



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## CENTERS SOLVE AFTER-THE-TEST DILEMMA

Anyone who has taught a compressed course or a night class is aware of the scheduling problems that may occur on test days. A test may take half of the class period, but the college may require that the class meet for the entire scheduled time. In this case, questions arise about whether the test should be administered at the beginning or the end of class and about how to use the time before or after the test in a way that will be most beneficial to students.

If a test is administered at the beginning of class, the professor has the problem of dealing with the rate at which students complete the test. Should he assign a time when all papers will be collected? Should she announce a time at which the class will reconvene, giving some students more than the necessary amount of break time and leaving others frustrated because they must rush? When students do return to class after a test, they are often mentally exhausted, unreceptive to lecture, and disinterested in group work.

If the test is administered at the end of class, the challenge of engaging students in activities during the first portion of class is a serious concern. Even though one might strive for a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, there is an incredible amount of tension in the air on test day. Students are intensely reviewing notes and study guides when the instructor enters the room. Asking students to put away their notes and concentrate on other topics borders on the impossible.

Having been a student in this situation, I know that waiting half of a class period to take a test is difficult. Last semester, a student echoed this feeling. I arrived early for the final exam, and as I walked past the area where she and a group of her classmates were studying, she said, "We are ready to take the exam now," and she asked me to please let them begin. I distributed the exam to these students 30 minutes before the scheduled time, and they thanked me profusely for not making them wait. "Getting it over with" is a relief for most students. Waiting to take any exam is torture. Based on

my own experiences as a student and my observations of the students I teach, I have determined that the best time to administer a test is at the beginning of the class period.

### Working Centers

While I do not want to rush students through a test, neither do I want to leave them waiting in the hall for the second half of class to begin. To meet the needs of students working at different rates, I have created a collection of "centers" that students can move to after the test. The concept of "centers" grew from my experiences with learning centers in elementary schools. Essentially, they are stations where students work individually or in small groups. They contain all the instructions and materials students need to complete assignments or projects independently, providing individualized instruction or enrichment activities.

The centers focus on course content we have covered in class. Activities are designed to help students expand their knowledge of particular concepts, explore subjects in greater detail, make value judgments, and create materials for use in their professional arena. In a course on children's literature that I currently teach, a center's instructions may ask students to learn more about an author or illustrator, explore a poetry book and find several poems they plan to use in the classroom, read excerpts from two or three writers and explain why one has more child-appeal than another, or make props to present a Mother Goose rhyme or introduce a children's book. The students who are already teaching appreciate this opportunity to make useful items for their classrooms.

Each center is self-explanatory. Students are free to take breaks, and they may work at their own pace. When they have completed the required number of centers, they may leave. The actual number of centers is determined by the amount of time it takes the slowest students to complete the test and the centers. I usually provide 10 to 12 centers and require each student to complete at least five. The directions and materials for each center are stored together in a folder. Each center requires a completed response sheet or activity. Most



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centers can accommodate more than one student at a time. Work completed in the centers is submitted for grading. Because I am available on-site to answer questions and guide students through the materials, grades for center work are usually high.

I am teaching at a new community college where the amount of space available for center work varies each semester. So, I have arranged the centers in different ways. I prefer to set up the centers before the test begins, placing folders with the materials for each center on separate desks in a vacant classroom. In this case, I join the students in the second room after the last test is submitted. If a vacant classroom is available and centers can be set up ahead of time, noise made by students chatting as they work is not a problem, and materials that are assigned to a certain center tend to stay with that center.

One semester my classroom was twice as large as necessary. I set up the centers in the back of the classroom, and I was able to monitor the test-takers while answering questions for students working in the centers. Students doing center work had to work quietly until all tests were completed. The least desirable situation was using the hall outside the classroom for centers—the lack of space in the hall provided the students little room to spread out and work, keeping the materials separate for each center was a problem, and I had to stand in the doorway of the classroom to see both areas and monitor noise in the hall.

### Other Options

Although the centers are designed currently to deal with material previously covered in class, I think an innovative faculty member might use them to stimulate an interest in future topics of study. The first two steps of Donna Ogle's "Know, Want to Learn, Learned Strategy" ([www.nea.org/readingmatters/class/kwl.html](http://www.nea.org/readingmatters/class/kwl.html)) might be adapted for such activities. Students might be led to think about their feelings regarding upcoming issues, especially the more controversial issues that will most likely lead to class discussion at a later date. Short videos, sound recordings, and PowerPoint presentations might be worked into the centers, inspiring students to write brief responses to material presented via multi-media.

### Conclusions

I draw on my years of experience working as a school librarian to design centers for teaching children's literature, often adjusting activities used with children in the school setting to meet the needs of their future teachers. In this course, work in the centers relates

directly to real-world experiences. However, students in any course could benefit from additional work at individual learning centers, and professors in any area may find center work to be the answer to the after-the-test dilemma.

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