Introduction

I began my first year of teaching full of aspirations, goals and ideas. I was completely confident my students would be as excited as I was about the curriculum. I spent hours after school, developing the “perfect” lessons, activities, and projects to make the most out of my 8th grade World Geography class.

I quickly began to realize my students felt differently about the curriculum than I did. As we read through each chapter in our social studies textbook, my students stared blankly at me. When I tried to encourage classroom discussions, the questions I asked were either left unanswered or I was haunted by the words, “I don’t know.” I could not understand how my students could not know information we had gone over for the last thirty minutes. The day after we read a chapter was even worse. My students could hardly recall what country we were studying let alone tell me what the economy was like. Even when I provided study guides for my students before a test, the majority of them still failed. When I examined my grade book, ready to complete report card grades, I could not believe how many of my students were failing or barely passing. My third period’s class first quarter average was 67.3%. My fourth period’s class average was even lower with a 64%. How was I ever going to prepare my students to take the Standards of Learning exams (the SOLs) in May?

I was frustrated and my students were even more frustrated. I needed to get to the root of the problem and fast. I realized many of my students despise reading because it is not one of their strong points, they aren’t confident doing it. I completely understood this factor. If I were asked to learn another language and then read a novel in this new language, I would not only be baffled, but frustrated. All of my students read below or even severely below grade level. Even though we were reading a textbook on their reading levels, they lacked reading strategies to help them pull the information out of the text. Furthermore, to expect them to go one step further and be able to recall this information the next day, week, or month was unrealistic. I somehow needed to develop a way to motivate my students and enhance learning in the classroom.

Related Literature

I discovered that I was not the only person frustrated because his/her students were unable to grasp concepts from their text. Students today, whether they are special education students or regular education students, are ill prepared for content area learning by the time they reach the middle school level.
These same groups of students need strategies to help them achieve success in all of their classes. They need material to be presented to them in a manner that is clear and organized. A clear organized style will allow students to link the new information to their existing schema of knowledge (Miller, 1998, pp. 46-48). We as teachers may spend hours planning the “perfect” lesson, but we need to go back and ask ourselves, “Does this lesson fit the needs of all of the students in my class?”

To achieve a solution to this dilemma, it is important to examine how lessons can be presented to students. The following exercise allows a person to see how a simple adaptation can enhance the capability of learning.

Look at the following row of numbers for five seconds and see if your can remember them:

10421902900619778534

Were you able to remember these numbers? Could you memorize the first four? Eight? What strategies did you use to help you remember the numbers? As an adult, a strategy that I might use to memorize the numbers would be to possibly group them. This seems logical or even obvious. Based on my observations this year, many students do not know how to look for “strategies” to make learning easier. This is why as teachers we need to develop and share strategies to help enhance learning among our students.

Look at the same numbers again presented in a different way.

1042  1902  9006  1977  8534

Were you able to remember these groups of numbers? Did the layout of the numbers this time allow you to memorize the information easier? Instead of 20 numbers to memorize you had to remember only five. This time, the numbers had been grouped. Just simply changing how the information was presented allowed you to easily recall and understand the information given. A simple change in the way material is presented can make a world of difference in the classroom as well as help meet your lesson’s objective.

Implementation

After I had done some research on strategies for teaching content, I was ready to try some in my classroom. I was no longer alone and realized the best way to stop my feelings of frustration was to encounter them with a change in my teaching approach.

Here are some lessons I used and reflections on how those lessons went:

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Graffiti Wall

Objective: Students will brainstorm ideas on a topic being discussed. Students will learn how to formulate an opinion on a current event issue.

❖ Note: This strategy works well when you want the students to discuss a current event.

Materials: large piece of paper; color markers; a current event topic/article/idea; and timer.

Procedure:
1. Divide the class into 2 groups
2. Give each group a large piece of paper, different color markers, and a side to take on the current event issue you are discussing.
3. For a short predetermined period of time, the students need to write down all the points that correlate to their issue. They may also include some graphics. (I usually limit this because the point of the activity is to get the students to write their views down on paper.)
4. When the timer goes off, each group then presents their issue to the rest of the class. After each group has made their point, the opposing sides may then question each other.

