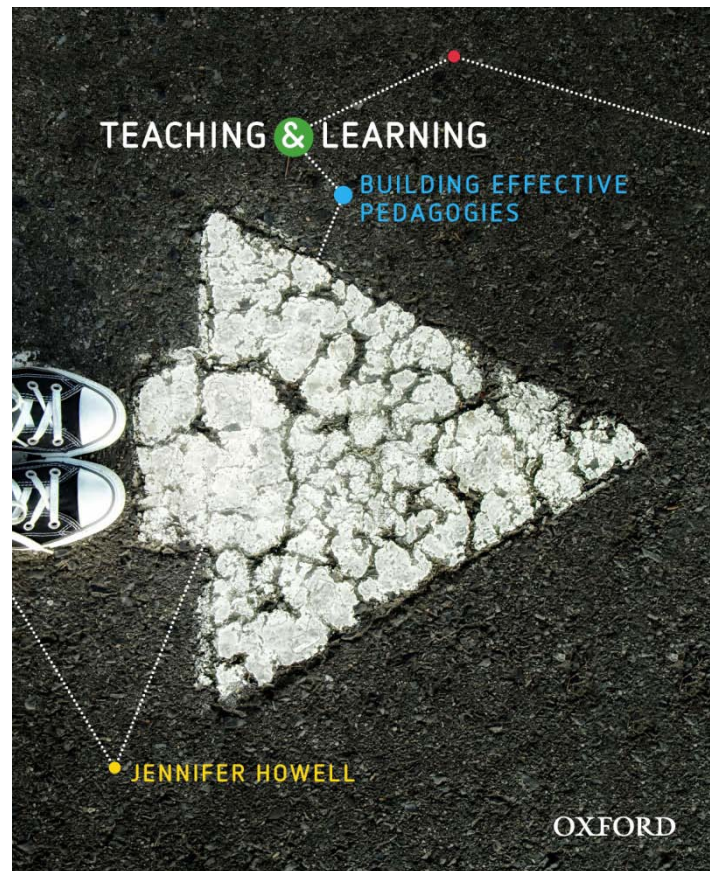


Teaching & Learning: Building Effective Pedagogies

Planning Toolkit

Understanding Your Students



Jennifer Howell

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Understanding Your Students

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with understanding the complexity of classes of learners and how to best meet their needs. There are many aspects that help us to create a positive learning environment, and this chapter focuses upon strategies, tips and ideas that will help you achieve this. It includes discussion on inclusion and diversity; some ideas for setting up your classroom, seating plans and your teacher's desk; tips on how to learn the names of your students; and some practical strategies for building and maintaining the motivation levels of your class.

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Talking about difference

Sometimes it's difficult to ask people about difference or even talk to them about it because you are unsure which terms to use. You do not want to cause offence or upset people, and this makes it hard to know where to begin or what to say.

Tone and body language

The first thing to realise is that your tone is very important when asking questions or initiating a conversation about difference. Here are some other suggestions:

- Don't be patronising—difference does not mean inferiority or being lesser in any way.
- Don't slow down—slowing your speech indicates that the other person is slow or has difficulties in understanding, which causes embarrassment and discomfort. If you suspect there might be language issues or you are unsure about an individual's ability to understand, select simple words and phrases and avoid complex or difficult-to-pronounce terms.
- Your tone should be friendly, open and natural, and your body language should support this. Don't sweep your eyes up and down, and don't focus on their difference if it is obvious.
- Make friendly, natural eye contact. Smile and be welcoming.

Language and terms

When determining what language to use, the following tips may help:

- Take your cue from the individual. How do they talk about their difference? What words or terms do they use?
- Avoid correcting people mid-sentence. For second-language speakers this is quite off-putting. Instead, model the correct way of pronouncing or saying something in your reply after they finish speaking.
- Ask them directly. State upfront that you are not sure or would like to know more about them, and ask them to explain. For example, if you have a Muslim student who wears a headdress you might open with: 'Susan, I see you wear a headdress, but I have seen other Muslim women wearing a full dress or nothing at all—what is the difference?' It's an opening to a conversation that can help you to understand that student and their differences more clearly.
- Ask the family or parents how they refer to the difference—this is particularly important when concerned with a learning disability or impairment. You want to support the family in their approach rather than interfere with any strategies they might be adopting.
- Ask other teachers—many of your colleagues will have ideas or approaches to share.

