

Best Practice Methods:
A Tool Kit List
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Explanation:

Various “best practice” tools and methods have common features, and research supported instructional benefits. All are geared towards three primary goals—engaging all kinds of learners, improving and deepening understanding, and raising the level of thinking in our classrooms. Here is a small collection of a few powerful tools you can use in planning Units and Lessons.

Part One is a snapshot review of the research on classroom instruction from three different, accredited sources.

Part Two is where I have compiled a list of those tools and methods we have covered to date along with some we have yet to examine. This might prove helpful as you reflect on those you might wish to try out in the classroom. Moreover, it will provide you a common set of terms to describe these tools and methods, as well as an easy to use Checklist for sharing with others.

PART I: The Research

A. Turning Points’ Vision of Effective Classrooms

(Adapted from *Turning Points’ Vision of Effective Classrooms* draft as presented – Madison, WI, August 2005)

Give Authentic and Meaningful Work:

- See connections beyond the classroom
- Foster a sense of responsibility
- Let student see the implications of their learning
- Become agents of change in the larger world

Sustain Focus on Essential Questions and Learning Goals:

- Focus learning across subject areas and through multiple entry points
- Offer a “bigger picture” of learning
- Provide continuity and coherence

Use Ongoing and Multiple Forms of Assessment:

- Make assessment criteria transparent
- Make indicators of quality apparent
- Students can explain their work, identify strengths and challenges
- Students have experience with multiple assessment strategies
- Students reflect on their own learning

Emphasize Critical Thinking:

- Students use comprehension strategies to unlock text
- Students use higher order thinking strategies
- Students know what high quality work looks like across the disciplines
- Students have powerful conversations with other students that are: related to subject matter, student-led, build collective understanding of a topic

Provide Appropriate Structures to Support Student Learning:

- Model learning strategies
- Students have opportunities to practice: shared practice, guided practice and independent practice
- Students receive immediate, appropriate and comprehensive

B. Best Practice Themes

- More emphasis on active, hands-on learning
- More emphasis on students actively doing, talking, and collaborating
- More reading of whole, original, real books and nonfiction materials
- More deep study of a smaller number of carefully chosen topics
- More emphasis on higher-order thinking; learning each content field's key concepts, principles, and ways of knowing
- More responsibility and choice for students; e.g. picking their own books, writing topics, and team partners; setting goals, keeping classroom records, etc.
- More honoring and modeling of the principles of democracy in school
- More attention to the affective needs and the varying cognitive styles of individual students
- More co-operative, collaborative activity; more sense of the classroom as an interdependent community
- More heterogeneous classes and groups where individual needs are met through inherently individualized activities rather than segregation of bodies into class groups
- More delivery of special help to students in regular classrooms
- More team-teaching by teachers
- More trust in teachers' descriptive evaluation of student growth, including qualitative/anecdotal observation: narrative feedback.

(Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde, 1993. *Best Practice*, Heinema

C. Research Synthesis on Best Basic Instructional Practices (*McREL, 100 studies spanning 30 years*)

The following list identifies the top 10 practices that are associated with improved student learning and performance:

1. *Clearly communicated objectives or understandings*
Not too specific, larger more enduring, adaptable to learners
2. *Regular and Specific Feedback*
Timely is better; corrective and informative
3. *Questions and advance organizers*
Activate prior knowledge; use higher order thinking questions but stay on topic
4. *Cooperative Learning & Small Group work*
Heterogeneous groups best; small, steady diet
5. *Summarizing and structured note-taking*

Organized note taking is best; using notes is key

6. *Practice and Homework used to do so*
Provide feedback in some form; clearly focused
7. *Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition*
Abstract symbolic praise better than tangible rewards
8. *Generating and Testing Hypotheses*
Deductive and discovery lessons; thinking and explaining are key
9. *Identifying Similarities and Differences*
Use of Venn diagram or other such tools helps; student and teacher directed work
10. *Non-linguistic Representations (pictures, charts, etc.)*
Visual representations help with deepen understanding

