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Innovative Classroom Ideas



OVERVIEW

You've probably noticed by now that students thrive on novelty. But who doesn't? We all get tired of routine and sameness, and we all like things that are unique, new, and interesting. That's what I try to do daily in my classroom: introduce something new and unique.



FIRST DAYS CHALLENGES

It begins on the first day of school with my First Days Challenges. To encourage creativity, enhance problem-solving skills, and to get to know my students, I use five challenges.

Day 1 challenge: **Find your place in the world (or at least in the classroom)**

For this challenge, you are to find your seat in the classroom. Without talking, sit in order of your birthdates (year doesn't matter) from January 1 to December 31.

There are lots of ways to do this, but most often I see a student take charge. Using hand signals, this student gets the others to first gather by month. Once the group of students is together they can usually sort themselves by date easily. Occasionally someone doesn't catch on and ends up sitting in the wrong seat, causing everyone else to move. It's rare for the students to realize that using gestures is only one way to communicate non-verbally. They are allowed to write down their birthdates, which would make things much easier. Rarely does that happen.

After all students are seated, and we check to make sure they are in the correct place, I discuss ways they might have completed the task more easily. When I ask why they didn't just write their birthdates down on paper, I always hear, "You didn't tell us we could," to which I reply, "I didn't tell you you couldn't." The first solution they come up with is not always the easiest, nor is it the best. It's a lesson I don't have to teach again.

From this challenge I know which students lead; which want to lead but allow themselves to be overruled; which students are the peacemakers, the rule followers, and the followers; and which students would prefer to be invisible.



Day 2 challenge: **Uncommon commonalities**

Sit at a table with at least two other people who have three things in common with you, like your favorite food or your favorite color.

If they think about this at all, they can sit with whomever they want. We can always find three things we have in common with anyone. I intentionally give them the “favorite” examples to get their minds thinking about favorites. Once they start that, it’s hard for them to consider anything else they may have in common (like gender, grade level, or teacher). This is a much harder challenge than the day before. They have to communicate with kids they may or may not already know and share something personal.

During our debrief, after making sure that all groups have at least three members and the members have three things in common, I discuss the other things they may have in common. It’s always interesting to see their faces when they realize that they could have sat with their friends, even if their friends don’t like the same color.

From this challenge I learn about my students’ likes and dislikes, who they already know and who is new, which students think creatively, and which students like to talk.

Day 3 challenge: **Make a dichotomy**

Split yourselves into two groups according to some rule that the group agrees to. Then split those two groups into two additional groups according to a new rule. Finally, split those four groups into two new groups based on new rule.

Figuring out the instructions and ending up with eight groups is less of a challenge. That’s the easy part. Two students step forward and become class leaders. But when those groups split twice, additional students need to step forward as leaders. Agreeing on what rule to follow tends to get heated. And fun to watch.

If I’m feeling exceptionally evil, I add a caveat: I tell them that none of the groups at any point along the way can have the same number of students as any other group. So if I start out with 36 students, 18 boys and 18 girls, they can’t use gender for the first split.

From this challenge a new picture of my students emerges. The leaders are again identified. If they’re the same students as on Monday, I either pull them aside privately and ask them not to lead for the rest of the week or simply add that to the next day’s instructions.

Day 4 challenge: Moral dilemma

(Special thanks to Dave Burgess for this great idea from his book, *Teach Like a Pirate.*)

Sit alphabetically by first name. Imagine there is a plane crash and there are 10 survivors who are on a small, uninhabited island. A rescue plane sees them and lands, but the pilot knows that although he will get the plane back home safely, he will never find the island again. He can only take five passengers, and the survivors must determine who stays on the island and who will leave with the pilot. Everyone at your table must agree to who gets on the plane and is saved, and who is left behind on the island. In making your decision, you need to consider the contribution each person will make to society (whether back home or on the island). You will be asked to present and defend your decision at the end of class today. You are:

- Athlete, 24 years old
- War veteran, 50 years old
- Billionaire CEO of popular company
- Paramedic, single father of three children
- Nobel Prize-winning scientist
- Eagle Scout, 16 years old
- Your favorite teen star (actor/singer)
- Botanist, mother of two small children
- Paroled convict
- You

This activity gets heated, loud, and amazingly fun. The students argue and discuss, and this allows them to feel moral outrage and justification. It is the most fun, for me, of all of the First Days Challenges. Not only do I really get to know a lot about my students with this activity, I find out a lot about their family life.

