

How to Break Free

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Our entire lives seem to be managed by time and schedules. Therefore, it only seems natural that this concept was heavily applied to our teaching and instructional methods. How can we break free of this though? How can we remove the chains that bind us so tightly that we have lost our way as educators? Though many believe that having a regimented schedule is the best way, I have recently found that this may not be completely true for every subject taught. Are our students truly learning if lessons are broken into so many pieces? If anything, these pieces begin to look like a scrambled puzzle that our students are desperately trying to put back together. So how can we fix this? How do we get back on track? Here I will address this issue further and offer a simple, eye opening way you can adjust your school day for a successful year.

Though in the past I have been a supporter of routine schedules, I have learned that there are better ways the instructional day can be handled. I believe my misconception of best practices may heavily be due to the fact it's what I was taught to do. From the time I was a young pupil, staying on schedule was imprinted on my brain. As a college student, my professors continued to stress the importance of building a lesson plan with scheduling blocks that would help me maintain a consistent routine. Working in public school only furthered my belief that this was not only the best method, but the only method acceptable. Now that I've had the opportunity to work in private education for a few years and had the privilege to create my own pedagogy, I realize how much better school life can be with just a few little tweaks.

Much of my work has been devoted to creating equal opportunity for greatness for all students. I have said it in the past and will say again that I do not believe in the three classes of education (Gifted, Main Stream, and Special Education). I believe that every student should be seen as an individual that has many strengths and may have some weaknesses, too. This should not define them as a person nor should it label them as less or more valuable than anyone else. Yet we find ourselves in a society that focuses heavily on praising the gifted but is absolutely lost in how to help those with special needs. It's time to graduate to the knowledge that school is very different than it was in the 1950s and be open to adapting and evolving our methods to meet the needs of today's generation of students.

In order to make change in our education system we must recognize that what was important in the past is barely relevant now, and will definitely be irrelevant in the near future. Learning tasks that are based upon rote memorization should no longer be employed, as it not only disinteresting to the students, but it has limited value in our world today. Teachers must break free of these methods and should begin implementing more evolved methods of instruction. Today we have knowledge at our finger tips. Teaching students how to find the information they are looking for is the key to true knowledge. Our world is continuing to change and evolve around us, yet it has a limited impact on what is happening in the classroom. If the world is changing, we must change

with it! Think about it, even a drop of water absorbs the changes of our world, are we less capable than a drop of water?

Preparing our students for the future is our number one priority as educators. If we want to be able to say we successfully met this goal, passion, creativity, and a can-do attitude will be required. Gone is the era where teachers can build a nation of “factory workers” capable of completing worksheets in a timely manner. College professors and employers are looking for individuals that can adapt, think creatively, work collaboratively, and are passionate! Let’s get students excited and passionate about learning again! So much is said about getting students to love to read, but what about getting them to love to learn? If our students are dragging their feet on the way into class, then we are doing something wrong as their teacher. Students should be running through the door and excited to get the day started. So how can we change our classroom to not only increase student learning, but raise the level of eagerness our students have to learn? Let’s move ahead and dive deeper into this change that will alter how you teach forever.

First, let’s hit the brakes on breaking your day into blocks. Focus on what you want your students to learn this week. To get started, pick a couple of standards from each subject area. Then combine those goals with your current Advanced Concepts goals (for more on that, you can read my book, “Advanced Concepts for a Better Future: How to Build an Accelerated Classroom”). Now that you know what you want to teach, let’s figure out how you are going to teach it. Not to play favorites, but personally I use Pearson’s consumable textbooks. They are wonderful because each student gets their own textbook full of vibrant colors and current information that they can write directly into. In addition, they have amazing online resources that expand upon the text lessons. Now returning to my original point, decide which standards you would like to teach each day and simply write down which lessons you would like to cover. For lessons that are text associated, present it as a “task” for your students to accomplish. Place them into groups, have the lesson separated into individual tasks that you will designate one at a time (this reduces confusion or misinterpretation of directions), reiterate expectations, and make sure they know what to do once they have completed their first task while awaiting additional instructions (my students always have a book that they like on their desk that they can immediately pick up while they are in transition). Below are some “Rules to Learn By” that I always keep posted. Always remind them of these rules before beginning a task and reference it as needed.

