “real time” thinkers where they are used to instant gratification. How can we compete with the flashy colours, intense graphics, and real time thrills that these students yearn for? I am sure that if a person came up with a fool proof answer to this question, the publication materials would be worth millions of dollars and educators would be scrambling to scoop it all up. I will propose a few ideas that have worked for me, ideas picked up through different conferences and subsequent reading.

As a student, I remember walking into the classroom, sitting in a desk, and listening to the instructor lecture for the entire eighty-minute block while I struggled to stay engaged with my limited attention span. In the next class, the teacher assigned the class twenty pages to read followed up with a three-page worksheet of questions on the reading. These two examples reflect a lot of the experiences that I had as a student.

After learning more about the way the teenage brain functions, I have realized the importance of breaking my eighty-minute classes into different segments. “Prime Time” is the first twenty minutes of the class where I will get the most out of my students. It is important to review material that has already been taught and engage the students. Even at twenty minutes with an activity, I will have lost some students who cannot engage in one activity for that length of time. A strategy that seems to work is to give the students a “brain break”. Even a quick change of activity will enable the teacher to recapture the students’ attention.

One strategy that I use during “brain break” gets the students out of their desks and interacting with each other. First, I come up with a topic that relates to something that the class is studying. The class is divided into two teams. Each team has a ball. The person with the ball says something about the topic and then tosses the ball to another student. This student comments on the topic and then passes the ball again. This goes on until each student has had a chance to contribute to the topic. We review the ideas discussed about the topic to wind up the activity. Although it is simple, the change of pace and the student movement gears the students up for the next portion of the lesson. After the break, I advance into the new lecture material.

I try to keep lectures less than 15 minutes. After the lecture, it is time to change the class up again. Traditionally teachers handed out an assignment at this point and told the class to get working on it because it was due the following day. I have learned that it is important to have the students teach each other the material again before they work on any assignments. I team the students up and have them work together to review the materials. As a class, we engage in small competitions as we review the lecture and cooperate in remembering what was taught. Finally, after the lecture and the students teaching each other, I feel comfortable enough to let them start on their homework assignment. I usually try to leave 10-15 minutes for the students to work on assignments so that I am able to answer any questions that might arise.

Before the class concludes, the students must complete an exit strategy in order to leave. This usually consists of 4-5 questions about what the student has learned during the class about the topic of the day. Once the students complete the exit questions, they are free to leave. My goal is to time it up so that the bell rings just as most of the students are finishing up the exit questions. When the students enter the class the following day, we will review the exit questions, reinforcing the topic studied. By giving a short lecture, having the students reteach, reviewing with a brain break game, and reviewing with exit strategy questions, the students have been “taught” the topic in up to five different ways.

I’m sure these ideas are not new to many teachers reading this article, but I continually hear complaints from parents that their children are bombarded with worksheets. I am not proposing that these strategies will cause the students to magically abandon their video games and big screen televisions and beeline for the nearest classrooms. It is my hope, though, that by differentiating the way we instruct our students, we can capture their attention, even if it is for shorter segments, and reinforce the lessons that we teach using different strategies. We owe it to our students to give them the best chance at success. Even though it is easier to open up a workbook and photocopy a generic assignment for them to work on, we must avoid the easy out and choose instead to try new and more effective strategies