



**KATHERINE
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ENGAGING ALL LEARNERS IN READING
AND WRITING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



Katie McKnight, Ph.D.
Learning Centers for Grades 4-12

"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."

- Katie McKnight, Ph.D.

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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Before 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.



You can't change the number of students in your class but you can control the number of teams you have. Start by dividing your class into teams of 3-5 students. Consider the possibilities. A class of 19 students could be divided up into: 3 groups of 5 students and one group of 4 students = 4 teams 4 groups of 4 students and one group of 3 students = 5 teams 5 groups of 3 students and one group of 4 students = 6 teams

You have no control over the length of your class period but you can control the number of centers you create and the length of time students will spend at each one. In general, each center should take 10-15 minutes. One 45-minute class period can be divided three 10-minute sections with a little time left over at the beginning for instructions and at the end for a makeup center.

Once you have some idea about the possibilities, you can develop some plans. And once you create a plan that works for your schedule, you'll find you can reuse it over and over again. The activities may change but the plan can stay exactly the same.

SAMPLE PLAN FOR A 60-MINUTE PERIOD

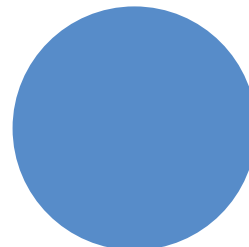
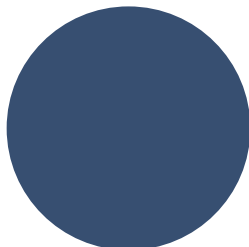
	9:00-9:05	9:00-9:15	9:16-9:26	9:27-9:37	9:38-9:48	9:49-9:57	9:57-10:00
Red Station	Instructions	Team 1	Team 4	Team 3	Team 2	Makeup station	Turn in work & clean up
Green Station	Instructions	Team 2	Team 1	Team 4	Team 3	Makeup station	Turn in work & clean up
Purple Station	Instructions	Team 3	Team 2	Team 1	Team 4	Makeup station	Turn in work & clean up
Blue Station	Instructions	Team 4	Team 3	Team 2	Team 1	Makeup station	Turn in work & clean up

As you walk from center to center or work in a teacher-led center yourself, answering questions and assisting students as they research and explore activities, you're likely to find yourself relating to your class in a more natural, organic way. The difficult-to-achieve differentiation will almost feel like it's taking care of itself as all students fully participate in the activities.

GOOD ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNING CENTERS

- Vocabulary workshop
- Grammar for writing
- Read independently
- Find evidence
- Watch video
- Determine point of view
- Listen to recording
- Question the author
- Stop & Write
- Graphic organizers
- Identify main argument
- Draw or interpret a graph
- Conversation Station
- Think-Pair-Share
- Read to each other
- Look for fallacies
- Figurative Language
- Finder
- R.A.F.T.
- Brainstorming
- Teacher-led center for formative assessment

- Every content area has valuable tools for learning its specific content. Those should absolutely be incorporated into the learning center experience! Centers that involve mathematical reasoning, data graphing, map reading, timeline development or exploration – all are excellent resources for learning center station creation.
- Multiple-choice questions are often frowned upon because they don't usually encourage nuanced thinking. They encourage students to look for one right answer rather than consider the range of subtleties. But what if you took some of your old multiple-choice homework and quizzes and converted them into prompts for argumentation? You could have each student in the team take one answer and explain why it probably is or probably is not correct.
- True/false questions can be used the same way. What would happen if students were asked to defend how they know that an answer is true or false? They could cite evidence from text, look for logical fallacies, or examine the implied argument of both answers. Suddenly you have an active learning activity, the kind that works with an adolescent's naturally developing strengths.
- Use your imagination, tinker with what you know, and use your fellow teachers as the worthwhile resources they are. Welcome learning centers into your classroom – you and your students will reap the rewards.



TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL CENTERS

- **Give Students a Choice**

Adolescents exhibit more enthusiasm when they have a say their actions or a choice in their reading materials. Granting them some independence means they're more likely to complete their task. So 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, for example, 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. But 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 just 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 only 3-5 students. Trust me, things will go more smoothly!

- **Offer Written Instructions for Each Center**

Those of us who work with them on a daily basis know that adolescents exhibit many charms. But they're not always able to listen to verbal instructions, remember, and apply them when needed fifteen or thirty minutes later. I've found that 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 then have the option of confirming 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 top of each table; or displaying all instructions on the whiteboard or via the LCD projector 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.

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