Finding Center: How Learning Centers Evolved in a Secondary, Student-Centered Classroom

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Finding Center: How Learning Centers Evolved in a Secondary, Student-Centered Classroom

The authors elaborate on the experience of creating for high school students effective multisensory, hands-on learning centers that address a full range of elements from the English language arts curriculum. Allison P. Movitz and Kerry P. Holmes detail the centers Movitz designed for a Mostly Medieval unit to show how learning centers can help students become more involved in and responsible for their learning.

Five years ago, a twelfth-grade student made a wooden axe as a project to dramatize his reading from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; shortly thereafter, another student made daggers after reading *Macbeth*. The excitement these students exhibited and their interest in reading and responding to the literature made me (Allison) realize that students never outgrow their need for multisensory, hands-on activities. The students demonstrated what I had thought all along: learning is more meaningful when students are actively engaged, even at the secondary level. Brain research supports my classroom observations. Robert Sylwester, a noted educator, states, “Recent educational thought has strongly and appropriately encouraged educators to emphasize activities that engage and develop all elements of our sensory system” (24). As my collection of relics, props, costumes, and artifacts grew, I sought ways to incorporate these materials in hands-on, multisensory activities. I remembered seeing elementary classrooms full of enticing materials organized into learning centers. Why did the fun, excitement, and meaningful learning have to end when students reached high school? I considered how to create learning centers for my high school English classes.

Initially, I sought information on the development and use of learning centers for older students, but I was frustrated because I could not find many books or articles written in recent decades about learning centers in the secondary classroom. I posed my dilemma to a colleague from the University of Mississippi Writing Project (Kerry) who is also assistant professor in the School of Education. Though together we found pedagogy that supports why learning centers would be effective in secondary classrooms, we still had to experiment with how to create effective learning centers for secondary students.

The purpose of this article is to interest middle school, junior high school, and senior high school teachers in the concept of learning centers. As readers follow the evolution of my experiment with learning centers, they will discover the knowledge born of my experiences in developing and implementing learning centers in my English IV classroom. We take teachers on a journey that begins with the development of the first learning centers that accompanied a Mostly Medieval unit through the development of additional centers created from observations and student feedback. The seniors in English IV rotate through the medieval centers. I also teach English I. The language arts centers (reading, writing, vocabulary, and listening) remain in place all year for students’ various visits to those centers. Although this article uses a medieval theme to illustrate how learning centers were developed and implemented in a secondary classroom, the concept of having a place and time where students can interact with materials to build English language arts skills can be applied to other units. While there was quite a bit of work involved in setting up the materials for each center, that work need only be done once. Centers were laborious to establish, but once I had them established, I enjoyed watching students reap the benefits of...
hands-on, minds-on, active learning that sometimes showed up in the most surprising places and in the most creative ways.

**Center Quest**

For teachers unfamiliar with using learning centers, I recommend beginning with one or two centers. The first year I used learning centers in my English IV classes, I set up seven centers: reading, writing, vocabulary, listening, art, puzzles and games, and dance and drama. I quickly realized I should have started on a much smaller scale so both students and I could adjust to this new way of learning; however, I immediately saw that students were actively engaged in learning. When students worked on individual and cooperative projects in the centers, they were engaged with the content at deeper, more meaningful levels. The learning centers contained multisensory and differentiated activities that helped meet the diverse range of student interests, ability levels, and needs.

Adolescent students have different physical and social needs than adults. Rick Wormeli cites the rapid growth spurt of students as the primary reason adolescents cannot sit still and pay attention for long periods of time (40). He presents compelling reasons for planning lessons that allow students to move around the classroom. In addition to the need to move, adolescents need positive social interactions with peers (National Middle School Association; Harris 279). They need to try out their ideas with peers during this adolescent transition into adulthood; they are learning to fit into the adult world. Movement, or the lack thereof, affects attention, but so does the number of breaks in a lesson or class period. Research has shown that students pay closest attention to the beginning and end of a lesson, which is known as the Primacy-Recency Effect (Neisser 236). To catch students at their peak learning times, lessons must have many beginnings and endings. Students in a learning center have control over creating the beginnings and endings as they move from activity to activity as their interests wax and wane. Overall, centers offer students multiple opportunities to build social skills and to interact with literature in novel ways.

