

# EXPLAINING CENTERS

## ENGAGING LEARNERS

When most teachers think of learning centers, they think of “stations” in K-3 classrooms. While that’s certainly a useful application, the early elementary classroom isn’t the only place learning centers can be used to build literacy skills and content knowledge. Don’t believe me? I’ve used learning centers in middle school and high school classrooms all over the country – in public, private, and parochial schools; in rural, urban, and suburban districts. I’ve used them with gifted students, high-poverty students, students with special needs, ethnically diverse students, and English language learners. I have yet to find a situation where learning centers aren’t effective. It may be tempting to dismiss something new out of hand, but please don’t assume that centers won’t work for you! There are some tangible advantages to including learning centers in the classroom. Experience has shown that students actually tend to be more engaged when they work in centers. The combination of self-directed activity and short, specific task lends itself to the natural strengths of the developing adolescent. Students with special needs, in particular, report that they feel “safer” in these small groups. They are often able to learn from and with their peers while finding it easier to concentrate – especially in inclusive classrooms. Teachers find that learning centers enable them to cover more content and skill development in the same amount of class time. Plus it’s easy to give individual attention and personalized instruction to students who need it.

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**B**efore the students arrive in your classroom you’ll want to create a game plan. It seems overwhelming, but it really isn’t. Start by considering the elements you have control over and those you don’t.

# TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CENTERS

## Give students a choice

Adolescents exhibit more enthusiasm when they have a say in their actions or a choice in their reading materials. Granting them some independence means they're more likely to complete their task. Whenever possible, give students a choice – even a small one – in how to execute an activity. Letting students choose between two or three texts about the same content yields great benefits and is a step in the gradual release of responsibility we all work toward in our classrooms.

## Keep the team size small

It's a common scenario: the teacher sets up three activities, divides the class into thirds, and moves them through three centers. The large groups have difficulty staying focused and avoiding distractions. They chatter. Tasks aren't completed. This results in a frustrated teacher who is convinced learning centers don't work. If this sounds familiar, try smaller groups and see the difference it makes. Come up with as many centers as necessary OR set up multiple cycles (two of each center) so that each group consists of 3–5 students. Things will go more smoothly!

## Offer written instructions for each center

Those who work with adolescents on a daily basis know they exhibit many charms. But they're not always able to listen to verbal instructions, remember, and apply them when needed fifteen minutes later. I've found it's helpful to have written instructions at each center. Ideally, you'll give a brief overview of the instructions for each center at the beginning of the class period. Students can confirm the instructions by reading them before beginning the activity. How you do it is up to you. Try hanging signs on the wall at each center; taping handwritten instructions on each table; or displaying them on the whiteboard for easy reference. Experiment till you find something that works in your situation.

## End with a "makeup center"

Timing is one of the trickiest parts of creating and running learning centers. Try to devote 10-15 minutes for each center. Then, because it's sometimes impossible to balance the time requirements, I've found it's best to end with a makeup center. Once students have completed their circuit of all the centers, allow five or ten minutes for them to revise or finish any center work. Unlike the other centers, makeup work can be done anywhere. I usually ask students to just stay in their last position to complete the makeup center work unless there's a need to move (to re-listen to a recording or re-examine a map for example).

## Clearly label each center

Make sure students know where centers are located in the classroom. It helps to create a routine. For example, if it's possible, have all groups move one position clockwise each time the timer goes off. Hang handwritten signs on the wall or on the side of tables –whatever works!

## Rehearse!

When I introduce learning centers to a new class I spend about five minutes the first day directing students. I let them practice moving between centers, listening for the timer, etc. Moving through learning centers is a simple process once students understand what's expected of them. Five or ten minutes of practice are more effective than thirty minutes of explanation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Dr. McKnight is an author, educator and consultant. Her career in education began as a high school English teacher in the Chicago Public School system more than 25 years ago. She received her B.A. degree from George Washington University, her M.Ed. from Northeastern Illinois University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She travels worldwide as a professional development consultant and a sought after speaker in the fields of adolescent literacy, inclusive classrooms, Common Core State Standards, Interdisciplinary literacy, and integrating technology in the 21st century classroom. She is passionate about creating curricula that engage all students in the regular education classroom. And she is completely committed to the development, sharing, and promotion of ideas and strategies that develop literacy skills in all students so that they can grow to be active, creative adults.*



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