

A “Workshop” Approach to Classroom Management

by Diana Takenaga, Los Angeles Unified School District

One of the dilemmas elementary classroom teachers have is how to incorporate science and other core subjects into the daily classroom schedule. Teachers have introduced science through thematic teaching, used language arts/reading topics as a springboard into the sciences, incorporated team teaching where one teacher is responsible for teaching the sciences to both classrooms, designated a “science teacher” who roves from one classroom to the next or who is responsible for setting up grade level labs, the list continues on.

While there is not one solution that works well for all classrooms, there is another strategy that is popular with elementary teachers and, at the same time, engages classroom students into scientific inquiry. This strategy Jones (1999) calls the “workshop approach,” which utilizes learning centers. Though not considered a new idea, there are many different ways to set up learning centers. The key characteristic of the workshop approach and all learning centers is that “the environment is designed to optimize concrete learning and enable children to explore a wide variety of objects and materials” (Jones, 1999, p. 27). This is especially true for primary students who need opportunities to work with their peers in a social context while at the same time are fully engaged in meaningful activities and experiences that foster the development of scientific thinking and reasoning.

Jones (1999) lists five key assumptions or guidelines that science learning centers should have:

- The curriculum is conceptually organized.
- Inquiry and authentic questions are a focus.
- Students are actively engaged in learning.
- Reasoning and thinking abilities are emphasized.
- Science application is emphasized.

In the workshop approach, Jones suggests including at least four or five centers to provide a balanced set of experiences for young students. She suggests the following types of learning centers and uses a study on magnets and magnetism as an example.

Exploration Center

Students use the exploration center with minimum instruction. They are encouraged to explore materials, discover and construct their understanding of the general concepts being developed. They explore magnets with an assortment of iron/steel objects and non-iron/steel objects and report their findings upon completion of the activities. They move on to the:

Reading and Writing Center

Students read trade books on magnets and keep a science journal that includes drawings, lists and entries about what they found out about magnets. This center is vital to their communicating ideas about science.

Game Center

Students practice with science skills and concepts through the use of game-like activities, which might include computer programs. A magnet game would include the use of a fishing pole with a magnet tied to the end of the line to pick up small steel objects.

Problem-solving Center

Students are engaged in activities such as investigations, experiments and challenges that focus on problems. At the magnet center, students would be challenged to find the strongest magnet given an assortment of magnets and steel objects. They would be asked to communicate their findings in their journals.

Application Center

Students apply what they have learned to real-life application. Students might design a refrigerator magnet using a variety of materials. They might design a device to help find small nails and pins around a workbench area.

Teacher Center

This center allows the teacher to work with small groups of students to reinforce the concepts being developed. A magnet activity might include horseshoe magnets and bar magnets on paper clips, small nails and steel wool. Students would explore both kinds of magnets and find out if both ends of the magnets, as opposed to the middle of the magnets, attract the same number of paper clips and nails.

In setting up the “workshop approach,” it is the teachers’ role to schedule how the students use the learning centers. Teachers can use a master chart listing names of students under the center names or let students select their own activities. It is suggested that students be given time to discuss the classroom arrangement of the centers prior to actually engaging with them.

Whatever strategies teachers decide on to schedule science into their classrooms will benefit science instruction for their students. Finding the strategy that works will remain the dilemma for most teachers.

Jones, Ithel (1999, November/December). A Workshop Approach. *Science and Children*, 26–30, 55.
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