I designed each center to help students activate prior knowledge, build independent learning skills, make connections with the literature, and make choices from among a variety of activities. I made sure that my centers engaged students with all strands of English language arts, including reading (vocabulary development, comprehension, and fluency), process writing, listening, speaking (drama), viewing, and visually representing information (art and graphics). The night before I introduced centers to students, I put up signs marking the various centers in the classroom. The students regarded them with eagerness since most recalled centers fondly from elementary school. Students visited the centers throughout the unit. At the end of the unit, each student was responsible for a culminating project of his or her design. Projects could be completed individually or in a group, but students were required to incorporate information or products from more than one center.

Within the centers, I provided individual and group work requiring cooperation and collaboration. Keeping in mind the learning objectives, I planned the content of the lessons, the processes students might need for learning, and the expected end products for each activity. I wanted to have meaningful activities tied to academic content rather than "fun" or "cute" activities. Carol Ann Tomlinson states that lessons lacking clarity and focus will result in "hazy" lessons. She drives home this point by saying that "[a] fuzzy sense of the essentials results in fuzzy activities, which, in turn, results in fuzzy student understanding . . . a barrier to high-quality teaching and learning" (37).

It is essential to create learning centers around clear, measurable goals. The students must know the purpose for each activity as well as the way their learning will be assessed. For the Mostly Medieval unit, students understood that the centers were

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Important lessons I learned about implementing centers had to do with the requirements and demands placed on the students when they were in each center. Overall, I learned an activity was well suited for inclusion in a learning center only if:

- I could establish and articulate worthwhile goals for the activity;
- I could articulate worthwhile learner outcomes for an activity;
- the activity was important enough to merit assessment, including informal observation;
- the students could articulate, reflect on, connect to, or apply meaningful knowledge following involvement in the center activity; and
- students could work independently without a great deal of direct instruction.

These criteria, combined with student feedback and reflections, helped me weed out inappropriate activities and create more-appropriate ones.

Must and May Activities

Within each center, I had several activities for students to choose from, with one catch: some activities in the centers were “Musts,” activities that must be completed by all students by a deadline; other activities were “Mays,” or optional activities (Mississippi Department of Education). By having students complete some of the same activities, we established a body of common knowledge and experiences.

To prepare for each center activity, I labeled the cover of a three-prong folder with the title of the activity and then designated the activity as a “Must” or a “May” and as a group or individual task. Inside one pocket of the folder, I placed the learning objective, materials list, a checklist or rubric for self- and teacher assessment, and background information about the content. I placed the directions in the other pocket. Because the directions have to do the instructional work for the teacher, they must be brief and clearly written in simple, short sentences, logically sequenced and either numbered or bulleted with pictures and visual aids.

Assessing Center Work

Assessments of center activities took various forms, including authentic, holistic, and criterion referenced. Sometimes I monitored students while they worked, checking for time on task and content mastery. I also gave points for appropriate participation and demerits for inappropriate conduct or use of materials. Other times, I graded students’ products after they completed a given center. Students also completed a self-evaluation and a center evaluation at the end of their work in a particular center, or by the end of the unit.

Even though students worked independently on self-selected projects, I assessed their progress as carefully as I assessed more-traditionally taught lessons. I not only used assessment results to determine how well the students were mastering the objectives but I also used assessment to determine how well the activities were promoting learning. By assessing my students and the quality of the activities I planned for them, I was able to keep students focused on essential learning as opposed to squandering precious time on nonessential learning.

