“Blocking” Student Learning: Choreography in the Classroom

In the world of theater, directors “block” the movements of their actors on stage – where they move, when, and how. In a sense, we do this in our classrooms. When we first ventured into four days of block schedule at SMA (how many years ago?) many of us went through professional development on how to best utilize the longer periods of time. Now, as we use Friday, rather than Monday, as our short block, it might be helpful to revisit best practices for long block, and see our Friday short periods in a new light. Some ideas will be very familiar to some of you; please remember that we have many teachers newer to block scheduling and that this may be “old hat” to you, but a quick review won’t hurt any of us! In addition, we offer a number of activities you may not have tried, or haven’t tried for a long time. As well, we will offer updated digital tools that will fit in nicely to the theoretical framework and/or replace a non-digital strategy.

**Chunking It Out:** Think of dividing the block into three periods, in our case, three 25 minute activities (5 minutes for intro, wrap up, etc.). Of course this is not a hard and fast rule; with younger students you might want four activities. With older ones, two may be sufficient some days. An intro activity of your choice as you take roll is always great...

**Sample Agenda 1: Rule of 3’s**

- **Activity 1:** direct instruction, lecture, reading, conversation practice
- **Activity 2:** small group work that derives from Activity 1: discussion, practice, answering questions, journaling.
  or a switch to other ongoing work: long term project, skill development, reviewing homework
- **Activity 3:** scaffolding for homework with information, skills, practice to prepare for next task (i.e. vocabulary in a reading assignment, review of a past skill that is needed for problem sets, etc.); peer review of work product; whole class discussion

Needless to say the agendas may vary widely with your individual disciplines. Math likely may start with a review of homework, not a reading! Modern Languages may use more rapid paced activities in a first or second year class. The point is to divide the class period into “chunks” that make sense and break the period up. Your expertise and experience will guide you into the divisions that work best for your classes. And of course sometimes magic happens and a 25 minute activity is so engaging and students so absorbed that you simply follow it!

**Other organizational patterns:**

**Sample agenda 2: Jigsaw**

Students work in teams. Each member of a team chooses one reading, one topic, one problem, or one topic, depending on the class.

- 10+ minutes: introduce process and organization. Divide students by lettering or numbering off.
- 25 minutes: students meet in assigned groups to read or work and discuss key ideas, solutions, principles, etc. Group 1 reads reading 1. Group 2 reads reading 2....Or - Group 1 goes over solutions to questions 10-12. Group 2 tackles questions 13-15, etc.
- 25 minutes: students reconvene in home groups (one or two “experts” per team) to review learning. For example, students solving problems A and B meet with group members who solved problems C/D, E/F. Each member teaches key idea, answers questions or raises questions!
- 20 minutes: teacher reconvenes whole class to reinforce main ideas, answer questions, acknowledge questions raised for next discussion, connect to next assignment, etc.
Sample Agenda 3: Research Topic or Problem

Introduce the goals and procedures for the period. Discuss protocols and options.

40 minutes: students research individually or in pairs/groups on the topic or problem.

15 minutes: Students reflect in writing on what they have learned, what questions have been raised, and what they need to know/do next.

10 minutes: Students share their reflections with others (small groups) asking for feedback and suggestions on their next steps. Teacher moves from group to group listening and offering ideas.

10 minutes: Given input from students and group feedback, teacher recapitulates common threads and directions and sends students away with goals to complete for next class. These may, of course, be part of a larger calendar of a long term project.

The previous ideas have many variations of course. They are meant to be possible templates to use and tweak for your own classes. Next, are ideas for fine tuning the block.

Ideas for Openers, Prereading, or Starting a New Topic.

1. Carousel Brainstorming:
   a. Generate questions or a problem on a topic and write each on a separate piece of paper.
   b. Divide students into groups of 5 or fewer. Each group gets a set time, i.e. 2-3 minutes to write ideas at each question station.
   c. At the last question station, have the group there select the top 3 ideas from that station to share with the class.
   d. Tech variation for discussions: Students to post responses or quick writes on a Schoology discussion for sharing with the class.

