

FIFTEEN GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING ATTENTION-HOLDING LESSONS

Ronald L. Partin, Ph.D.

Do students sometimes fall asleep halfway through your class? Do you ever find yourself yawning as well? Do you pray for fire drills to spice up your lessons? Or do you simply want to stimulate your own and your students' enthusiasm for your subject? It may be time to evaluate the attention-holding power of your lessons.

It is absurd to expect all students to be constantly on the edge of their seats mesmerized by masterful instruction. Middle school students do bring outside agendas into the classroom. Divorces, deaths, infatuations, conflicts, and the growing pains of puberty can distract even the most conscientious students.

While the teacher cannot control these outside events, the teacher does have a significant effect upon the learning of most students. Some teachers have greater skill at teaching lessons which hold students' attention and which result in higher achievement than other teachers. Probably all teachers have a few lessons which always excite and interest students. Those successful attention-holding lessons likely adhere to most of the following 15 principles.

1) Plan carefully and fully.

Lessons which are run smoothly keep students' attention and minimize interruptions. This has little to do with charisma. Lessons run smoothly because they are carefully planned and organized. Time is invested up front to assure that materials are ready, the teacher knows what to do next, and the unexpected is anticipated. This helps create a businesslike, task-oriented atmosphere.

2) Clarify the specific objective(s) for each lesson. The single most important question you can ask yourself each day is, "What do I want my students to learn from this class?" Unfortunately, some teachers have no clearer notion of where they are headed than "to make it through the

textbook" or "to make it to the Civil War by Christmas."

3) Share your objectives with your students. Let them know what they should get out of this lesson. Of course, you cannot tell them if you have not thought this question out yourself. With purposes clear and instruction systematic, students will more readily master that lesson.

4) Divide learning tasks into smaller sub-skills. Present those sub-skills in logical and manageable lessons. Sequence your lessons so that you aren't trying to teach skills for which students have not yet mastered necessary prerequisites. Otherwise, both you and your students will be frustrated.

5) Teach lessons which are of the appropriate level of difficulty. Lessons too difficult frustrate and alienate; lessons too easy bore and invite apathy. Begin instruction where the students are, not where you would like them to be. In heterogeneous groups some remediation



may be essential for success. Peer tutoring, small group instruction, homework, and computer-assisted instruction are options used by some middle school teachers to achieve individualization.

6) Remain flexible in your teaching. Furrowed brows and frowns will tell you some students did not grasp a point. Squirming, fidgeting, or daydreaming may cue you to pick up the pace or change your approach. Good planning must remain flexible. There is little sense in plowing ahead with a lesson plan that isn't working.

7) Use variety. Even the best students become restless after too much of the same thing. Mix lecture with small group or individual work. Don't become too predictable (except, perhaps, in working with emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded classes). Occasionally, surprise your class with something different. It may not be your style to dress up as a Revolutionary War soldier, Roman senator, or witch doctor, but those who do, certainly get their students' attention. Don't overdo the theatrics, however. If your students begin to expect it every day, its value decreases.

8) Make your presentations clear. Use vocabulary appropriate to the level of your students. Speak at a pace which they can understand. If you tend toward a monotone voice, work on developing more animated speech. Periodically record or videotape your lessons. Seeing or hearing yourself as your students do may reveal areas of needed improvement.

9) Plan for student involvement in the lesson. Too much passive listening invites distraction. Provide opportunities for active involvement through exercises and activities which break up long formal presentations. When asked, most students prefer lessons in which they act out parts, build things, interview people, or carry out projects. Least favored are those classes in which they are only allowed to listen.

10) Show your enthusiasm. If you appear bored, how can you expect to instill interest among your students? Your tone, non-verbal gestures, and preparation all convey your enthusiasm. Your enthusiasm is contagious.

11) Move around. During lectures or large group activities, avoid sitting behind a desk or standing only in one spot. Sitting seems to invite monotone speaking.

Use body gestures to animate and punctuate your speech. Teachers who are more animated are viewed as more enthusiastic.

12) Minimize criticism and offer praise when appropriate. If students are too frequently criticized, they quickly learn to avoid volunteering their answers or opinions. There is no quicker way to squelch creativity or participation than to criticize the first couple of contributors. Use praise judiciously. Praise specific behaviors, not general characteristics. Be aware that for many early adolescents, public praise can backfire. Their peers may taunt them for being the teacher's pet.

13) Avoid becoming too involved with one student during discussions. The rest of the class may assume they are not a part of the discussion and turn their attention elsewhere. While being sensitive to individuals, teach to the whole class. Maintain control of the discussion. If one student is monopolizing the interaction, ask questions of others to get them involved.

14) Use your sense of humor. Do not try to become a stand-up comic, but don't be afraid to laugh or add humorous remarks to your presentation. The guiding principle relative to using humor in the classroom is that it should be relevant to the topic under discussion. Avoid the temptation to entertain with jokes that don't have an educational point. Interesting lessons make learning fun, and a natural response to fun activities is the occasional laugh. You need not strive for a belly laugh, but when a humorous incident or anecdote presents itself, use it to your advantage.

15) Relate the content of the lesson to the interests and needs of your students. Although the cry for relevance in education may have resulted in some questionable practices during the 70s, lessons which are seen as totally inapplicable to students' lives have little chance of success. Discover their interests and needs by observing, talking, and listening to them. Use examples, problems, and anecdotes related to the interests as you teach the skills and content.

Capturing the attention of early adolescents is indeed a challenge for even

the most skilled teachers. Extra effort put into increasing the interest level of lessons may make both teaching and learning in the middle school more exciting, stimulating, and rewarding. An occasional review of

our lessons against these guidelines should help both novice and experienced teachers achieve this goal.

Dr. Ronald L. Partin is Professor Emeritus, College of Education and Allied Professions, at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. He may be contacted at: rpartin@bgnet.bgsu.edu

For more information about Ron Partin's writings and workshops see his web site at

ronpartin.com

Adapred from: Partin, R. L. (1987, February). Fifteen guidelines for developing attention-holding lessons. *Middle School*, 18(2), 12-13.