Quiet Days and Busy Days

After introducing the students to each of the centers and directly instructing them about the skills they would need to use, I said, “Go forth into your centers and learn!” However, in some instances, learning was not happening at the rate I had anticipated. Even after a few days of students’ working in centers, I had trouble putting my finger on the problem. It was through a student reflection that I gained an insight that helped me set up centers that allowed for a variety of activities to take place.
successfully at the same time. The student wrote, “Although I thought the Listening Center was the most organized, I had trouble hearing the music even with the headphones on. A crazy drama group was way across the room killing monsters, but I couldn’t focus because I wanted to see what they were doing that was making so much noise.” It was then that I realized we needed two kinds of center days, “Quiet Days” and “Busy Days.”

On “Quiet Days,” students could choose the Reading Center, the Writing Center, the Vocabulary Center, or the Listening Center. On “Busy Days,” the students might be involved in the Art Center, the Puzzles and Games Center, the Dance and Drama Center, or in the construction of individual or collaborative projects. On “Busy Days,” students might also give performances or presentations. Managing students’ work spaces takes thoughtful planning and advance preparation. I learned that the consideration of noise levels must be an integral part of planning.

**Quiet-Day Centers for a Medieval Unit**

**Reading Center**

Students browsed books with a medieval theme culled from my personal library and from the school library. The books, historical fiction and nonfiction, were at a variety of reading levels. The goals for this center were for students to make discoveries, generate interest, and have reading choices related to the Middle Ages. Students were free to read as many materials as they liked. Because our school uses the Accelerated Reading (AR) program, students were encouraged but were not required to read an AR book with a medieval strand.

**Writing Center**

Stocked with paper, dictionaries, different colored pens, pencils, erasers, correction fluid, highlighters, and sticky notes, this center also contained various writing prompts related to the Middle Ages. If the students needed prompts for writing, they could choose from story starters, add-on stories, pictures, and nonprint prompts such as bags of medieval objects to incorporate into a piece of writing. Students were to choose a genre, audience, purpose, and topic for writing. Students were also encouraged to emulate the style and craft of the writing we studied. This center contained a “Dear Reader” inbox for drafts that needed peer review and a “Dear Writer” outbox for drafts that had been reviewed. Students chose when and how often they wanted their draft to go through the peer-editing process. The goals for this center were for students to write and publish a piece of writing about the Middle Ages. Students could choose the steps of the writing process they needed to generate a final piece, which they had to complete.

**Vocabulary Center**

In the Vocabulary Center, students worked with language and words. The goal was for students to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary necessary for participating in class discussions and reading literature selections.

In one “Must” activity, students accrued vocabulary for the texts we had read or would read. Words were written on strips of paper and placed in a fishbowl. Students fished for a word, found it in their textbook, and determined the meaning. They put the word, the meaning, and the title of the text where the word was used on a colored sheet of paper and added it to our word wall. As words were defined on the word wall, students added them to their master vocabulary list. In “May” activities, students could use their vocabulary words to play word games such as “Think Links” (a rhyming word game), words searches, and crossword puzzles. This center contained plenty of dictionaries, thesauruses, markers, paper, and tape. The goal was to have students enrich their vocabularies so they could read with fluency and understanding.

**Listening Center**

The Listening Center contained headphones and CD and cassette-tape players. The CDs and tapes included recordings of Gregorian chants, early music and Renaissance music in several languages, poetry, works read in Middle English, and selected dramatic readings recorded by previous students. Other materials included photographs of musical instruments from the Middle Ages, historical information, and some translations. The goals for this center were to discover the types and uses of music in medieval times and to hear poems and text selections that solidified the sounds of the language and the sounds of the times.
Busy-Day Centers for a Medieval Unit

Art Center

The Art Center contained construction paper, poster board, cardboard, scissors, yarn, rulers, material, thread, books on clothing and art and architecture, glue, markers, Styrofoam plates, pens and pencils, calligraphy pens and ink, acrylic paints, paintbrushes and sponges, cups (for water), loads of paper towels, newspaper, a garbage can, and extra garbage bags. Students could choose materials to create an art form or picture related to our unit. They had opportunities to represent their thoughts through two- and three-dimensional creations of their choice. Thomas Armstrong calls this expression of ideas and concepts “hands-on thinking” (76). One group of students engaged in hands-on thinking when they wanted to re-create a stained-glass window on our classroom window. They researched a design from one of the books, photocopied it, enlarged it onto a transparency, and used the overhead projector to trace the design onto the window with a washable black paint marker. They spent center time coloring in the spaces according to their research. They enjoyed figuring out the processes they would use to make their idea a reality. They also enjoyed telling their peers about the original location of the window, its history, and why they chose that design. This was not one of the activities I created and placed in a notebook; this was a student-initiated and student-centered project that resulted from their learning, interests, and talents.