Avoiding gender roles and stereotyping

Being conscious of the strategies you use in the classroom is important and you need to be aware of any gender roles or stereotyping you may be perpetuating. Adopting some of the following strategies can improve your practice in this area:

- *After you ask the class a question, pause.* Waiting a moment gives everyone a better chance to answer.
- *Bring everyone into classroom discussions.* Don't wait for students to raise their hands—be proactive and ask individual students (particularly those who are quiet) what they think. Give them time to develop their thoughts and if they talk slowly, be patient. The more they speak and feel comfortable doing it, the smoother their presentation will be.
- *Use friendly examples and metaphors that are balanced between genders.* Students are naturally more interested in subject matter if they are familiar with or interested in it. Balance your use of traditionally male-oriented metaphors and examples with female ones (for example, use netball as well as football).
- *Supplement male-biased textbooks* whenever possible with books that focus on girls or present a female perspective.
- *Assign female-centric class projects.* A few ideas: famous women, the suffrage movement, gender stereotyping, and women's contributions in particular fields (such as science, the arts or aviation).
- *Encourage girls to take risks.* Boys learn that they can succeed by trying out possible solutions, even if they make mistakes. When girls are praised and rewarded for venturing into new mental territory (as opposed to for being neat and well-behaved) they strengthen their self-reliance.
- *Use gender-neutral language.* Research shows that when children hear male-biased phrases like 'All men are created equal' they don't picture a co-ed group. One way to add balance is to use the generic third person: 'they', 'them', 'us'.
- *When possible, create welcoming space for girls.* Studies show that boys often monopolise physical space, such as at the classroom computer. Do your students have computer access? Set aside times when girls have first dibs.
- *Take sexual harassment seriously.* Teach students the significance of harassment, the importance of eradicating it, and how they can respond if harassed. Don't concede that bad behaviour is OK because 'boys will be boys'.

Source: based on www.deebest.com/Teachertips.html

Inclusion in the classroom

How to be inclusive on prac

A lot of inclusion starts with the individual teacher; their experiences, beliefs and assumptions. Being mindful when planning will help you to have an inclusive approach to teaching and planning. Use some of the following approaches to help you clarify this process:

- Reflect on your practice by asking yourself the following questions:
 - How might your own cultural-bound assumptions influence your interactions with students?
 - How might the backgrounds and experiences of your students influence their motivation, engagement and learning in your classroom?
 - How can you modify course materials, activities, assignments and/or exams to be more accessible to all students in your class?
- Incorporate diversity into your overall curriculum.
- Intentionally create a safe learning environment by utilising ground rules.
- Be proactive in connecting with and learning about your students.
- Utilise a variety of teaching strategies, activities and assignments that will accommodate the needs of students with diverse learning styles, abilities, backgrounds and experiences.
- Use universal design principles (more on this below) to create accessible classes. For example, present information both orally and visually to accommodate both students with visual or auditory impairments in addition to students with various learning preferences.
- When possible, provide flexibility in how students demonstrate their knowledge and how you assess student knowledge and development. Vary your assessments (for example, incorporate a blend of collaborative and individual assignments) or allow choice in assignments (for example, give students multiple project topics to choose from, or have students determine the weight of each assignment on their final grade at the beginning of the semester).
- Be clear about how students will be evaluated and graded. Provide justifications.

What is universal design for learning?

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners to eliminate unnecessary hurdles in the learning process. This means developing a flexible learning environment in which information is presented in multiple ways, students engage in learning in a variety of ways, and students are provided options when demonstrating their learning.

Universal design for learning is similar to ‘universal instructional design’ (UID), and ‘universal design for instruction’ (UDI). All three advocate for accessible and inclusive instructional approaches that meet the needs and abilities of all learners.