Lesson Reflection

I have found that allowing students to write down their ideas in this “fun” creative way affords them the opportunity to learn more information than if I were to have them simply list ideas on a notebook paper. This also allows the students to interact with each other more than they would normally. One current event my students debated the longest was, “Short Shorts: Whose decision is it anyway?”

Based on Washington Post article 6/9/00
**Lecture Bingo**

**Objective:** Students will review notes from readings, lectures or class discussions. Students will also be focused and attentive during a lesson.

**Materials:** overhead projector; bingo board; markers; predetermined concepts (facts, vocabulary words, and lines from notes)

**Procedure:**
1. Develop a list of at least nine concepts or terms that will be discussed during a lecture. Write these terms on the overhead.
2. Give students a blank bingo board. Students randomly fill in the nine boxes with the terms found on the overhead.
3. As you read a chapter, students mark the boxes as each concept/term is discussed. Who ever crosses off three in a row wins!

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**Lesson Reflection**

I found that this really did motivate my students, however, I would not recommend using it all the time. The students tend to lose focus on the material that you are reading. I try to include lecture BINGO in a lesson that requires the reading of a short chapter; this way students can really grasp the main concepts. This activity works well when trying to emphasize important vocabulary from a chapter as well.

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**Index Card Match**

**Objective:** Students will review concepts in a Unit of Study. Students will be better prepared for a content assessment.

❖ **Note:** This is a great strategy to use when you want students to review for a test.

**Materials:** index cards; manila envelops; sample questions/answers.
Procedure:
1. On separate index cards, write down questions that review concepts studied in the unit.
2. On a separate card write the answer down to these questions.
3. Mix the cards and place in manila envelopes.
4. Students can work in pairs or alone to match up the concepts.

Lesson Reflection

The students enjoy this review game. It is very simple to implement too. I usually assign my students to write questions related to the topic on one card and the answer on another for homework. The next day when the students come in I collect their “match-ups” and place them in manila envelopes. The students are then paired up and have to match up all the concepts. (My students enjoyed being paired up, however, students could work alone.) This activity is a favorite among my students. I enjoy it as well, by having the students writing and answering their own questions, they are studying for the test without even realizing it.

Highlighters and Post-it Notes

Objective: Students will be able to “pull-out” important information from their textbooks.

❖ Note: highlighters should be used with care because students will try to highlight every word on the page.

Materials needed: Pens, pencils, Post-it notes, highlighters

Procedure:
Place baskets containing the materials listed on each table.
Emphasize to students that they are selectively underlining key words and concepts and not coloring.
Place post-it notes beside the information that is being read.
Students begin to highlight key words and concepts or write down key words and concepts on their Post-it notes.
Lesson Reflection

I placed baskets on each table in my classroom. Each basket contained pencils, pens, highlighters, POST-IT notes, and some colored pencils. I encouraged students to highlight important concepts as we read “hand-outs” about Germany during WWII. It is important to the first couple of lessons, to discuss with students’ important concepts that need to be highlighted. Many times my students and I stopped after each paragraph to discuss information and to highlight. Soon, we began to scan every two paragraphs before we stopped and discussed what should be highlighted and then eventually, as we read, students were able to highlight the concepts individually. Also, our discussions were much more enlightening. They really grasped main concepts and were not only able to share information, they were also able to respond and reflect on it. Although, this might seem like a long tedious process, it really only took my students two periods to catch on to this. I was amazed at how much knowledge the students had recalled in this unit. In fact, a month in a half later the English teacher began a Holocaust unit. As the students read about Anne Frank they were able to recall and reflect on their background knowledge of Germany during WWII.

Using post-it notes works similarly to the idea of using highlighters. Students are not allowed to write or highlight in their geography textbook because they are reused. When we read in our textbook, I encouraged students to write down any key words, questions or thoughts they might want to discuss on their sticky note. I encouraged them to write anything they found important throughout the readings. At the end of the reading we took time to discuss our comments. Soon it was the students leading classroom discussions and not just myself asking them questions.