Inevitably the students take this home. It is discussed by families all over my district that night. The next day students will come back and tell me they changed their minds or that they had a discussion with their family and their family made different decisions. They beg to get back into the same groups so they can convince their group that a mistake was made. I let them get back into the group, but with a few rules. Everyone gets three minutes on the clock to pitch their opinions. If you don't want to pitch your opinion, you can pass. After everyone has given their opinion, the group votes to determine whether they want to change yesterday's decision. They vote yes or no in private ballots. Then the group announces to the class if they would change or would not change their original decision. They aren't given the option of telling what change they would like to make, just that they have changed their collective minds.

This activity comes up again and again throughout the year. It's not usual for me to hear in April, "Well, you did want to leave the single dad on the island."

From this challenge I learn about how my students work under pressure, how persuasive they are, how well they can work together as a group, and how they pout.

Day 5 challenge: Play-Doh®

Remove the Play-Doh® from the can and use it to create something that represents you. You have 10 minutes to complete this activity and will have to present your creation to the class.

I allow the students to trade colors with other people at their table. I am intentionally vague. One time I mistakenly told the students that they could create a representation of food or of a book they liked. Ninety percent of the students in that class made food or a book.

While they present their work of art, I take their picture with their creation. It helps me memorize their names. By associating something they like with their face and their name, I can more easily make a connection in my brain.

I discover things about my students I might not otherwise have known. I have dancers and gymnasts, students with large families, students whose parents are active military. One student made a snake, not because it was easy, but because he said he looked like a snake. Some students just write their names, while other show incredible artistic talent and imagination.

Later in the year, if it seems like the class is out of sync, I will bring out the Play-Doh® again. I ask the students to make a representation of what they are most concerned about at that moment. It's always interesting to see what comes from that assignment. Most of the time, I find the issue can be solved easily. Frequently all I need to do is to pay more attention to the class and rely less on autopilot.

MASTERY LEARNING

Mastery learning is more than assessment. It's making sure your students have mastered one concept before they move on to the next one. Learning is cumulative, and if students don't understand the first piece, you can't build on it. This can be labor intensive for you, the teacher, especially the first year, but it is transformative for the student.

Students are given opportunities to learn new material, and they are given ample opportunities to prove mastery. I offer various learning opportunities for each topic.

Mastery-based learning starts with you: the educator. Take your district, state, or school curriculum and break it down into bite-sized pieces. You will base your assessment questions on these bite-sized pieces.

The standard may be "Add fractions." There's a lot that goes into adding fractions. Assuming that the students can already add, that they know the difference between the numerator and the denominator, and that they understand why the denominators need to be the same in order to add



fractions, I'd change that into the following learning goals (or concepts):

1. Add fractions with like denominators.
2. Add fractions with different denominators.

To assess this, write four test questions for each learning goal. A student's score—which does *not* relate to percentages—would be 1, 2, 3, or 4, based on how many they got correct. This aligns closely with our state testing, which assigns students a ranking of:

4. Exceeds the standard
3. Meets the standard
2. Approaches the standard
1. Falls far below the standard

You can set up your mastery in whatever way works best. Lots of teachers use a five-point scale because their district's definition of mastery is 80 percent (or four correct out of five).

By using this type of assessment, you know with laser-like accuracy what a student knows and doesn't know. It's not that they did poorly on the chapter 4 test; rather, it's that they are unable to distinguish between simile and metaphor in a reading passage. It makes your teaching more efficient, because now you know what lessons to revisit.

STICK PICKING

Each student writes their name on an extra-wide craft stick. I group the sticks by class period. When I need to choose a student, I pick a stick. The students know that who gets chosen is random. I don't worry about calling on the boys too often, or the girls. I don't pay much attention to who has their hand up. I just pick a stick. Generally I replace the sticks so that a student won't feel like they are off the hook for the next 30 questions. The same name may be randomly chosen repeatedly.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT: CHOOSE YOUR OWN

Consider letting your students choose their own seats. The students stand around the perimeter of the room. When I pick their stick, they can choose to sit in any empty seat. Once they have chosen, however, they cannot change their seat.

I do this as often as needed based on group dynamics and content concerns. Sometimes I will tell the students they can sit anywhere except with the people who were at their table. Sometimes I tell them they can't choose to sit at the same table as the one they just left.

I always reserve the right to refuse to allow students to sit in their chosen seat. If there are personality conflicts between students, I don't want them sitting together. If students misbehave

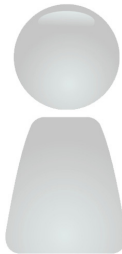
and I need to move them, they lose the right to choose their seats for the rest of the semester. I choose for them.

When they complain about the people they sit near, I always remind them that they chose their seat. I didn't assign it.

