Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, October 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

Small Group Instruction: What are the Rest of the Kids Doing?

This year, Krista and I (Dana) are focused on effective teaching strategies, including **workshop** teaching (last month's topic) and **small-group** instruction. Meeting students where they in small groups works in every content area. We think it's gotten kind of a bad rap, but when done well, it's a **game-changer**. Last month, Krista set the stage with her information on the workshop model, which is firmly based on utilizing small-group instruction. This month, I am going to attempt to help with the age-old question, "If I am working with a small group, ***what are the rest of the kids doing?"***



My answer is **Learning Centers**. When you need a focused time with a small learning group, you want children who are not working with the teacher doing work that is worthwhile and engaging. I've heard teachers call learning centers "old school." Yes, learning centers have been around for several years, for good reason. They work. Many may have tried worksheets or more screen time to "keep kids busy." But that strategy misses one key component: students know it's "busy work," and they bring little passion to their tasks.

Learning centers are areas located around the classroom that focus on independent or collaborative learning tasks. They are meant to encourage students to focus on a topic of choice and engage in their work.

Teachers have many options for learning centers. To create successful learning centers, consider the themes you are studying, the topics your students need and enjoy, and the materials you have in your classroom. Here are a few examples:

- Art Center - A collection of interesting art materials, including a variety of paper, markers, paint, glue, a recycling box with odds and ends collected from other projects and home (think toothpaste boxes, paper rolls, Styrofoam pieces), colored pencils, buttons, and fabric.
- Book Center - Bookshelves with books (ideally including ones you have read aloud to the students) in bins or displayed, labeled, and easy to locate; paper and pencils; pillows; and a few stuffed animals to create an appealing, cozy space.
- Writing Center- A variety of writing paper, lined and unlined, pencils, pens, several styles of dictionaries and thesauruses, letter tiles, erasers, a box of old greeting cards, blank cards, index cards, blank books, and writing space that accommodates the number of children that will work in this area.
- Math Games - A variety of math games, decks of playing cards, Unifix cubes, number boards, math books, paper, and pencils.

- Science Center - Collections of natural items, including rocks, acorns, leaves, bird's nest, non-fiction science books, paper, colored pencils and pencils, muffin tins for sorting activities, balance scales, magnifying glass, and collections of insects, flowers, and seeds.
- Building Center - A set of unit blocks, Legos, and other building materials; books with pictures of architecture; grid paper; and pencils.

I don't recommend "activity-type" tasks; instead, pull together materials in the room to encourage student creativity and independence, where the students create the goal and purpose. The key is to organize materials in a way that makes sense and lets children clean up easily.

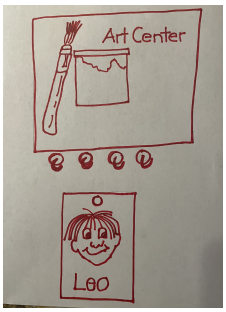


Consider workspaces for small groups of children. A writing center needs table space, while building centers work best on a small carpet with materials stored on shelves. Also consider the number of spaces you need in the centers to accommodate the children who will be working there while you work with a small group.

Once you decide which centers you will offer, think about how to manage time when students work independently in learning centers. The management process I propose will allow students to choose and commit to their work.

Choice and Commitment

Choice is powerful, but lately, I seldom see students allowed to make choices during the school day. **Choice is motivating.** When we are asked to make a choice, whether it is what dressing to have on a salad at a restaurant or where you will choose to work, once you declare your choice, you tend to make it work. **Choice is empowering.** It tells us you can make decisions and follow through on a project.



You will need a learning center planning board. I like to use a magnetic whiteboard. I make a small sign for each center. You can take a picture of the learning center or an icon to represent the area—for example, a picture of a paintbrush and jar of paint for the art center. Print the name of the center on the sign. Below each sign, put magnetic hooks to represent the number of spaces allowed in the center. If the art center has four chairs at a round table, put four hooks below the picture of the art center sign. Hang all the center signs with the number of hooks below where it is clearly visible and the children can reach them. Hang a picture of yourself and the number of hooks to represent the children you will be working with at your small-group table. Also, make cards with a picture of each child. (Many teachers have electronic slides that show students the center choices. If you have this, make sure the students can still manipulate their own choice, moving their icon as needed.)

