

Summary of Instructional Practices

1. Focusing Activities

Active and reflective focusing activities awaken the mind, revitalize and settle the body, increase our capacity to pay attention, and build community.

Examples

- Active: Playful, engaging team-building activities that wake us up and give the community a common goal to work towards (such as Wild River Runs, Ball Toss, and How Many of You. . .)
- Reflective: Writing, drawing, a few moments of silence, relaxation and breath work, creative expression, and mindfulness practices (such as journaling on a prompt or quote, progressive relaxation, and feelings wheel)

2. Symbolic and Creative Expression Activities

Symbolic and creative expression activities give students opportunities to know themselves and each other through a “third thing”—a symbol, metaphor, or image that expresses something they are feeling, thinking, or experiencing in their lives or in relation to content. Symbolic and creative expression develop critical and abstract thinking skills and allow students to indirectly (and sometimes nonverbally) share feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that might be difficult to speak about in a more direct way.

Examples

- Symbolic objects: Students bring or choose a symbolic object that represents something they are feeling, thinking, or value in their life. This activity can also be used to make content-area connections. For example, ask students to bring or choose an object that best represents a character in a book or a concept in math.
- Creative expression through the arts: Invite students to draw, paint, sculpt, or collage an image that represents aspects of themselves, their goals or hopes for themselves, or a connection they have to the content.
- Focusing activities, such as improv or drama exercises: These activities often involve symbolic and creative thinking.

3. Focused Listening Practices

These practices provide students with opportunities to speak and listen to each other in new ways. In focused listening, the speaker shares on a theme while the listener listens without offering questions, prompts, or feedback to the speaker. For a prescribed period of time (usually thirty seconds to three minutes, depending on age and context), the speaker is invited to share his or her own thoughts, feelings, stories, or wisdom on a particular theme. Then the role of the speaker and listener shifts, so that each person has an opportunity to speak and listen. These practices also foster critical thinking, as students often make new discoveries when they speak to another person without interruption or feedback. Focused listening practices also augment and support other communication practices, such as active listening, nonviolent communication, constructivist listening, and Socratic dialogues.

Examples

- Dyads and triads: Focused listening on a prompt in pairs, trios, or small groups
- Wheel within a wheel: Focused listening in a series of dyads

4. Community Circles and Councils

Community circles and councils offer students a simple and structured format to engage in respectful communication, storytelling, and personal sharing around relevant themes. Students and teachers sit in a circle of chairs and are invited

to speak one at a time on a theme, without interruption. All participants are given the option of “passing” or adding their silence if they do not choose to speak out loud. Depending on the community and context, an object or “talking piece” may be used to designate who the speaker is. Additionally, participants are encouraged to listen and speak openly, honestly, and without judgment and to speak from the “I” perspective.

5. Silence, Solitude, and Reflection

The integration of periods of silence, solitude, and reflection in the classroom cultivates awareness, concentration, intellectual integration, and personal resiliency, giving students a much-needed pause in their day.

Examples

- Golden Moments: One to two moments of silence used throughout the day or to begin and end an activity or lesson or to provide a break when students are unfocused or rowdy
- Solo time: Opportunities for longer periods of silence and solitude in the classroom or in nature
- Reflection: Quiet moments of reflection that can involve stillness, observation, journaling, or drawing

6. Incorporation of Relevant, Developmental Themes

Integrating themes that relate to the developmental stages of young people supports them to feel the relevance of their school experience. Such themes address the transitions students are going through and offer them the opportunity to reflect on their own values, identity, visions, and goals. Additionally, students are invited to make connections between academic work and their personal lives and to engage in multiple-perspective taking—a key critical- and creative-thinking skill.