

# Block Classes Change Instructional Practice— Carpe Diem!

*Middle Ground, Volume 2, Number 3, February 1999*



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I had been teaching for several years before I figured out that what my students learned from the curriculum mattered more than what I had covered. Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner often refers to coverage as the death of mastery. Yet stuck with those traditional 47-minute cattle drives, I whipped through the curriculum and accepted the minimalist thinking: First, do no harm. Depth and understanding were luxuries I thought I could not afford.

Enter block scheduling. Longer class periods gave me the opportunity to step out of the darkness, as Plato described in his story, "Cave Allegory," to the bright illumination of meaning. I now have the time to teach to the rhythm of my training and experience instead of to the tick of the classroom clock.

The positive results of changing instructional practices in block classes are well documented. In "Finding Time to Learn," an article published in the November 1995 issue of *Education Leadership*, John O'Neil tells the story of Roger Schoenstein, a teacher in Colorado, who once covered eight Latin textbook chapters a year within the traditional 50-minute periods. With longer class periods he couldn't complete as many chapters. Yet by varying activities to accommodate the additional time with students, Schoenstein found that they scored 12-15 percent higher on vocabulary and translation tests than they did under the traditional setup. Said Schoenstein: "My kids encounter less Latin on the block schedule of longer class periods, but they take more of it with them when the class ends."

The National Training Lab reports that we remember only one-fifth of what we see and hear, 80 percent of what we experience directly, and 90 percent of what we teach to others. Discussions, direct experience (such as simulations), and student sharing are all highly effective methods of learning. But they're also time-consuming. With extended class periods, however, we can use these best practices more often.

In his survey of students whose schools switched to the longer class periods, Robert Canady found that if teachers were willing to experiment and try new strategies, the students, thought longer class periods were wonderful. But if the teachers used the extra time as study halls, the students found the longer classes torturous. The latter group of teachers tended to view block scheduling as a way to manage adolescents instead of another way to help them learn.

To use block classes successfully, we must teach differently than we do during 47-minute classes. Think of extended classes as mini-professional workshops. The goal is not to get through page 213 before 10:57 a.m. The goal is to increase learning. The question we need to ask ourselves each day is this: Have I chosen the most appropriate instructional model for these students?



In their book, *Teaching in the Block* (Eye on Education Inc.), Robert Canady and Michael Rettig say that the beginning and end are the most remembered parts of any lesson. Make sure to start each lesson with materials and methods that are both intellectually rigorous and engaging. Get students involved in a substantive task as soon as they arrive. Save clerical matters for the middle of the lesson or while students are completing that first activity. Leave time at the end of each lesson for reflection, summary, or synthesis.

Canady and Rettig suggest several successful models for extended class periods. One is the “1/3 Model,” which consists of one-third presentation of content; one-third application of knowledge and skills learned; and one-third synthesis of the information. Another is the “Concept Attainment Model” in which the teacher:

- Presents examples and students work with them, noting attributes;
- Asks students to define the concept to be learned;
- Critiques more examples in light of newly discovered concepts;
- Asks students to complete activities that enable them to apply the new concepts and demonstrate their understanding of the lesson; and
- Evaluates students’ knowledge through additional applications.

Canady and Rettig suggest a ratio of 75 percent direct instruction and 25 percent classroom management. Videotape a couple of your classes and note the amount of time you spend teaching versus completing clerical tasks such as taking roll, getting students settled, and shuffling paper. If your classroom management time is higher than 25 percent, something needs to change.

In longer classes we also must focus on the physical needs of young adolescents. Ten- to 15-year olds experience incredible growth spurts, and it’s often a painful process for them. We can relieve the stress on their bones by having students move every 15 minutes or so. Movements can be as simple as allowing students to turn around to discuss something with a partner, turn in papers on the far side of the room, or get up and stretch. Movement also makes concepts more vivid, such as when students assume the roles of characters in a novel or body-sculpt the novel’s theme.

Setting up a floor continuum is another excellent physical activity. Tape a line diagonally across your classroom floor. Place a “Y” for “Yes” at one end, and an “N” for “No” at the other end. Place a smaller perpendicular line across the center to indicate an undecided response. Ask the students yes or no questions about the lesson’s topic and encourage them to stand near the marker that best represents their responses.

Extended classes also provide time for young adolescents to stoke their fires by eating. I’ve let students bring healthy snacks to my classes for almost two decades, and I’ve never had a problem with messes or interruptions.

Successful teachers pay attention to momentum strategies during extended class periods. In his book, *The Skillful Teacher*, Jon Saphier writes that the best teachers learn to stock their classroom provisions in advance. Waiting for supplies to be created or found slows the pace and causes students to become distracted. Keeping students focused is very important in block



classes. Saphier suggests many effective strategies. Some of the best ones for middle school students are circulating around the room; creating suspense and curiosity; asking students to serve as your assistants; using props; making connections to students' fantasies; and using students' names in instructional examples. Saphier also recommends using topical fillers—"sponges"—that fill extra time with purposeful experiences.

Constructivist teaching, a proven approach with young adolescents, is more likely to work well in extended classes. It takes time for students to create their own meaning instead of listening to their teachers spell it out for them. For example, before discussing the parts of speech, a teacher might ask students to design their own language. Most adolescents will respond with alphabet codes. The teacher then might ask them how they would deal with subject-verb tenses, plurals, punctuation, and numbers. The class can try to have a conversation without verbs—a difficult thing to do. Suddenly seemingly unimportant conventions become vital.

Here's another example that I picked up from *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development): A science teacher might ask students to classify and place diverse groups of books on a section of library shelves, sequencing them both vertically and horizontally according to the criteria identified in small groups. Then the teacher would help the students draw analogies to the Periodic Table of Elements. The books represent the periodic elements, the numbers represent the atomic numbers, and the classifications represent the chemical families. Because teachers have more time in a block schedule class, they can create vivid, meaningful context for student learning.

In my block schedule classes, I've discovered more uses for my boom box. We listen to classical music and radio plays. I also have the luxury of increasing wait times, which improves the quality of students' responses. In addition, I often use parent volunteers, colleagues, guest speakers, or other students to help me introduce new topics. These co-presentations give students different ways to understand material and give me another way to address their varied learning styles. I can devote more time to my average students who used to get lost in the pressure to meet the needs of students at the academic extremes.

Extended class periods also enable teachers to focus on the affective development of students, much to the pleasure of their future employers. Business leaders in my state have pointed out that covering the curriculum isn't enough anymore because subject content changes too rapidly in the Information Age. They say they'll do the extra training to increase core knowledge, but they want graduates who can take initiative, solve problems, anticipate needs, and collaborate with others. Middle school is where students internalize these habits and values. Teaching them how to think takes more time than teaching them to memorize facts for next week's quiz. Building character takes even longer. In block classes, however, we can accomplish both objectives.



Planning and conducting block classes also can help the staff think like a “lab school” where teachers regularly interact with professors and students from a local university. Conversations tend to focus on teaching practices instead of gripes about students, parents, and colleagues. In these settings, teachers accept Piaget’s observation that the best methods are the most difficult ones. These professionals welcome challenge. And they become better teachers because instructional expertise, not survival, is paramount.

William Blake reminds us that “the hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom no clock can measure.” With an armful innovative strategies, a classroom full of eager students, and a risk-taker’s passion, we can consider a longer class period as an opportunity, not a hurdle or an annoyance. Take the challenge and teach the way you’ve always wanted—now that you’ve got the time!

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### Original publication information:

Wormeli, R. (1999). Block classes change instructional practice—carpe diem! *Middle Ground*, 2(3), 17-19.