There are three main principles of UDL:

- 1 *Provide options for perception.* Based on the premise that learners access information differently, this principle means providing flexible and multiple ways to present information. For example, using PowerPoint as a visual supplement to your lecture.
- 2 *Provide options for expression.* Since learners vary in their abilities to demonstrate their learning in different ways, this principle means providing flexible and multiple ways to allow students to express their knowledge or demonstrate their skills. For example, providing students an option of writing a final exam or submitting a final assignment.

- 3 *Provide options for comprehension.* Students are motivated to learn for different reasons and vary in the types of learning activities that keep them engaged. This third principle means providing multiple ways for engaging in course activities. For example, engaging students in both group work activities and individual work, as opposed to engaging students only in individual work.

Identifying diversity

As we have seen in Chapter 9, diversity is sometimes not obvious. People do not wear labels declaring their backgrounds, religious beliefs and diversity. Teachers need to understand the backgrounds and diversity of students in their class in order to meet their needs. How can they do this in a way that is supportive, non-confrontational and does not label anyone as being different or special? Here are some ways they can achieve this:

- Ask previous teachers of the class or other teachers currently teaching the students. Collective wisdom helps.
- Look—think—ask *only* if it impacts on their learning. For example, you would not at the start of the school year ask a student if they were poor or had financial problems—it is not relevant and intrusive.
- Be mindful about what you observe in your class—make sure the assumptions you make are correct.
- Flag or sign-post upcoming topics or activities that might be impacted by diversity—students will often come forward and talk to you about anything they can or cannot do. Get into the practice of saying ‘Next week will be doing [x topic]. If anyone wants to speak to me about that or has any concerns, please come and see me’, or something similar and age-appropriate.
- Select content, topics or activities and then carefully scrutinise them—who can do it, who cannot, who is advantaged or is disadvantaged? Make changes based on these conclusions.
- If you have a mix of diversity in your class, try to include these aspects in your yearly content—different religions, cultures and ways of doing can all be incorporated in the lesson content.
- Diversity may be present in preferred learning styles—adopt a framework, such as Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory, and cover all aspects over the course of a program of work to ensure that the diversity of the class is being included.

Learning names

Memorising strategies

Here are some useful strategies to try:

- Spend the first lesson making and decorating name badges. Having students wear these for two to three weeks will help you to learn names.
- Take a class photo then print it on an A3 sheet of paper and ask everyone to write their name above or under the picture. Keep this at the front with you.
- Have a class seating chart, with seats marked on it along with each student's name.
- The name game 1: Have each student introduce themselves to the class and tell everyone about themselves (provide some guidelines), then ask questions, for example, who likes to drink Milo? Who has been to Fiji on holiday? Do this a couple of times and you will start remembering names.
- Make sure you use the students' names as often as you can in the beginning—it will help.
- On your roll, put down some identifiers (nothing personal or rude) for example, John—red curly hair, Suzie—loves horses.
- The name game 2: The students find an adjective to describe themselves, starting with the same letter as their name, for example, 'My name is Sue and I am stupendous'.
- The name game 3: The students say their own name, and then the name of the person they are passing to. Anyone who pauses or makes mistakes is out. 'Tim to Anna, Anna to Chirag', and so on. Ask the students to pass to someone of the opposite sex, to make it harder and to avoid friends passing to friends all the time.

Fun games to use

These games are suitable for early years or primary-aged learners but some could be adapted for secondary school students.

- 1 'Picnic' is a primary school classic (it's best to acknowledge at the beginning that it's a little hokey). Tell students you are going on an imaginary picnic. Ask the students to go around the room introducing themselves by saying their names and a food to bring that begins with the first letter of their name, for example, 'I'm Greg and I'm bringing grapes.' The next person must give the names and foods of everyone who came before, then his/her own name. ('That's Greg and he's bringing grapes. I'm Alice and I'm bringing applesauce.') Instructors usually go last, so that they have to repeat everyone's name.

Variation: Have students bring objects more closely related to the class content; for example, for a literature class students might bring famous authors, or for a class on animal rights they might bring animals.

- 2 Ask students to introduce themselves, giving their names and one unusual bit of information. Choose a common theme: ask students to reveal what food from home they won't miss, the kind of animal they would like to be reincarnated as, or their favorite movie. Again, you might want to have students give information related to the content of the class.
- 3 Ask students to introduce themselves by saying their name and revealing what one (visible) article of clothing reveals about them. For example, 'I'm Robin and these sneakers reveal how boring I am because I wear them every single day', or 'I'm Max and this shirt reveals how organised I am because I knew four days ago that I would be wearing it'.