2. Essential Questions:
   a. Create one or two essential questions – large, overarching questions to guide a unit. Have students do a quick write/journal on the questions. Follow this with a quick sharing of ideas if appropriate.

   b. Visual variation: If you would like to create more flexibility for students responding to a question or prompt, give students the option of creating visual or multi-media representations of their ideas using collage apps, art apps, infographic tools, or even just in Notability.
3. Use a YouTube video, a song, a visual, a podcast, an excerpt from a contemporary news story, a weird problem etc. to pique interest in a new unit. No doubt you have a backlog of ideas here!

4. Pre-reading Activity: KWL

K - What I know
W – What I want to know
L – What I learned (to be completed later)
Can do this individually, or in small groups. It can help set purpose or review for a quiz

Other Tech Variations for Opening Activities

1. Tech for oral conversations: For a “walkie-talkie” activity, use apps like Voxer to allow students to send audio messages back and forth. Again, this is a great option for world languages classes and collaborative homework assignments.

2. Selfie Openers: Ask students to post a selfie with an inspirational line of the day, or to post an inspirational image/quote/article/photo to Schoology for everyone to share.

Ideas for group or paired questioning, discussion, and other midstream activities. Many can be used or adapted to act as formative assessments.

1. Reciprocal Questioning:

Students are divided into small groups, each getting a reading, or a portion of a reading from a longer text. Each group develops discussion questions directed toward the teacher. They revise and consolidate questions and then try to “stump the teacher.” The teacher answers to model and reinforce learning, especially the process of deeper thinking, elaboration, qualified and non-binary answers.

Tech variation: Have each group create their own Kahoot or Jeopardy game to share with the class or with the teacher.

2. Vote with your feet:

Identify a somewhat controversial topic or one in which students disagree related to the course of study. This could be anything from the best solution to a math problem to whether babies born in the US of immigrant parents should have citizenship. Choose a Yes/True..... No/False.... And Undecided region of the classroom. Have students move to that place. Give students time to discuss their opinions. Those with a position should be ready to defend it with reasoning. Those who are undecided must think of pertinent questions to ask that will help them decide. Then establish your protocol for going forward: Groups get 4 minutes each to present their case. The Undecideds get 4 minutes of questioning to each group. Final statements? Then students vote again with their feet – undecideds moving toward a group, perhaps, but others are also free to change sides. This can get heated and a bit “active” (see chaotic) but gets students very engaged in authentic reasoning.
Quick write variation for writers: Have students create blogs (either through Schoology or through another free site like Kidblogs) on which they write and post a series of quick writes over the course of the unit. This can add an authenticity to the activity, especially if you ask students to read and comment back on each other’s blog posts.

3. Hot Potato:

Each team has one sheet of paper and each student a different colored pen. The group gets a problem. Student 1 writes the first step of the solution, explains it aloud and passes the paper to student 2. She makes corrections and adds the next step, explaining aloud, and passes the paper on. Process continues until the problem is complete.

Tech for oral conversations: For a “walkie-talkie” activity, use apps like Voxer to allow students to send audio messages back and forth. Again, this is a great option for world languages classes and collaborative homework assignments.

4. Silent Debate:

Students pair off, one pro, one con on a topic. Each pair has one pen and one sheet of paper. Topic statement is given and pro student writes a statement in support of the statement. Con student reads this statement and writes a response against the pro statement. Process repeats several times. At the end, students talk about what arguments were most persuasive and why.

Tech variation: Have the students use a collaborative online space like Padlet, Quip, or Talkboard to engage in the debate. For added fun, suggest or require that the debate be visual rather than written.

5. Socratic Seminar:

Student driven discussion, often with a group of students, fishbowl style.

Audio openers: For classes in which oral conversation is imperative or for individual students who are absent or may have a harder time writing, consider offering the option to create an audio recording instead. These can be created inside Schoology, or in another app and then submitted separately.
6. **Learning Stations:**
   Small groups of students begin at different stations, each with its own task and instructions. They have a set amount of time at that station and then move to the next.

   **Tech variations:**
   a. **QR Codes:** Add QR codes to each station that will take students to websites, instructions, or interactive activities in addition to the other elements at the station.
   b. **Digital Scavenger Hunts:** Create a digital scavenger hunt using QR codes or an app like Klikaklu to send students from station to station to answer questions or perform tasks.