Rules to Learn By:

- 1) Use critical thinking and problem solving
- 2) Communicate effectively and politely
- 3) Cooperate
- 4) Think creatively

You will be shocked to see how suddenly exciting the textbook has become. Be sure to rotate around the room and monitor student progress to ensure everyone is on task and producing quality work. Students should be taking turns reading short sections aloud and rotating around continuously

so each student has multiple opportunities to read to the group (and this will keep them focused and on task, too). Allow short breaks with interesting videos (Pearson and Brainpop have great videos that accompany every subject). Videos offer a visual aide that helps many students (that may otherwise feel lost) understand what is being explained in the textbook. Take turns with the class by allowing them to work in their groups for a period of time and then have them follow along while you read aloud to them. This balance works wonders in keeping the lesson fun, interesting, and engaging. Once you see that things are winding down and almost all groups are finished, do a quick summary of the lesson. Providing short lesson checks, and allowing students to utilize the text to source information, is a great way to not only check for understanding, but develops your students abilities to use available tools to find information. Moving beyond textbook lessons, visit your local teacher resource store for fun activities that will enhance their learning. For instance, Edupress makes task cards titled, "Speaking and Listening". These provide individual, small-group, and whole-class activities that strengthen presentation skills and promote collaborate discussions. My students have a lot of fun with these cards while learning to do research, write reports, design power point presentations, and speak to their fellow students in a professional manner. These lessons don't need to be limited to 30-45 minutes like math and reading activities should. Lessons surrounding science, social studies, and research based activities should last until the goal for knowledge is reached. My students can spend over an hour on these activities and won't even realize it because they are so engaged and involved in their learning. Overall, be sure to look for other task cards or class games and activities that are sure to energize your classroom.

This year my classroom's Advanced Concept is "Global Studies". In addition to teaching the standards, my students have the opportunity to learn about two countries every month. To support our Advanced Concept monthly learning goals, I prepare several in class and out of class activities. In class lessons include culinary arts, creative arts, art history, and cultural perspective. Outside of class we go on field trips that either fits with the country we are studying or supports one of the standards we are learning about (science and social studies lessons go a lot farther when you take them on a field trip that can expand upon their knowledge of the text). We even invite many community professionals, family, and family friends who can further enhance our class learning. We've all heard the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child". Well it takes a village to raise a student, too! I do not know everything and do not profess to my students that I know everything. If I can get someone else to teach my students about a particular topic that knows more than I do, than I am going to go and find that person and give my students the opportunity to learn from the best!

The key to a successful school year is knowing what you want your students to learn. Determine your learning goals for the year, set goals for each month, and then get to work on weekly lesson planning. A successful day isn't when you have taught each subject within the given time frame.

A successful day is when you have taught your students what you wanted them to learn!

Set goals for the day but don't put yourself on a timer and get frustrated when you don't finish in time. If you are frustrated, bored, or unhappy, so are your students! Make learning fun and have fun

while you are learning. Life is an adventure! School should be an adventure, too. When the school day begins, my students and I dive right in. There is no set schedule because the day must stay flexible. My students love that they can truly enjoy a lesson without worrying about running out of time. The lesson is over when they've completed their tasks and shown how much they have learned. It's really that simple!

Now you may be thinking, "How am I supposed to teach everything this way?" Well, here's another simple answer, you might not get to everything! But guess what, that's okay! My students learn way more when they can take their time, work together, and complete a task or project without time constraints. Every lesson we do is valuable. Imagine you are on an archery field with a bow and arrow. Would you rather shoot as many arrows as you can or would you rather take your time and hit the bull's eye every time? You will score more points if you hit the bull's eye, just like your students will learn way more if they have more time, too. Now every lesson doesn't always surround group work and projects, but many do and they really enjoy it. Think about it, when we go to meetings, we would much rather work together on a group project than sit and be lectured all afternoon. We typically learn more and are more likely to take something away from the meeting using this method as well. Plus, allowing students more opportunities to work in groups builds collaborative work skills, team work, and helps students recognize and share their own strengths.

In conclusion, when you break free, you are not only freeing yourself, but you are paving the way to freeing your fellow educators. Change can't happen until it happens! So join me in pioneering these much needed changes in education. You can do it! You have a voice, so use it! Be loud and proud about what you do as an educator and encourage others to do the same. Step out of the box and into the real world. Your students are counting on you! So be your best you and you will see the best them. Remember, we need to prepare our students for their future. Your class should evolve and change with the world so that your students will be prepared for world expectations. Always remember, every student is an individual, every class is different every year, and you must make sure to change your instructional methods to match their needs. The above information is a resource for you to take from. You can take all of it or only some of it. It's really up to you and the needs of your students. Make sure you check on yourself at the end of each day to make sure you met your class learning goals. And don't wait for others to tell you that you are doing a great job. Your students are the only measure of greatness you need.