

GETTING RID OF

THE DEAD TIME

IN CLASS



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Alphabet Publishing

Published by Alphabet Publishing, 2018.

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First edition. September 5, 2018.

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ISBN: 978-1948492225

Written by Alphabet Publishing.

Getting Rid of Dead Time in Class

Whether or not students should have cellphones in the classroom is a big debate these days. And I feel ambivalent about the issue.

On the one hand, I love tech toys, I think telling my 25-year-old student to put away his or her cellphone is condescending, and I know that students sometimes use them for a quick translation or comprehension check rather than interrupt the whole class to ask what “ambivalent” means.

On the other hand, my classroom is often full of students staring at tiny little screens and when I call on them I get a bleary-eyed, “What?” I’ve even had students texting each other in class, so I know cellphones can be distracting.

But several years ago, I had a great epiphany:

Students start pulling out their cellphones in class for the same reason I pull mine out at lunch with friends or in the middle of a webinar—BOREDOM.

How do I know? Because my classroom is also full of students staring out the window, napping, chatting, doodling, doing homework for another class, checking the clock every five minutes, trying to distract me from the lesson so we can just talk and kill time. It’s not just the cellphones.

The problem isn’t that kids today are addicted to evil technology.

The problem is that I am a boring teacher!

That’s a tough thing to admit, but I’d be surprised if a lot of cellphone use didn’t come down to students being bored. And look, I don’t think we

need to entertain our students 24/7 with games and jokes and juggling tricks. I don't think they want that.

They want to learn and they know learning is sometimes not fun. Listening to a lecture on the present perfect can be interesting, if not exactly fun. Filling out a relatively rote worksheet about a new grammar point can be satisfying, if boring. Reading an IELTS passage on the Titanic can be insanely boring, but students understand that it is necessary. So, it's not that I am a boring teacher *per se*. It's that my class is boring sometimes.

And when is my class the most boring?

Class is most boring when nothing is happening.

So, to keep students off their cellphones (and looking at you, not the clock) I need to identify the dead time or downtime in my class. Usually it's when:

- **I'm taking attendance**
- **I'm handing back homework or conferencing with an individual student**
- **Students finish early**
- **One student is dominating the conversation**

I don't know if you would add anything to the list. I've been slowly trying to work on these moments so that students always have something to do and it's been working well.

In this short ebook, I'll be sharing ways that I kill dead time in my classroom that have worked for me.

How to Keep Students Active While Taking Attendance

One area that often causes dead time in class happens right at the beginning. For some reason, getting off on the right foot is very important to me. I think you set the tone for the class in that first ten minutes or so. And unless your students are super-motivated, getting them to switch to class mode takes some doing. So, if the first thing you do is take attendance and the students start getting bored immediately, I think you've lost half the battle already.

So what can you do?

- A “DO NOW” on the board while you are taking attendance. This also can shore up that dead time that occurs as students arrive. By getting students working as soon as they sit down, you're setting up an expectation that class is not a place to waste time. Every class, put up either a riddle or puzzle on the board. Or a quote that students have to guess the meaning of. I sometimes put up instructions for checking homework or the topic of the first warm-up discussion. If you turn this into a habit, you theoretically don't have to even start class. Students will come in, sit down, and start doing whatever is on the board. Meanwhile, you take attendance, get your papers in order, have that first sip of coffee, or whatever you need to do.
- A similar idea is to set a routine at the beginning of class that all students know and can do. In a writing class, class starts with journals so students know that at 9:20 they go to the cupboard, pull out their journals and write about their day. Or they get out their homework, find a partner, and start checking

it. The only difference between this and a *DO NOW* is that a *DO NOW* is different every day.

- Take attendance later in class when the students are doing something else such as working on a work sheet.
- Call on students to tell you if another student is there: “Michael, is Sarah here?” Expand it to ask weird things, “Michael, is Sarah wearing her glasses today?” That keeps taking attendance entertaining and allows you to practice a vocabulary set or grammar structure.
- Ask students about things the whole class is interested in. I think asking each student individually, “How was your weekend?” only captures the attention of that student and his or her friends. Asking the group, “Who did something fun this weekend?” might also lead to a ten-minute monologue by a student no one likes. I prefer questions like, “How was the exam in your last class?” or, “Who saw Simon drop his papers in the hallway? I missed it, tell me about it.” Those get almost everyone talking or listening.

Conferencing or handing back homework

Another area where the majority of the class is not paying attention is when I am handing back homework or conferencing with students. Also, I don't know about you but when I'm handing back essays, students often have a lot of question so you end up doing a mini-conference.

I put these two together because I suspect the same solutions apply to both. It's a time when students want or need individual attention and you have to do something with the other students.

The classic way to keep students active while conferencing is to give them another assignment. I find that doesn't always work because the students are dying to know their grade so they don't take the assignment seriously. Plus, as you hand back essays students start chatting and comparing.

So it's best for it to be something they have to work on. It could be a graded assignment. Or you could give them review questions for an upcoming quiz or test. Or even preview questions for the next lesson, allowing them to get prepared for what's coming up next.

The important point is that the busy work shouldn't be empty work. It should matter to the class. And have consequences for not doing it.

On the other hand, sometimes something fun is the best way to keep them engaged. I like handouts with riddles and brain teasers, which also make nice do-nows and fast-finisher work.

The students really get into them, and it's not a complete waste of time as they are grappling with language and trying to think out the puzzle.

Be sure to have an answer key to hand out at the end, or you'll lose your whole class explaining the answers.