IT'S WHAT YOU SAY AND HOW YOU SAY IT



Tone of voice matters, and so do the words you use. I never argue with students. Instead I pull out my handy two-word comeback: "Probably so." They don't know what to say next. "This grade is unfair." "Probably so." "You're picking on me." "Probably so." "I don't like this class" "Probably so." Try it. It is amazing and works wonders. It also works with family members.



Calling worksheets "learning opportunities" allows the students to see worksheets for what they really are: opportunities to either learn something new or practice what they have learned. The same goes for homework. No, I don't recommend calling it "home fun." I tried that for while. Did. Not. Work. (Just Google "home fun" and you will see what I mean.) But calling homework a learning opportunity makes a difference in how the students approach it.

Homework and worksheets (like packets) are things that we, as learners, have been conditioned to dislike. They are associated with drudgery, busy work, boredom, and tedium. By calling them learning opportunities, the students (and you) begin to see that they can be a worthwhile experience.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION: FOOTENOTES

I've read *Drive* by Daniel Pink and I know that extrinsic motivation often backfires. But I have found that FooteNotes work incredibly well with students. I've successfully used them with students from grades 4 through 12.



FooteNotes look like little dollars. The students can earn FooteNotes for many things. If I catch them picking up trash in the hall or befriending the new student, I could give them FooteNotes. If they remember their manners, I sometimes give them FooteNotes. If they bring in some extra, much-needed classroom supplies, I might reward students with FooteNotes. If they see me in public and acknowledge me, I give the FooteNote; but if they introduce me to whoever they are with, they get even more FooteNotes.

Homework doesn't count for a grade in my class. I'd like to believe that my students are all motivated enough by the desire to learn that they will automatically do the assignment. The reality is that many (most) don't. So it's FooteNotes to the rescue. Do your homework; earn FooteNotes.

Students use FooteNotes for things like a piece of candy on Friday, a raffle ticket for the monthly

iTunes gift card, to change their seat in class, to get help on one test question, to postpone a test by a day. At the end of each semester, I do a blind raffle where they buy chances to win a “bag of stuff.” The stuff in the bags is usually swag from conferences with a can of soda and a bag of chips.

It’s interesting to see who the savers are, who the spenders are, and who the sharers are in my classes. I’m always open to suggestions for ways to earn FooteNotes or rewards to earn with FooteNotes. One class wanted to be able to have lunch in my classroom (with me). That might not be surprising for younger grades, but these students were in eighth grade.

GRADING SYSTEM

My grading system is based on mastery learning, as described above. Eighty percent of a student’s grade is mastery of learning goals. Twenty percent is for projects. Homework does not count for a grade. In-class work does not count for a grade. Bringing in a roll of paper towels does not count for a grade. There is no extra credit.

**GRADES ARE BASED SOLELY ON WHAT STUDENTS KNOW
AND WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW.**

Because students are able to retake learning-goal quizzes, when they ask how to improve their grade, we look at the learning-goal checklist. The students know exactly what they need to do to improve their grade. The way their grade is determined is no longer mysterious or unknown. This empowers the students to do what they need to do to demonstrate mastery.

READ ALOUD

I read aloud to my students. This began out of necessity. My students were always late to class. Since our campus was relatively small and there was a generous passing period, I knew that the tardies were intentional. Two minutes after class ended, I began reading aloud, at first to an empty classroom. I felt foolish, but I was confident it would work. I began with Andrew Clement’s book *Frindle*, which is one of my personal favorites. I would continue reading until the tardy bell rang. Once the bell rang, I would finish the chapter, close the book, and begin class.

In less than a week kids were getting to my class well before the bell so that they could hear the story. I never had problems with attendance, and behavior improved too. Although I was teaching at an alternative high school at the time, reading aloud has been popular in all of my classes, grades 4 through 12. It doesn’t really matter that they can pick up the book and read it themselves; something magical happens when we are being read to.

After doing this for years there are many books that I feel I have memorized. Finding new books is less of a challenge with the advent of e-books and blogs. I solicit advance reader copies (ARCs)

of books from publishers; usually these are called galleys. I read them myself, and if they are appropriate, I read them aloud to my students. I also do a review on my blog to provide publishers and readers feedback on the books. (Most of my galleys are obtained through www.netgalley.com.)