- 4 Ask students to introduce themselves by telling everyone some part of the story of their names: Were they named after someone? Does their name mean something special? Do they think their name suits them? Is it hard to pronounce? Do they have a nickname, and if so, how did they get it? Do they wish they were called something else?
- 5 In ‘Secret talents’ each student is given an index card. Ask everyone to write on the card something not immediately apparent about themselves: a secret talent or obsession, for example, ‘I know how to juggle’, or ‘When I was ten I demanded that everyone call me “the Fonz”’, or ‘I know all the words to “The Sound of Music”’. Students should not write their names on the cards. Collect the cards and redistribute them, asking students to make sure they don’t receive their own back again (if they do, give them a different one). Next, students should find the person whose card they received, which means everyone will have to get up and move around. When everyone has had time to find the person whose card they have and to talk a bit, they should introduce that person to the group, giving just the name and talent. Select one person to begin the introductions; the person just introduced will introduce the person whose card they received, and so on.
- 6 ‘Personal ads’ is similar to ‘Secret talents’: start by giving each student an index card. Ask them to write a personal ad about themselves, not including any details about personal appearance, just likes/dislikes/hobbies. (You may want to warn them that the cards should be G-rated, something they wouldn’t be embarrassed to let their grandmother read.) Then, redistribute the index cards and ask students to find the person whose card they received, and then have each student introduce their person as in ‘Secret talents’.
- 7 To begin ‘Dopey questions’ ask everyone to stand up. Tell them you will be asking them to get information about three different classmates, and that for each question they should try to find someone whose name they don’t know or with whom they haven’t spoken much. They should ask the first person for three things that are always in his/her refrigerator. Allow a few minutes for conversation, then move on to the second part: ask everyone to find a new partner and get the name of the band that played at the first concert he/she ever attended. Allow a few more minutes before the third part: ask everyone to find another partner and get a description of his/her most spectacular childhood injury. (Again, you might want to include a question related to course content instead.) At the end of class, see if the students can remember the names, faces and answers of the three people they met.
- 8 Have students pair up and introduce themselves. After a fair amount of time, the partners are asked to introduce each other to the class. Special points to address in the interview could be: the partner’s name, major, background, future goals, etc. After one-third of the people have been introduced, ask the class to do a quick recap of the people who have been introduced and then continue with introductions.
Variation: Each student introduces his/her partner by giving the partner’s name and one piece of unusual information (such as those in games 2 and 5).
- 9 Ask students to interview each other using questions about unique traits, unusual hobbies, proudest moments, most prized possessions, most unusual accomplishments, etc. Students then introduce their partner to the class. After everyone has been introduced, hold a memory test. The instructor begins by stating their own name as they holds to the end of a string from a ball of yarn. The instructor tosses the ball to someone and says something like, ‘I’m tossing the ball to Greg because I remember that Greg wrestles alligators in his spare time.’ The pattern continues until everyone in the class is connected. The class members then do the same thing in reverse as they untangle themselves and talk about the person immediately before them.

Variation: While all class members are connected, the instructor may want to use the connected students as a model to explain how the class will grow from a collection of individuals to a network of educated students over the course of the semester.

