Learning Center Synergy

Synergy is the power of the team! It is the idea that combined effort produces superior results. Learning centers, once singularly confined to the elementary classroom, capitalize on synergy by placing many resources for learning in one central place.

When connected to the Internet, learning centers engage students in specific activities that are crafted to customize instruction for each student or small groups of students. Today's Web-based learning centers provide systematic, differentiated, small-group instruction by using one link for younger students or a hotlist of links that can be accessed by older students.

Benefits for Educators

Teachers appreciate the benefits of learning centers. "I like to think the students take control of their learning while using a center," said Rhonda Hall, second grade teacher from Port Arthur, Texas. "Center time also frees me to work with other students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups."

The links used for learning centers may be placed in a favorites folder that is customized by subject area, student, or teacher's name. You may also decide to collect links in a hard copy activity sheet, save them in a network shared drive, or add them to your Web page. Some teachers, such as 35-year veteran Mary White of Tahlequah, Oklahoma, save them in a word processing document. White likes this approach because the word processing file can be sent as a file attachment in an email to absent students or students working from home. The file can be updated easily and resaved from year-to-year as links change or become obsolete.

Learning center islands incorporate activities that reinforce previously taught concepts. They also invite students to apply newly acquired skills. Learning center activities include hands-on targeted tasks that align with curriculum and reinforce previously taught skills. The end result from a learning center experience is a deliverable that students create to demonstrate their skill set mastery.

Deliverables may include any number of products created from software such as spreadsheets that can tally data, create budgets, or hold equations. Multimedia slideshows present information accompanied by artwork, scanned drawings, and digital photos. Online hard drives such as the **Kodak Gallery** (www.kodakgallery.com) offer free storage for photos. With photographic gallery Web sites such as **Flickr** (www.flickr.com) anyone can upload their digital photos for viewing. Be sure to check these Web sites against your school filter to see if they display properly before recommending them to kids.

Products may be digital versions of "make and take" manipulatives such as paragraph summaries, poetry, stories, biographies, lists, and data in table formats. Publishing software can be used to create newsletters, brochures, greeting cards, bookmarks, announcements, and "help wanted" advertisements. Graphic organizer software lets students add data to Venn diagrams, make mind maps, and create blueprints or flowcharts.

Web-based learning centers keep students academically engaged in meaningful activities that reinforce, demonstrate, and extend learning. A center can cover a transitional period of

time or be a permanent fixture in your classroom. Setting up a learning center takes just a few minutes when you keep an eye toward the ABCs of setup.

Follow the ABCs of Setup

- **A**ssign a definite work area for the center. This can be a desk with a tri-fold divider or a series of desks clustered together. An inviting poster can signal the purpose of the designated area. Avoid the temptation to encroach on this area when completing other classroom tasks.
- **B**order the center to isolate it. Use a bulletin board, curtain, or poster to anchor the dimensions of a specific learning center. Bordering tools can also be used to hold activity cards, link lists, computer use guidelines, and specific task instructions.
- **C**ollect Web links. Links pertaining to a specific learning center may be collected in a hotlist, favorites file, or desktop shortcut. In general, use only one Web site for the youngest learners. As students grow older, gradually add Web links, one per grade until middle school, when students' attention spans tolerate a lengthier listing.
- **D**efine concrete tasks and clear instructions for computer use. Hall recommends that "teachers really need to think about the objective they would like their students to work on while at the center. I try to spend some time going over the rules with the students and the preferred outcome of each center." Computer rules must be reviewed prior to learning center visitation. These rules need to be posted at the center for reference. Examples of necessary computer use policies include when to save and print and proper care for the center area and the computer itself.
- **E**stablish a backup plan in case technology becomes unavailable. A bulleted list detailing an alternative plan for technology outages is an ideal accompaniment to a learning center. Saving Web sites in an archive will allow access to most sites if the Internet server goes down. To archive a Web site, access the site in Internet Explorer. Choose File/Save As/Web Archive to complete the archive process. An archive folder is a great addition to your computer desktop. This folder's contents may be saved onto a floppy disk or burned to a CD for ready reference by students without Internet access at home.
- **F**ormulate an activity sheet to collect data or a time log to record progress. A hard copy activity sheet or graphic organizer helps keep learning center time goal-directed. For older students, such as those in grades 4–12, information may be collected digitally in a word processing document, spreadsheet, multimedia presentation, database, or graphic organizer file. If your school district has a shared-drive network, students can easily save their work in customized folders.
- **G**ive students the big picture of what they will accomplish at the center. Take a few minutes to have a whole group

discussion regarding your learning center or centers. Use your computer connected to a projector to display the main page of the applicable Web site. Or, consider printing the main page of the Web site on a transparency and display using an overhead projector. Such a display method gives an added visual check so that students know that they have arrived at the correct site.