7. **Various random name-calling strategies:**
   a. Music plays while students pass an object around. When the music stops that person must answer a question.
   b. Popsicle sticks or index cards – every student writes her name on a stick or index card. You call on a student as you pull a stick and then that individual is off the hook until you go through the rest.
   c. **Tech variation:** Use an app like Team Shake, Stick Pick, or Random! on your iPad to choose names. Or have a student do it for you!

8. **Posting questions on an inquiry board.**

   Individuals or small groups post questions as they emerge in class. Stop and address the questions when a healthy collection has emerged. Encourage students to propose answers to discreet questions, or use open-ended questions for further discussion.

   **Tech variation:** Use an online collaborative board like Padlet or Google Docs that remains open throughout the week or unit so students can post and answer questions either during or outside class.

9. **Appointment calendar:**

   Using times of day (or seasons or any other designation with the right number of changes!), ask students to fill in their appointment calendar, i.e. find a 2 pm, 4pm, 6pm, 8 pm and 10 pm partner. Then pose a question and ask students to talk about it with their first appointment partner. After your predetermined time, ask them to say goodbye and move to their next appointment for question 2. And so forth and so on. Lots of appointment clock templates on line.

   **Tech variation:** Use a name picker app to quickly create and recreate small random groupings. Airplay or put your iPad under the overhead camera so students can see their new groups. This is especially nice when students don’t know each other well or have a tendency to group with the same people.

10. **Using paper or digital graphic organizers** as a group or in pairs to review text.

    **Tech variations:**
    a. Students use a digital graphic organizer in Notability so they can include typed text, handwriting, colors, shapes, and pictures in their organizer.
b. They create their own! Encourage students to create their own graphic organizers using mindweb apps like Popplet or Corkulous, or drawing/annotation apps like Notability and Skitch. Some infographic tools are also available as apps if they are interested.

11. “Say something”

Students read or perform tasks/problems and stop at an assigned point to discuss their understanding with a partner or in triads. Variation: Quest: stop and an assigned point and ask questions of a partner.

Tech variations:

a. Audio/video Reflecting: Students record their own reading to help them articulate the language or demonstrate understanding using body language. Then they can work alone or with a partner to reflect on their understanding.

b. Listening to the masters: If the content can be included or found in a video, upload it to EdPuzzle and add questions/discussion points to the video where you want students to stop and respond. This is also a great option for flipping your class or for students who are ill or cannot be in school.

12. Bookmarks –

Divide a standard piece of computer paper lengthwise, to create two long “bookmarks.” Attach these to a text. Students can write questions on their reading, or write observations, responses, etc.

Tech variations:

a. Digital discussion: Students post questions or observations on a Schoology discussion stream.

b. Collaborative discussion: 2-3 students share a collaborative space using Padlet or Talkboard. While reading the same piece, they can silently write or draw their questions/observations, then respond to each other. This kind of silent but collaborative activity can be especially effective for quiet students who have a hard time being heard AND for talkative students who need to learn to process a bit more before speaking.

Consider using one or two methods that require movement. Students sit a great deal during the day!

Post Activity/Reading/Lab/Work Activity: Consider the importance of building in reflection time on learning, metacognition activities, those that ask students to think about how and what they learn and how they know what they know, and their capacity to share their learning. These can also serve as formative assessment.

1. Written conversation on text/activity: write to a seat partner or partner about what you learned, what surprised you, what you want to know more about. Exchange “transcripts” and write a response on paper or digitally.

2. Musical chairs

Leave a first note on your iPad about your significant take-away from the learning activity, move around during music reading iPad notes, and stop when the music stops. Carefully read this note and respond.
3. **Most Important Word or Idea**

Identify the most important word, phrase, or idea from a text, lesson, or activity. Explain your choice and its importance, perhaps by writing a tweet length defense.

**Tech variation:** Post it to Schoology. Can also ask them to post it to their own social media accounts and send you a screenshot.