Students commonly created something in the art center that could be used in another center. For example, hennins (pointed hats worn by women in the Middle Ages), paper helmets, shields, and various types of swords, daggers, and other weapons could be made for use in the Drama Center. Students initiated research into weapons and placed this information in this center so that others could learn and create more of them, another example of a student-directed project. One student summarized her learning experience in the art center, saying, “The Art Center was interesting. I made a hat that women wore in the Middle Ages. The hat was called a hennin. I believe that they were very expensive because the word hennin was shouted at other women who wore these tall hats by women who could not afford these hats.” Students also created "woodcuts" (made from Styrofoam plates) to stamp illuminated pages and scrolls that they may have used for their compositions in the Writing Center. The main goals for students visiting the Art Center were to gain an appreciation of the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and to get a sense of what the people of those times valued as beautiful.

Puzzles and Games Center

Students could choose from among many games and puzzles. They could help complete a 3-D castle puzzle, play Beowulf Bingo or Concentration, cast runes to predict their future, or try to match medicinal plants to their descriptions and uses. In addition, there were riddles and mind games. In this center, the students engaged their minds to solve problems and to learn.

Dance and Drama Center

Students found a variety of instructions for dances and dramatic scripts as well as costumes and period musical instruments. The swords and daggers, made in the Art Center, could be used here. Students could learn dances such as the “Gey Gordon” and the “Tangle Browne.” They could also use scripts and parodies from the Writing Center to act out on “Busy Days.” In the past, students have improvised scenes from Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Le Morte D’Arthur, Macbeth, and The Canterbury Tales.

Codes, Crimes, and Punishments

This center was the direct result of previous student-initiated projects. Although still under construction, it will contain displays about knights, their training, and the Code of Chivalry; a pillory (head and hand stocks) from our Renaissance Fair; and a list of crimes students might commit to be “arrested” and put in the stocks. Students have been interested in adding information about the “laws” of medieval society and the harsh punishments for violating them, including thumbscrews, foot roasters, and heretic forks. One goal for this center will be to help students gain a new appreciation for the American judicial system and the separation of church and state.

Finding Center

It is important to note that I used learning centers as part of a total curriculum. To balance instruction, I
provided direct instruction for many of the skills, systems, and processes students needed to complete center work. Low-achieving students learning basic skills need a planned, systematic instructional approach (Allen 10; Everson). I combined student-centered learning with direct instruction to create a comprehensive program where students not only learned facts and skills but also had numerous opportunities to apply them in authentic, student-chosen learning activities.

Learning centers provided a place for students to experience how facts and skills related to broader goals and concepts. Instead of being told why activities were important, students discovered for themselves the importance of hard work and learning. The use of learning centers added meaning and excitement to learning and taught students to assume responsibility for their success in the classroom. I showed respect for students by using their ideas for creating and modifying learning centers. I am continuing to build a collection of student-developed and student-tested centers that I hope will continue to meet the needs and interests of all students. Perhaps secondary teachers will now be inspired to try learning centers, since my students have shown that older students benefit from them, too.

Works Cited

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READWRIETHINK CONNECTION
Movitz and Holmes share various means to engage students with multiple ways of learning. The ReadWriteThink lesson plan “Designing Museum Exhibits for The Grapes of Wrath: A Multigenre Project” also uses many different forms of learning during a unit of study. Working alone or with a partner, students create artifacts in a variety of genres for a museum exhibit that will demonstrate important facts about the research topic and its significance to viewers. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=892