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“Sponge” Activities—Student Learning Ideas

DID YOU KNOW



Madeline Hunter originated the term "sponge activities" to describe "learning activities that soak up precious time that would otherwise be lost." This might be when students complete a test or assignment early, when the Internet goes out during a planned technology lesson, or when your lesson for the day ends a few minutes early. Hunter stated that sponge activities should focus on reviewing previously learned material and provide distributed practice activities.

At their best, sponge activities are academically rich and not just time killers. They should also, if at all possible, promote laughter, which activates dopamine and the learning centers of the brain.

“Sponge” Activities for Students

Your goal as a substitute educator should be to deliver the lesson plan that has been left for you. Sometimes you'll find yourself with lesson plans that seem less than adequate. They may lack detail, they may not be structured effectively, etc. In some cases, you may not have been supplied with a lesson plan at all or have time left to spare. What do you do?

Don't despair—implement a sponge activity. Sponge activities describe learning activities that soak up precious time that would otherwise be lost. Remember that your goal is to ensure that learning continues in the absence of the permanent teacher. There are many different ways that learning can be facilitated. The best ways involve the student thinking creatively and applying knowledge. Here's a few brain-based activities that you can employ to help convey lesson material in a pinch—or when you need to fill some time.

Remember the goal is not just to 'kill time'. A good sponge activity can be fun for the students and promote learning at the same time.

Problem Solving Box

Direct your students to collaboratively create and decorate a box with a slot in the top, labeled "The Problem-Solving Box." Have members of the class anonymously compose and insert a problem they might be having that they can't solve. Withdraw two problems to discuss right away. Time permitting, choose a couple more.

Progressive Writing

A group of three or more students answer a prompt, as described by [Fisher and Frey](#). At the end of two minutes, each writer passes his or her paper to the student on the left. Continue until every student has written on every paper.

Tweet POV

Today's students are social media savvy—and you don't need the Internet to use this fun way to convey an experience, craft an argument, or explore a point of view. Just have the students do it *using 280 characters or less*. Have students summarize something they've learned—twitter style! (**NOTE: do not let students actually tweet or text using their device. Nor should you even have your smart phone or tablet turned on in the classroom**) Writing the 'tweets' longhand is just as effective. The challenge is conveying information using the limited number of characters or words.

Expert Panel

Select five students to be experts on a critical concept. Let them prepare to discuss the assigned content, while the rest of the class prepares questions to ask the panelists. After 10-15 minutes of study time, seat the five students at the front of the room.

Blackboard Purge

Have groups of students write everything they know about a topic on the board. Ask students to orally elaborate on statements they have written.