Begin the time when you will be working with small groups by placing the pictures of the children that you will start your first small group with under the picture of you. These students have a "heads-up" that they will begin with you in a small instructional group. Gather the students in front of the planning board and review which students will start with you. Then have each child take turns choosing where they will work today.

This is the commitment part. When we commit, we tend to follow through. Commitments are even more powerful when you declare them aloud to your teacher and classmates. In my experience, children rarely make commitments about their work in school because it is always assigned.

I ask two questions of each child. Where would you like to work today? And what do you plan to do? Here are some examples of the short exchange I may have with students during this process:



Me: “Where would you like to work today?”

Child: “I want to go to the Art Center.”

Me: “Is there space in the Art Center?”

Child: “Yes”

Me: “What work do you plan to do today at the Art Center?”

Child: “I’m going to make a card for my mom. It’s her birthday.”

Me: “I can’t wait to see what you design for your mom.”

Me: “Where would you like to work today?”

Child: “I want to go to the Building Center.”

Me: “Is there space in the Building Center?”

Child: “Yes, but I don’t know what I want to do.”

Me: “You have been reading a book about farms. Could you do something with your interest in farms at the Building Center?”

Child: “I could build a farm.”

Me: “That sound interesting and I have a collection of farm animals that I’ll bring you to help with your farm.”

A note about what you may have noticed in these short exchanges: I use the term “work” for their efforts in learning centers. It may look like play, but it is work, and I want to reinforce that with my students. For children, **work and play** are the same, but I consider time in learning centers as working time, and I want to elevate that thought with my students.

As the process continues, each child hangs their card on the hook under the learning center they choose. The planning board makes the choices clear. As spaces fill, they may have to consider another option. That’s real life too.

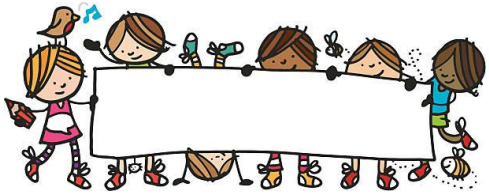
Early in the year, and depending on your students' age, this process takes a few minutes to complete, but once they know how it works, students will begin to think about their choices and be prepared to discuss them.

Once everyone has committed, you will gather with your first small group. These groups can be flexible and likely will last about 20 minutes. When you are finished with the group, take them to the planning board. Pull the cards of the students you will work with next and place them under your

picture. Call those students to clean up their learning center and then go through the commitment process with the students who just finished your group.

This is also a chance to quickly visit students working in learning centers. Remind them of their commitment and acknowledge when they change. Make a quick suggestion or help work out other issues before you begin with your next small group. You may find a child that, for whatever reason, needs or wants to change to a different center. Take that child to the planning board and, depending on available space, go through the process of committing to a new learning center with different work.

To honor their commitment to their work and keep them working each day, gather the students at the end of the session for a quick follow-up. I call this meeting a **Review Time**. This is when you ask students about their work. Questions like: “Did your plans change? Did you have help with your plan? Or my favorite question, “After your work today, what will you do tomorrow?” Commitments work but only if it is clear someone will follow up. Otherwise, if you're asked to commit and no one asks how you did, you won’t bother making a real commitment next time.



Students need time to follow their interests, write what they want, read what they want, and create what they want, not just play games, but make up their own games, creations, inventions, books, and more. Have you noticed that when students are asked what their favorite time of the school day is, they often say lunch or recess? Those are the times when they control what they do, what they talk about, and where they go at school. But isn’t a constructivist classroom a children’s **workshop**?. What if we added a few minutes of center time each day where students could practice making decisions, committing to the task, and sharing their progress? Center time might become their favorite part of the day because children feel the agency to do work that **matters** to them.