PART II: Methods, Tools and Approaches

A. Collaborative Learning

1. **Clock Appointments:** The use of the 12 hours on the clock to arrange for up to 12 student discussion partners which are variable and facilitate learning conversations and community-building. (eg; Think-Pair –Share)
2. **Circle of Knowledge:** Small groups brainstorm “what we know”--- around a central question, prompt or topic. Each student in the small group contributes what he/ she knows, marking his contribution on the web with his/her name. This same group can reconvene once the unit is done, to check for new understanding given the same question, prompt or topic.
3. **Literature Circles, Book Clubs or Reading Teams:** This is a small group method seeks to bring students together for discussion around the reading of some common text. Students read independently and prepare to meet with their group for a rich discussion of the text. Preparation varies based on the text (nonfiction vs. fiction), but generally students are asked to think and record as they read in some way. One way is through the use of roles. Four roles offer a nice balance in the nature of contributions:
 - *Discussion Director prepares a list of 2-3 questions to examine the text’s message and content. Students need explicit help in crafting decent questions.*
 - *Passage Master or Literary Guru: Writes down passages they believe are critical, important, moving, puzzling, hilarious, confusing or powerful.*
 - *Illustrator: Draws a sketch or chart, or visual which captures the text in some way they believe is important.*
 - *Connector: Notes connections from the reading to themselves, the world, and other readings. (Email Nancy for actual Role Sheets)*
4. **Jigsaw:** An approach to group work that emphasizes the division of labor so as to insure that each student has a piece of the Jigsaw Puzzle to contribute to the whole. The divisions can be major subtopics within a unit, the responsibility for different readings, parts in a production, or areas of research. In Two Step Jigsaw, each student is charged with becoming an expert on one reading/topic and teaching the members of his/her group. In Three Step, individuals add depth by meeting with others who read the same text or are working on a similar area, to refine their understandings before going back to teach their respective Home Groups. Jigsaw is best used to deepen understanding of a

topic, to apply knowledge in-group presentations, or to create common understanding. Students will need support in learning how to share their information with the others in their small group.

5. **Structural Indexing:** This is a wonderful way to review a recent Unit of study focusing on Key words that are critical concepts or vocabulary terms within your Unit. Students with your help are asked to list the main terms from the Unit of study underway. The 9 most important terms are isolated in one List. (This can also be provided by the Teacher) The students will work in small groups of 3, laying out the 9 words in 3 rows of 3. (3 x 5 cards work or slips cut to size) Then students will create 3 Statements, which reveal their understandings of the Unit's Big Ideas. They must create statements using all 3 words in one row. Students should be encouraged to embellish the statements to increase their validity and completeness. The 3 statements should be built from 3 different rows: one diagonal, one vertical and one horizontal. Class members can rank them for accuracy and completeness or use them for the next day's lesson. They can be used for reflection, whereby students chose one to defend with examples and details.
6. **Discovery Stations:** The teacher creates 5-6 different learning stations in which some information is revealed about the topic under study. Students travel in small groups to each "discovery station" gathering important knowledge and understanding. It is helpful if stations ask students to do different kinds of tasks. Once they finish all stations, then it is best to do some integrative and summarizing activity to pull ideas together. One big question can frame the DS visits. It is helpful to equip students with a recording tool to carry from station to station.

B. Improving Comprehension

1. Try not to ask students to enter a lesson or new topic or reading without getting everyone ready to enter the lesson or text Thinking.
2. Use Before, During and After Strategies for Reading as a steady diet for all reading done in and out of class.
3. Avoid Textbook reading other than as one research source.
4. Avoid having students read aloud in class.

BEFORE READING

1. **Four Corners:** Students are asked to respond to 3 Provocative statements about the topic you are about to study. They must Take A Stand in one of 4 Corners where they are asked to share their Point of View. (NOTE: This can also be done with content review once you have taught a Unit).
2. **Anticipation Guide:** Craft 4-6 True & False statements that reflect information they are about to learn either from a reading, a Video or from your Lecturette. Then ask students to answer the Questions now and share with a partner to compare responses. Then they should either read to find the truth, listen and watch to find the truth or listen to you and make notes on the Truth. Then, they will need to answer the very same questions again, compare with their partner again and get ready for whole class wrap-up.