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K-W-L

Objective: This strategy helps students focus on a new topic.

Materials: KWL chart

Procedure:
Students make a chart with 3 columns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I know</td>
<td>What I want to know</td>
<td>What I learned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first two columns are completed on the first day of a new unit. As the students share ideas to the class and complete their charts.
The teacher uses a chart shown on the over-head and completes it with the students’ thoughts. The last column is completed as a final activity before we have our unit tests.

Lesson Reflection

My students are able to focus more on the main ideas at the start of a unit when the KWL strategy is used. At the end of the unit, it is also beneficial for the students to compare how much information they knew about a topic before with how much they found out after the unit.

Directed Reading-Thinking Activity

Objective: This strategy helps students read and comprehend material read from textbooks.

Materials: selected reading materials. (i.e. content area textbooks, news articles, etc.)

Procedure:
1. Prior to reading the chapter in the textbook, have students read the title of the chapter section.
2. Have students make predictions about what they will encounter when the chapter is read.

Lesson Reflection

This procedure is a quick and simple strategy to easily implement into your lessons. By having my students preview a chapter, they not only think about what might be included in the text, but it also allows them to recall background knowledge when making predictions. For instance, when we previewed a chapter on Nigeria the students were able to infer that some Nigerians might be subsistent farmers. The picture showed a man working alone on a tiny piece of land. Seeing the picture allowed the students to recall back to when we studied Latin American countries where many residents were also subsistent farmers.
Graphic Organizers

Objective:  This strategy allows teachers to present key concepts in a more organized manner and encourage students to become actively engaged during class discussions.

Materials:  a graphic organizer (visual display of information)

Procedure:
Give each student a copy of the graphic organizer.
To present a larger model to the entire class, an overhead projector is needed.

Lesson Reflection

Graphic organizers are visual displays teachers use to organize information in a manner that makes the information easier to understand and learn. Graphic organizers can come in all shapes and sizes. The Venn diagram is the most common. Students enjoy more creative kinds like word webs, picture graphics, etc. Graphic organizers help students link new information with existing knowledge. I found that when we are comparing similarities and differences between two regions or two leaders, my students were able to recall more information from a graphic organizer than if we had written this information in our notes.

Creative Writing:

Objective:  Students will refine their thinking on factual events.

Materials:  paper, pen

Procedure:
Students are given a creative writing assignment on a topic being studied in class.

❖ NOTE:  You might want to give the students writing prompts as you begin.
Lesson Reflection

In the beginning of the year, my students only wrote notes in class. At our school, we encourage the use of the Cornell note-taking system. When I gave my students a creative writing assignment for the first time, they were not comfortable with writing creative stories for Geography. They felt an assignment like writing a story is only given in an English class. My students quickly began to realize that I was not going to stop assigning creative writing assignments just because they despised them. Writing stories allows the students to put themselves into the shoes of a “character” from the region we are studying. They have written stories regarding many serious world issues. Some example topics that I have used this year include: A day in the life of a subsistent farmer, The life of an 8th grade student from Latin America, The role of a political figure in a country surrounding turmoil, etc. This activity really causes the students to use a higher level of thinking. I have found this strategy has helped my students understand the information I have presented better.

Conclusion

Adaptations are part of the solution to enable students to learn more. There is never a magic “fix,” but a combination of strategies does help the teacher teach effectively and students learn more efficiently. As the strategies were incorporated, changes were observed.

Each semester as I implemented a variety of different learning techniques into my class, the average grade of each class began to rise. At the end of the 3rd quarter my third period’s class average was 74% and my fourth period’s class average was a 75.1%. Based on the trend I observed from each quarter (The class average rose about 3.4 points) I am confident that the grades during the 4th quarter will rise as well.

My students’ grades have increased, not because I have lowered my standards or expectations, but because I have utilized different learning techniques in the classroom to accommodate every child’s need. Students reading on an 8th grade level and students reading on a 4th grade level are capable of learning the same content. Accommodations do not hinder a child’s academic performance; instead they enhance learning.

References