Small Group Instruction: What are the Rest of the Kids Doing? Reflection Questions:

How could learning centers of choice enhance your student’s ability to make independent decisions and enjoyment of school?

What types of learning centers would be valuable to your students’ age and interests?

We want to hear from you!

Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Small Group Instruction: What are the Rest of the Kids Doing?,** *here.*

Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: My kids just don't make very good choices sometimes. What do you suggest?



A: The best way for your students to learn to make good choices is to offer choices, make sure they understand them, and set parameters. In work at learning centers, as I described in this newsletter, if a choice is poor, don't offer it. Choices need to be clear, and it helps to emphasize that they "get to choose." I often tell children, "It's your choice." Or, "It's your work." This takes me out of the equation.

Here is an example: At a neighborhood party, I noticed a grandfather and grandson in a power struggle over what the little boy would eat. The grandfather kept saying, "Put something on your plate," and "You have to eat something." The boy looked miserable. I said to the grandfather, "Do you mind if I try?" "No," he said. "I am getting nowhere." I took a paper plate and napkin from the serving area and handed them to the boy. Then I pointed to a tray of burgers and hot dogs and said, "Hamburger or hot dog?" He said, "Hot dog." "Bun or no bun?" "No bun," he said. "Mustard or ketchup?" I asked. "Ketchup." "Chips or grapes?" "Chips," he said, and walked away carrying his plate, looking very pleased with himself. Afterward, all grandpa said was, "Impressive."

It works much the same at school. Make the choices limited and clear. Accept the results no matter what. (I might have preferred he pick grapes, but I offered chips, and he took me up on it.) Kids get better at making choices when they are allowed to make them. Think about your school day. When can students make choices? Lunch? Independent reading or writing? Recess activities? Learning centers? Math games? Make sure you offer choices throughout the day. Keep reinforcing that they are making the choice. It's their preference.

Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Reading and Writing Across Multiple Books

Reading and writing across two or more books, poems, or articles increases opportunities for knowledge building, thinking, rich discussion, vocabulary, and comprehension within our students. This teaching strategy is not new but is gaining traction for increasing writing practice and applying isolated literacy skills to authentic reading and writing in the literacy block or literacy workshop.

See the next page for a few engaging multicultural picture books about FALL.



We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga

By Traci Sorell

A warm look at a full year of modern Native American life, detailing how a community maintains active, everyday practices of gratitude across every changing season.

Cherokee Nation

- Native American modern traditions
- Autumn new year rituals
- Seasonal community gratitude

Thanking the Moon: Celebrating the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival

By Grace Lin

A Chinese-American family prepares a nighttime picnic under a bright autumn moon, sharing a feast of mooncakes, warm tea, and glowing paper lanterns.

Chinese-American

- Mid-Autumn Moon Festival
- Chinese lunar calendar holidays
- Multi-generational family bonding

Two New Years

By Richard Ho

A multicultural household honors two unique new years—one marked by autumn apples and honey, and the other by late-winter red envelopes and lanterns.

Chinese-Jewish / Blended Heritage

- Autumn Rosh Hashanah traditions
- Lunar New Year practices
- Harmonizing dual family heritages

Grandma's Tiny House

By JaNay Brown-Wood

Neighbors, friends, and a giant extended family pack tightly into a small home to cook, crowd the tables, and share a lively autumn feast.

African-American

- Large multi-generational family gatherings
- Fall harvest feasts and community cooking
- Early childhood counting rhythms

Let It Fall

By Maryann Cocca-Leffler

A simple, poetic look at seasonal transitions featuring a highly diverse group of neighborhood kids experiencing crunchy leaves, apple picking, and pumpkin patches.

Inclusive / Diverse Representation

- General autumn weather themes
- Multicultural peer groups in nature
- Universal seasonal changes

Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit here!

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