- 10 In 'Scavenger hunt', start with a sheet of traits with blank lines beside them. Some of the traits might be quite general ('Likes to wake up before 7 a.m.' or 'Has never seen *The Brady Bunch*'); others might relate to the course content ('Read *Wuthering Heights* in high school' or 'Can define pi'). Pass out the sheets, and ask students to wander around the room, finding a classmate to fit each trait and writing down their names. The one rule is that a student can use a person only once to complete their sheet.
- 11 Put students in groups of four. Then challenge the group to come up with five things they all have in common. Five is a nice odd number that will require some discussion to achieve (if you require four things in common, each member may just choose one and present it on behalf of the group). The one restriction is that the students can't use school- or work-related items. Personal items such as favourite music, books they've read or where they've travelled to work best.
- 12 Ask students to get into groups of two or more. Each student must find something in their wallet that will help the group understand who they are. Although pictures are a satisfactory option, encourage the students to search for the most creative things they can find.
- 13 In 'Beads', pass around a bowl of beads, encouraging people to take as many as they want. One or two will always take a big handful. Once everyone has some in front of them, tell them that for every bead they took, they have to volunteer one interesting fact about themselves.
- 14 In 'Deck of cards', pass around a deck of cards and have everyone pick a card. According to their suit (using a pre-determined key held by the teacher), they have to reveal different pieces of information about themselves.
- 15 To begin 'Koosh ball/Juggling ball', get everyone in a circle and ask them to give their names. The teacher starts: 'I'm Andrea and I'm throwing the ball to Sally.' Sally then throws it to someone else, mentioning them by name, and so on until everyone has had the ball. If the ball drops, start over. Play a couple of rounds (people must throw to different partners each time), then, once the third round is going, introduce three more balls into the mix. The game starts moving very quickly; chaos and hilarity ensue ...

Note: This game is probably best played after a couple of classes have gone by and students know at least a couple of other people's names.

Motivators and engagers

Sometimes during a lesson you need to use ‘engagers’—tools to re-direct the class and engage the students in a task. ‘Motivators’ are good ways to start a new lesson or topic in an interesting way.

Motivators

- 1 A Y chart is also known as ‘looks like, sounds like, feels like’, and encourages students to think outside of the square. On a large sheet of paper, teachers or students draw a large Y and label and fill in the different sections (see an example at <http://teaching-strategies.wikispaces.com/Y-Chart>). The results can be displayed around the room and possible follow-up activities could include all class members walking around the classroom, considering the responses given by each group and how they varied from their own.
- 2 Brainstorming is an individual and collaborative process which is used to generate a large number of ideas and encourage creative thinking. Teachers may wish to teach and use the DOVE guidelines for brainstorming in the classroom; these guidelines can assist in the creation of an environment where all ideas are valued and where students listen effectively to others and value their opinions. DOVE calls for all students to:
 - D—defer judgment on anyone else’s ideas or comments.
 - O—opt for the unusual and creative.
 - V—generate a vast number of ideas.
 - E—expand on the ideas by piggybacking off others.
- 3 The ‘Think, pair, share’ encourages students to think first by themselves and then discuss their opinions with a small group of people. In groups, students consider a question or issue. They begin by reflecting on their opinions and ideas on the topic and individually recording them on a template, pairing up with the student next to them to discuss their ideas and opinions. The next stage of the process requires the team to come together to share their ideas and collate a group response. This should then be fed back to the class as a whole.
- 4 Divide students into groups and give each group a large sheet of paper and an issue, topic or question to consider. The paper, or ‘placemat’, is divided so that each group member has a section to write in, with a square or circle in the middle to record the group’s response. Students begin the process by considering their own responses and ideas, and recording them in their section of the placemat. Students share their perspectives and an agreed team response is recorded in the middle of the sheet. Possible follow-up activities could include all class members reviewing the placemats of other groups, considering their responses and how they varied from their own.
- 5 A ‘Graffiti wall’ collects knowledge and ideas from all class members. Large sheets of paper are placed on the walls of the classroom, on which students write their responses, draw pictures and record their thoughts on a given topic. Students are encouraged to use coloured markers to make the wall interesting.
- 6 A ‘Sunshine wheel’ is used to brainstorm ideas in groups. The central topic is written on the middle of a large piece of paper or a board and the arms on the outside of the space are used to record student responses. They could be emotions associated with a word, components that make up an object or thing, or adjectives to describe an object. Depending on the developmental level of students, teachers can easily adapt this tool to make it more challenging and extend thinking in a particular direction. Teaching this

tool can also be a beginning step in introducing students to the process of mind mapping.