3. PACA: Prediction matters. Predict. Answer. Confirm. Answer. Give students words, pictures, symbols, or passages from which they try to make predictions about something they will study. They then learn in order to test their Predictions and get the Truth.
4. Word Splash: Provide the class with 10 key terms, which carry the content to be learned. Have them work in pairs to tackle one or two terms. Then, in jigsaw like groups, they are to review the new words before you start the Unit, reading etc.

DURING READING

1. T-Charts, Double Entry Journals, or Open ended response sheets that nudge students to note a passage and then respond to that quote.
2. Marking Up Text using a code system to help readers stay engaged with Text. (See codes I gave to you; e.g.; !, ?, + & - etc.)
3. Sticky Notes or Bookmarking to identify what's to be remembered and discussed.
4. Say Something-Pairs read for 10 then stop and say something about what they read, and so on until done. Note-taking form helps.
5. Power Notes: Open-ended forms like the 3 column: "It says, I say and So what?"

AFTER READING

1. Clock Appointment Meetings to Discuss Text (Also great for easy collaborative talk)
2. Literature Circle Meetings or other small group discussions of Text.
3. Jigsaw Expert Groups Meet and consolidate Big Ideas.
4. Graphic Organizers to organize Information read.
5. Bloom Taxonomy Guide: Apply Bloom's verbs to help students review something read or studied.
6. Save the Last Word Sum it Up: – Students sit in groups of 4 to 6. Everyone reads a chapter or article independently, marking sentences with which they disagree or agree, or to which they want to add or delete something, or otherwise generate a response in them. Once everyone is done, the first person reads one of his marked sentences without offering any response to it. In turn, each member of the group makes a response to that line. The originator of the statement, the first student, makes his response only after everyone else has contributed, thereby leaving the last word for him. Once someone has used a sentence from the reading, it may not be used again as the originating sentence.

C. Vocabulary

1. Adding Visuals to Word Study or Verbal and Visual Word Association (VVWA) Divide page into 4 quadrants. Each quadrant features another way to interpret the word including a Visual box where students can draw out the word's meaning. This should be used with Terms that denote big concepts such as Manifest Destiny or Mitosis.
2. Zoom in-Zoom Out: Take large concept, or persons or events or ideas endemic to your UNIT. Example: Harriet Tubman or The Theory of Evolution and then have students examine that concept from many Lenses. You can ask that they compare it with others, give details, connect it to other events etc. The zoom in & out is only one way to look at its guts (zoom in) and step back and look at it from the broader world. (Zoom out)

3. Semantic Feature Analysis: This is yet another way to help student's master terms with a unit. Words are stacked up in a grid and students have to record the features that are associated with the word. It is intended to help them compare an contrast similar terms (e.g.; varying rocks and minerals, chemicals, animals, characters, famous people)

4. Word Splash-Take 15-20 key words from a reading or your unit. Be sure to include some familiar words. Have students meet in groups of 3 to build a framework using all the words. They need to write these words on small slips of paper. The task is for them to cluster the words by likenesses and label the clusters. Some call this List-Group-Label. This is a conceptual map of words.

5. The 5 C's of Vocabulary Instruction

Robin L. Angotti and Anthony T. Smith

"Why are there so many words in Math?: Planning for Content-Area vocabulary"

(See NCTM Math Lesson Illumination: On Fire)

1. Concepts

Draw key words to address from the big concepts in your lessons that are central to understanding what it is you will teach.

2. Content

Draw teir 3 words or subject specific words that are unfamiliar to most students.

3. Clarify

Choose 2 words from both of the above lists and strategize how you will teach these words before you begin the lesson.

4. Cut

Reduce your total list or 5-6 power words for a unit with 40 or ore words identified.

5. Construct

During the lessons, help students build meaning around these 5-6 words.