Learning Center Management

Learning center management involves rotation and time limits. Students should ideally spend only 15–20 minutes at a learning center. Their tasks should be clearly defined and concretely attainable. Collaborative groups work best in classrooms with one to five computers. In classrooms with more than five computers, pairs of students may rotate. Individual rotation of students is best accomplished in permanently established centers.

Students may be assigned to teacher-selected groups in a number of ways. Assign students to groups as they enter the room or group students more formally through alphabetical representation, seating chart order, or by birthday.

Consider using colors to organize students into groups. The colors can represent roles within a group. For example, in each group, red students may be the recorders of information, blue students may be the collectors of resources or mouse clickers, and yellow students may be organizers of materials.

Colors may also be used to define the areas of your classroom into specific learning zones. Blue zones may be for seatwork. The purple zone may incorporate teacher-directed discussion. Yellow zones designate the computer center, and green zones may indicate the project/art area. Brown zones may refer to the quiet reading area. An additional zone may be the pink zone indicating an assessment area. For larger class sizes, add additional sections as needed, such as an extra red or orange zone for seatwork or projects.

Learning center rotation is an important aspect of classroom management. Try this "divide and conquer" method. Take the number of students you have and divide them by the number of computers in your classroom. Or, if you have one computer in your classroom, divide your number of students by three, which will represent the number of students per group at the computer. Students move from zone to zone upon hearing music prompts, teacher request, or soft chimes.

Types of Web-Based Learning Centers from A to Z

On the next page is an alphabetical listing of Web-based learning centers to consider for your students. Add your own titles or themes. Interject your own Web site favorites. The units and ideas in this issue of the *Connected Newsletter* are also great launching points for learning centers. Aim to introduce one new center idea either as a permanent addition to your class or as a seasonal variation.

Center Name	Web Site Link	What To Do
All About Me	**Trackstar: Day You Were Born** urlic.com/1h1	Complete an online scavenger hunt.
Biography Central	**The Biography Maker** www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm	Follow steps to write a biography.
Career Investigation Clues	**ABC Careers** www.hardin.k12.ky.us/Upton/NewFolder/ABCCareers/index.htm	View the PowerPoint and take the survey.
Drawing Lessons	**Draw and Color with Uncle Fred** www.unclefred.com	Practice drawing.
Equation Station	**Math Clips** www.kyrene.org/schools/brisas/sunda/math/math_clips.htm **AplusMath** www.aplusmath.com/Flashcards/	Create your own flashcards.
Flat Stanley Project	**Flat Stanley** www.flatstanley.com/	Make a travelogue or map of places Flat Stanley visits.
Gee Whiz Geometry	**Gallery of Interactive Geometry** www.geom.uiuc.edu/apps/gallery.html	Use activities to illustrate geometry concepts.
History Now!	**History Channel** www.history.com/ **History Matters** historymatters.gmu.edu/	View videos of historic events and rewrite historical document text.
Internet Field Trips	**The OOPS Virtual Field Trip Page** oops.bizland.com/vtours.htm	Take a trip and write about it.
Journaling Center	**Refdesk.com** www.refdesk.com	Complete daily journal entries.
Keyboarding Practice	**Dance Mat Typing** www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing/	Keep track of words per minute.
Light Is Amazing	**Light Is Amazing** oops.bizland.com/light.html	Try an online scavenger hunt.
Musical Melodies	**Music Hall** edgate.com/musichall/educator/	Study composition and music appreciation.
News of Note	**Front Pages of World Newspapers** www.oops.bizland.com/frontpage.html	Compose a daily log entry.
Opinion or Fact	**Fact and Opinion** www.mrsdell.org/gr2/factopinion.html	Distinguish fact from opinion.
Punctuation Station	**The Grammar Gorillas** www.funbrain.com/grammar/	Compose sentences with grammar mistakes.
Quiet, Please	**Storyline Online** www.storylineonline.net	Illustrate the story as it is being read.
Ready! Set! Research!	**VirtualSalt** www.virtualsalt.com/	Learn powerful ways to find information.
Spelling Bee	**Harcourt Brace Spelling** www.harcourtschool.com/menus/harcourt_brace_spelling.html	Complete a game scoring log.
'Tis the Season	**Enchanted Learning** www.enchantedlearning.com	Investigate activity sheets, games, and puzzles.
Under Construction	**Playing with Time** www.playingwithtime.org/	Create a sequencing chart.
Vocabulary	**Vocabulary University** www.vocabulary.com/	Complete the learning games and keep a drill and practice log sheet.
Weather Wonderland	**Extreme Weather** harcourtschool.com/activity/extreme/html_docs/Weather.html **Weather Brains** www.weatherbrains.com/	Keep a weather temperature tally sheet.
XPeditions	**National Geographic: Xpeditions** www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/	Explore activities and lesson plans.
Your World	**Photo Story 3 for Windows** www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory	Make a photographic journal.
Zoomania!	**WhoZoo** www.whozoo.org	Complete an animal biography or design a habitat.

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