## **Teaching Tips for New Teachers: The Importance of Bell-to-Bell Instruction**

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During your first few years of teaching, it’s easy to become preoccupied with mastering craft of content, discipline, and classroom management.  However, it’s also important to follow the best practice of using your class time as efficiently and effectively as possible. One teaching method that may be used to accomplish this is called “bell-to-bell” instruction. You might think that this means having students participate in one particular task or activity for an entire class period.  This is a common misconception, partially due to the name “bell-to-bell” instruction itself, but also because teachers may be more focused on getting through all their content in the duration allotted rather than thinking globally about overall classroom learning objectives and management.

Although I’ve spent seven of my nine years in education teaching middle and high school science, I still find myself altering my instruction each school year around this idea of time management.  The main concept underlying the “bell-to-bell” approach is learning how to properly allocate your daily classroom minutes.  This can be used in both the elementary and secondary classroom but will vary dramatically with individual classroom needs, so I will provide some basic examples and ideas for your classroom, and you can alter them as needed for your specific grade level and subject.

One of the first ways to break up your instructional minutes is to examine the age of your students (e.g. mine are typically 12- and 13-years old).  Accordingly, in my own classroom I don’t remain on any one topic, activity, or teacher-led discussion longer than 12-13 minutes. Likewise, a kindergarten teacher may want his/her students to do a particular task for no longer than about 5 minutes, and a high school teacher may have up to 15-20 minutes before students lose interest.  As you may well have already discovered, if you try to cram in more than your students can handle they’ll likely shut down. This leads to a waste of precious classroom instruction time, rather than gaining progress towards the standards and learning objectives for the day or week.

Another factor is how well your students handle transitions between activities. These might include going from one activity to the next within a single class period, moving from class to class in secondary settings, or from the classroom to recess or lunch.  This will take practice not only for the students, but the teacher as well. My personal rule is to spend a good amount of time within the first two weeks of school setting clear expectations and practicing transitions with the students, which will ultimately make the rest of your school year much smoother for everyone.  For example, I have my students practice lining up in the hallway outside the classroom door, and then come in and sit down quietly.  As soon as they master this, I show them how to submit homework items into the basket as they enter, then sit down quietly.  You can continue to work on building these procedures for morning activities, such as going to the carpet to do the daily calendar, or washing their hands before they go out to lunch.  The more they practice simple procedures and transitions, the better their classroom behavior will be, which frees up valuable time to be used with more effectively.

Once classroom transitions are well in hand, there are additional layers you can add to maximize teaching and learning. Instead of having the students sit and wait for you to take the daily attendance and lunch count, you can ask them to discuss or write about a prompt on the board, work on a math problem, think about a science current event, or even answer a question about what was covered in class previously.  These daily questions can be part of your morning warm-up routine and can be graded or not, but either way can provide a great opportunity to share their ideas or just practice their writing skills at the same time you are finishing administrative duties like attendance. For example, if you ask students about something that was covered during an earlier class you can treat this as a warm-up for further discussion. Over the course of the semester you can also consider keeping their responses or artifacts in a composition notebook or binder as a portfolio demonstrating their progress.

An additional option for bell-to-bell implementation is to include the use of classroom jobs that are grade-level appropriate.  I find that my middle school students can easily be responsible for collecting homework, passing back graded worksheets, greeting guests, caring for classroom plants, picking up trash, etc. This approach not only creates less work for the teacher in the long run, but I find that it also fosters good student behavior when they perceive having a classroom job is a privilege.

Of course, the typical classroom day almost always also includes some type of teacher-led activity, instruction, or lesson.  As science teachers, we have the luxury of having a variety of resources in our “tool belts,” and one of my favorites is doing demonstrations followed by open discussions about the students’ observations.  Alternatively, teachers might have the students take notes from a lecture, guide students through a chapter in the textbook, or play a review game for a history topic, etc.  No matter what the activity, it’s important to budget time appropriately for grade and age-level and as you’re leading the activity, to be mindful of adhering to your planned timing as much as possible. However, it’s also crucial to plan ahead for any unexpected daily disruptions that might arise.  These might include unplanned observations by Administrators, discipline issues with students, fire/earthquake/lockdown drills, changes in weather (my students love to stare at the rain falling outside the window for some reason!), or technology problems.  You should always have a backup lesson plan just in case these distractions arise, as they can drastically alter and hinder your ability to keep your students on track with your daily teaching minutes.  If you work hard on your classroom management and discipline plan early on, these distractions will be less of an issue as time goes on.  The important part is to be flexible and to be prepared to just take a step back to revise your game plan.

Bell-to-bell instruction is a critical part of your teaching strategy, and as long as you “keep your eye on the prize” (which for most of us is reaching proficiency on the state exams), you will maximize the chances for your students’ success!