MARKERBOARDS

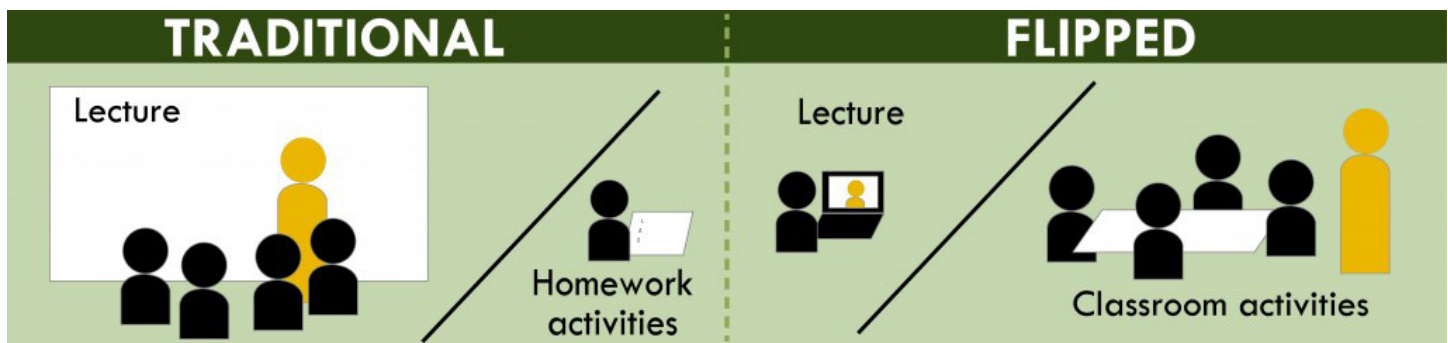
Individual whiteboards have been transformative for my teaching and my students' learning. Each student gets a markerboard when they walk into class. They each provide their own low-odor dry erase marker, and we use old socks as erasers. If I need them to work out a problem, they work it out on their markerboard. I have the students hold up their markerboards so I can look around the room and see where they are with regard to the concept I'm teaching. With a glance I can see who has mastered the concept, who needs a bit of help, who needs a lot of help, and who is totally lost. This one technique allows me to take a quick pulse of the classroom without increasing the number of papers I need to grade. Nor does it allow any student to put on their invisibility cloak.

The students have become reliant on their markerboards. They want to take them home and take them to other classes. I no longer have to remind my students to show their work or ask what they did in one part of the problem or another. It's all right there for all of us to see.

FLIPPED CLASSROOM

I remember that, when I was a student, I struggled with lectures. All I did was copy whatever the teacher wrote on the board. I didn't hear what the teacher said; I didn't ask questions or try to understand the material. All I did was write. Which, of course, meant there was a lot of frustration and tears at home. I needed help when I was working on the assignment, not when I was frantically copying the board.

As a teacher, I grew increasingly frustrated with students telling me that they could do problems just fine in class but once they got home they couldn't do them. Parents would contact me and tell me that they really wanted to be able to help their child with homework, but that they didn't remember how to graph a quadratic equation (for example). I began making short videos for the parents so that they could be reminded of the skill and help their children when they came home from school. Instead, the parents gave the videos to the kids, and it worked very well.



Due to limited bandwidth, I found it easier to put the videos on YouTube—where they reached an international audience. But my primary focus was, and still is, the students who daily sit in my classroom.

My lectures are all videos that I make myself. They are short—rarely more than 10 minutes. The students watch the videos for homework. When they come to class, we apply the concepts they learned. This allows me to individualize instruction more effectively. I have more time to work with the struggling students, and the advanced students can move forward when they are ready.

There are still issues. When students don't watch the videos at home, they need to do it at the beginning of class (and miss the fun activity the rest of the class does). If they don't have Internet, I give them the videos for the week on a thumb drive. If they don't have a computer, I give them a DVD. In some cases, I've provided portable DVD players for students to use.

It's not perfect. A lecture is still a lecture, no matter how it is delivered. Even if I call kids out by name in the video, some students feel it is too impersonal. But for a majority of my students, the flipped classroom has opened the door to learning for them. They enjoy class, and they are confident in their abilities. They know when they know something, but more important, they know when they don't know something.

FINDING MY GOLD

I search for education gold. I read and go to workshops and attend seminars and conferences and talk to everyone on my quest for educational gold. When I was a new teacher, it was easy. Now that I'm seasoned, it's more complicated. I hope that you find some gold in this white paper. Take what you like and mold it into something that works for you. Ignore the rest. That's what I do.

ABOUT NANCY FOOTE



Nancy Foote, M.Ed., received her B.S. in chemistry from Loyola University of Chicago. After working as an industrial chemist for several years, she returned to school to earn her M.Ed. from Arizona State University. Holding a National Board Certification in the area of mathematics, Nancy spent many years as a classroom teacher, curriculum specialist, and elementary school principal, and is currently a math and science teacher for the Higley Unified School District. She has received many awards, including the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and the 2012–2013 AZ Middle School Science Teacher of the Year award.

The proud grandmother of nine, Nancy maintains a popular [YouTube channel](#) and [blog](#). Her latest book is *Teacher Resource Guide to Algebra 1*.

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