4. **Concentric Circles**

Students form two concentric circles with an equal number of students in each (hopefully). Inner circle faces outer circle. Inner circle students ask the partner from the outside circle a question – a review question, a synthesis question, etc. Partner student answers, and the pair discuss the answer. Then the inner circle moves three students to the right. Outer student asks a new question to her inner circle partner and the process repeats.

5. **Pair-Share (Think-Pair-Share)**

In pairs or trios students consider a prompt related to the lesson, and turn to a partner to discuss.

6. **Exit cards/slips – two sided response**

- Students identify what they learned and what they still don’t understand, or want to understand better.
- Students identify new concepts/ideas they learned and questions they have.
- Students identify Pros and Cons on a topic

**Tech variations:**
- **Digital exit slip:** Use a survey tool like Socrative, SurveyMonkey, Schoology quiz, or Google Form to have students turn in their exit slips.
- **Visual exit slip:** Students take pictures that represent their answers and create a digital collage to turn in using PicCollage.
- **Selfie exit slip:** Students take a fun selfie and add a meaningful quote, inspiring thought, best idea, or question as a comment.
- **Texting exit slip:** Create a Remind account and add all your students to a class. Use it to mass text them a question or request, then have them respond back to you by texting through the Chat feature.
- **Audio exit slip:** Using either the audio feature on Schoology or another app like Voxer, ask students to talk send you an audio message explaining in their own words the questions they have or the most important thing they’ve learned.

7. **Whip Around**

In small groups students each respond to the topic they have been learning/practicing, etc. Each student says something, i.e. what they learned, what they still don’t understand, what surprised them. . .

**Tech variation:** Have students in a small group type questions or comments, then add them to a Quizlet pack. Using one person’s iPad, set the pack to random, then hand the iPad around to each person who randomly gets a question.
8. Revisit Opening Strategy to Identify Growth

Revisit initial answers to Essential Questions in journal form or a sharing activity.

Journal on learning, skill development, on paper or digitally.

Small group discussion on new understandings

Tech variations:
   a. Blogging: Ask students to journal, answer quick writes, etc. each day in a blog instead of on paper. For added collaboration, ask students to read and respond with positive comments or questions to each other’s blogs.
   b. Padlet board: Using Padlet as a class collaborative space, students revisit the essential questions or original understandings.
   c. Multimedia Reflection: Students create a multi-media reflection of their learning (this is particularly useful when they are reflecting on their skills or growth.) They can use any tool as long as they meet the criteria you set. These multimedia reflections usually include visuals, graphics, text, and can even include audio. Great tools for this purpose are ThingLink, Notability, and Adobe Voice.

9. Tech-related formative assessments
   a. Student-created scavenger hunts: Students create their own 30 second videos that have either questions or prompts for other students to use. Tellagami and Adobe Voice are perfect for this. Then have them create QR codes for those videos and post them around the room for their own class (or even better, for the next section coming in!)
   b. Video analysis: Students use a video tool, such as Adobe Voce or iMovie, to demonstrate their understanding of a step-by-step process (e.g., science experiment or a physical movement) or to walk through their analysis of an idea or text. Students can post links to their videos to a Schoology assignment, or share the links with each other.
   c. How to Videos: Students create short how-to or explanatory videos on a topic. This can be useful as a formative assessment or as a review tool. Adobe Voice, Explain Everything and iMovie work for this. But there are lots of fun tools out there to create neat videos. Encourage students share their favorites with the class.
   d. Gameshow style quizzes: Using Kahoot or free online interactive Jeopardy boards, create review quizzes for students. For an added twist, ask students to create the quizzes for each other and post them to Schoology.

So How Do We Use Friday Red Schedules Now? Here are some ideas.

Consider Fridays as a recap day, or a day to catch up with what didn’t get finished earlier!

Go over an assessment that happened earlier in the week, re-teaching or practicing as necessary.

Devise an activity that connects the week’s learning to real world application. Perhaps even set up a Skype call with an expert!

Use the day as an activity bridge to the following week’s activities.

Pair a short lecture with another activity previously listed.
Our goal, quite lofty of course, is to try to provide a variety of learning experiences that help each student find what research psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls a state of “flow,” a state in which one is fully immersed or absorbed in the activity at hand.