Be careful of puns and plays on words. Those don't always translate. But some riddles about language actually build awareness of spelling or double meanings. I like riddles such as:

"What's the difference between here and there"?

Answer: "The letter T".

You can also give homework back ahead of class time. I have never gotten this one to work but I know some teachers hand out all the essays ahead of time. Students then have a chance to see their grade and prepare questions and complaints before you see them, meaning they are more focused during class time.

How to NOT Hand Back Homework

You can also nip this problem in the bud by not handing back homework. Here are some alternatives.

- Record your feedback at home on Voice Thread or a similar program. Students can then talk to you later if they have specific questions.
- Put the answers to the homework in a folder in the classroom. Students are on the honor system to do homework first and then check it.
- Give students the answers to the homework and let them check their work. Then talk about only the ones they didn't understand.
- Give preview homework. Do not collect it, but do check who did it. Teach the lesson. Then for homework, students check and redo their preview homework.

Fast Finishers

What do you do with the student who finished the quiz or test far ahead of anyone else? This is one of the most common causes of dead time in class, and one of the easiest to fix: Give them something else to do! The problem is 1) making them do it and 2) not giving them something that is going to put them perpetually ahead.

For example, if you tell the student to do the next exercise, he'll be one exercise ahead of the class. And the problem just snowballs: Have her start the homework and she won't have any homework that night. You might then find that other students rush through quizzes and tests so they can do homework in class.

So it's really a question of having some busy work for them to do and making the busy work fun or relevant (I always get so busy copying my quiz that I forget to copy my busy work!). A few easy suggestions:

- Extra worksheets, ones you think you won't have time to get to. And then have them check it themselves (see the list How to Not Hand Back Homework for ideas on giving students answers without taking up too much of your time).
- Riddles, puzzles, brain teasers, fun stuff like that!
- A reading book. Especially if students have picked the book themselves, this can be a fun reward that also helps them learn.
- A diary or journal. Give them fun or interesting prompts
- If you can't keep them off their cellphones while they're bored, put those cellphones to use. Tell them to find three examples of vocabulary words or grammar on Wikipedia.

The TALKERS

I don't mean to be unsympathetic, but every now and then we have a student who talks a bit too long, causing the class to lose attention. However, you don't want to discourage students from talking and you don't want to be rude.

Has this ever happened to you?

You ask a question of the students, perhaps a warm-up at the beginning such as "How was your weekend?" And one student starts to tell about his weekend in great detail for five to ten minutes.

Or maybe it's the answer to a reading question: You ask, "Why did the man go see his father?" expecting an answer such as, "To help fix the sink." One student starts retelling every nuance of the relationship between the man and his father. He's preempting your next question, "Why is that significant?" by explaining how Dad has Parkinson's disease and can't do the job alone. He's talking about irrelevant details like the color of their clothing which is confusing the class.

Most importantly, while this one student is talking, the others are taking out their cellphones, doing homework for their next class, or reading ahead which throws the whole class timing off.

Managing Over-Enthusiastic Students

THIS IS TRICKY BECAUSE we usually encourage students to talk, right? So how do you politely tell a student to give a shorter answer without 1) insulting him or her, 2) discouraging participation, and 3) discouraging complete answers?

- When you hear the right answer from a student that you know tends to talk a lot, cut them off quickly with praise. Say “yes” and maybe echo the answer. This provides a model of the kind of answer you want and also interrupts the student with praise.
- When the student moves beyond the right answer and starts to preempt your next question, tell them, “That’s my next question. Let’s see if someone else can help me?” If they persist, say, “Let’s give someone else a chance.”
- If the problem persists, you may need to talk to dominant students outside of class and explain that everyone needs to participate. Some students talk a lot to show and get teach attention, so you can let the student know that they are noticed in class and doing a great job. Obviously NEVER be sarcastic or indicate that talking long is a bad idea. And never mock students in class.

Preventing the Problem in the first place

- Make sure the question is clear and students get what you want. Sometime students give shotgun answers, they just talk and talk and hope they hit the target.
- Make sure this is a question that needs to have a free answer. I know we are taught to always let students talk and ask open-ended questions but sometimes holding up a piece of paper with the answer, or matching, or something else is better practice
- Think-Pair-Share gives students a chance to think first and refine their answer with a partner. Plus talkative students may get it out of their system by talking to another student.

FUNNILY ENOUGH, BRITISH Council posted a related question on Facebook recently: What to do with a dominant student in class¹.

There were a lot of commenters with good suggestions and here are some ideas I really liked:

- A basic, always-enforced everyone speaks once before someone can speak a second time rule.
- Give students a set number of talking cards per class or activity. Every time they talk, they spend one card. Once they are out of cards, they cannot speak. This helps if you have perpetual talkers in class.
- Speak to a dominant or loquacious student after class and let him or her know that while participation is awesome, he or she needs to let everyone talk.
- Force students to raise hands. Never call on a caller-outer.

More Resources

So those are some suggestions for keeping your class moving so students stay focused and engaged. I hope it's been helpful for you. Feel free to share this book with anyone who might make use of it.

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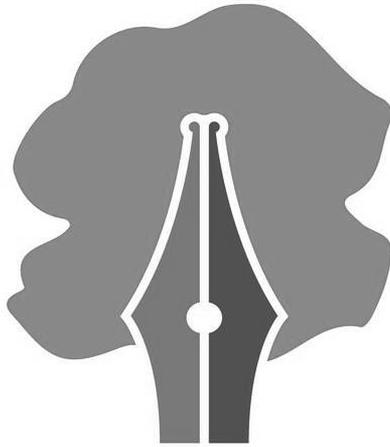
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