D. Engagement & Differentiation Tools

1. Multiple Intelligence Survey: Students complete a survey, which helps them identify their own strengths. This can be used to foster self-awareness and can be monitored all year. It can be used for students to learn about one another and build a more collaborative culture in the classroom. It can be further be used to help teachers know students better as learners and to plan for modifications and lesson designs accordingly. Finally, students can learn about the theory as they study human nature, diversity and intelligence. (Email Nancy for original survey)
2. Tic Tac Toe Menus: This is simply a way to offer greater choice when students are asked to complete a Project or a Performance Assessment. The middle square can be required of all with students choosing 3 in a Tic Tac Toe row. Think of this as a kind of Menu of choices. Point values can be assigned as desired. A holistic rubric can be applied.
3. Discovery Stations: Creating stations in your room is one powerful way to get kids up, moving, thinking, & discussing. Stations can be brief encounters with areas of related content introduced with various entry points, or longer encounters with related content. Each station should accommodate no more than a group of 4-5, or ask students to work in pairs while at their Station Stop. Stations should seek to accommodate different learning styles and reading levels. They should be preceded by teacher led instruction and followed by closure or reflection or review.
4. R.A.F.T.-Design a menu of learning, project or assessment tasks from which students will choose. Use the R.A.F.T to delineate the variety. Vary the Role, Audience, Topic and Format.

D. Writing To Learn

(Daily writing informal writing improves students learning and future formal writing)

1. Many Ways to Use a Notebook, Learning Log or Journal: There are many ways students can engage in Think-Write (-far too many versions to list here). Suffice it to say that thinking on paper is a good use of student time, especially when the Primary Focus is the Thinking about ideas, and not only writing for Public eyes. Double entry or Two Column writing, sticky notes, bookmarks with questions, Venn diagrams etc all represent this rich area for teaching. Consider this an excellent tool for deeper understanding.
2. Summarizing: There are many ways to have Kids “Sum Up” what they have learned, read etc. Exit Slips (or Ticket Out the Door) are one of a much longer list. (See Handout on Summarizing Tools)
3. Write-Around: This is a writing tool for summarization and formative assessment. It encourages reflection, thinking and attention to big ideas. It also can be thought of as written communication or note writing. The teacher creates one prompt and then each student as a member of a small group of 4, writes a response on his/her paper, with his/her name in the left-hand margin. The teacher monitors time, and calls halt. Students pass their papers to the person to their right, and then continue to write while also responding to what their neighbor has written. This continues in short writing spurts until each writer gets his/her paper back. Teachers can collect and get a great read on the groups’ thinking.
4. Stop and Write: During any lessons, it is helpful to have students stop and write at intervals highlighting key ideas, key words, key questions and so on... as needed. These must be used later on however to be rich fuel for learning.
5. Daily Lesson Logs-Students respond to prompt or question each day or several times each week.

E. Assessment Tools

BEFORE

1. Pre-assessments: There are many ways to get a quick read on your student's readiness to learn new material. The key message here is of course, don't start without knowledge to inform your plans. The simplest means of assessment albeit not the richest, is a paper and pencil quiz or test. Some teachers find it very useful to give students the actual unit test before they begin. Why not? If this represents what you hope students will learn, this should be a great source of information about what they know & don't know.
2. Four Corners: This is one you should know by now, but it makes for a great start to any new content area unit. Students are asked to respond to 3 Provocative statements about the topic you are about to study. They must Take a Stand in one of 4 Corners where they are asked to share their Point of View. (NOTE: This can also be done with content review once you have taught a Unit). It is wise to ask students to do a quick write before they take a stand. It is helpful to have them to talk it out with 1, then add 2 and then whole class.
3. K-W-L or Circle of Knowledge: Small groups brainstorm "what we know"--- around a central question, prompt or topic. Each student in the small group contributes what he/ she knows, marking his contribution on the web with his/her name. This same group can reconvene once the unit is done, to check for new understanding given the same question, prompt or topic.

DURING

1. Exit Slips: A quick way to gather a read on students' progress is to use Exit Slips or Ticket out the Door. The key to success with this is to craft a meaningful prompt that is clearly aligned with the days' or week's lesson. Usually these are short and focused however you can opt for a longer exit slip. Try the 3-2-1 version. Ask students for 3 critical pieces of information they believe every one should know, 2 connections they can make from the lessons to life and 1 word that is a critical vocabulary word for that week.
2. Check-In Cue Cards. Students place their name on one side of a paper and then rate their understanding on the other side as 1-2-3, with one being not confident with content to 3 being really confident with content.
3. BackMapping: Metacognitive work improves understanding. Have students create a visual map of what you have done to learn about x. The maps should show learning activities and content and concepts learned.
4. Fist to 5: Quick read on the room when you ask students to give you a fist for *no clue* to 5 for *I get it*.