A list of great thinking tools that can be used as motivators can be found at this site:
www.sac.sa.edu.au/Library/Library/Topics/thinking_skills/thinking.html

Engagers

- The game called ‘Are you listening?’ is a little bit like ‘Simon says’ but starts with the teacher saying: ‘If you are listening put your hands on your lap’. After about five instructions all the children should be joining in and focusing their attention towards the teacher. This method does take a few moments to work but is effective.
- Clap out a rhythm, and have the students repeat the rhythm. That is their signal to stop whatever they are doing and focus on what the teacher has to say.
- Hit a tambourine (or any musical instrument) three times—the children would have previously been instructed that this means stop and so should all say the word ‘stop’. Shake the tambourine for a few seconds—the children would have been instructed that this means look and so all should look at the teacher and point to their own eyes. When the teacher folds their arms, this means the children should copy them and be ready to listen.
- A teacher can use ‘1-2-3, eyes on me’ to get attention. Or teach the students to reply ‘1-2, eyes on you’.
- A tool for checking understanding is: ‘Thumbs up if you understand, thumbs down if you don’t’. The children who have their thumbs down can then ask questions.

Pacing the lesson

The art of pacing your lesson to ensure a balance between the lesson objectives and maintaining student interest and engagement is a skill that needs to be learnt. How you pace a lesson will often depend on the class itself and what they are able to do within a lesson and the strategies they best respond to.

Some general guiding principles:

- Create a sense of ‘business’—a good steady pace and progress should be kept.
- Make goals clear—set out what the lesson will cover, write key words on the board and cross them off as they are achieved to demonstrate the progress being made.
- Have smooth transitions—maintain interest and engagement, don’t be disjointed.
- Have materials ready and to hand.
- Present instructions visually, so that they can be referred to as many times as possible.

Useful online resources on pacing a lesson:

- Ideas, tips and tricks to improve pacing: go to www.davis.k12.ut.us/Page/181 and select the link to ‘Leader notes’ from the Improving Pacing section.
- A video on pace and structure in lesson planning from the Teaching Channel: www.teachingchannel.org/videos/lesson-pace-structure
- An interesting article on how to pace effectively, from New Teachers: <http://newteachers.tes.co.uk/news/introducing-pace-and-purpose-your-lessons/45867>

See Chapter 12 of this Toolkit, *Planning for Effective Teaching and Learning*, for lesson-planning and techniques, including structure and timing.

Setting up your classroom

Seating plans

In addition to reading about seating plans in Chapter 9, have a look at these online resources, which discuss many types of classroom layouts.

- 1 A useful tool to develop a plan of your classroom can be found at Classroom Architect: <http://classroom.4teachers.org>
- 2 The Cornerstone has photographs of actual classrooms arranged in different ways with pros and cons set out for each plan: <http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/free-resources/organization/classroom-seating-arrangements>
- 3 This site describes and illustrates different seating arrangements, and gives advice on how to choose the best one for you: www.dummies.com/how-to/content/rookie-teaching-technique-choosing-a-seating-arran.html
- 4 Pinterest has a collection of ideas for how to arrange and label student desks, along with other ideas for classroom layout: www.pinterest.com/explore/student-desks/?p=2
- 5 A suggested list of seating arrangements based on the type of lesson (for example, individual, collaboration, whole class) can be found at this site: <http://specialed.about.com/od/managementstrategies/tp/Seating-Plans.htm>
- 6 This site presents classroom seating plans based on learners with particular needs typically found in classrooms (e.g. the talker, the disruptive student, the unmotivated student): www.lessonplansinc.com/classroom_management_seating_chart.php

Teacher's desk

- This is an interesting website with lots of different images to show you how to set up your desk: www.amodernteacher.com/2013/06/17/mission-organization-21-ideas-on-organizing-your-teacher-area
- These videos show real-life examples of setting up a teacher's desk—they're made by teachers for teachers:
 - Teacher's desk organisation—Carrie, part 1: www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXcTYLnFe4Y
 - Teacher's desk organisation—Carrie, part 2 (the following year she made a number of changes, listen to why she has done this): www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVyueObNYnY
 - Tips and tricks for your desk: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF2o0CUz934

What to have with you when teaching

When we first start teaching it takes time to work out what a particular class can do during a particular timeframe. It also takes some time for you to settle in to working out how long it takes you to do a good introduction, how much teachable content you can cover and how much time is needed to wrap up a lesson effectively. Regardless of these things, it's always smart to be prepared for eventualities.

Secondary years

Because secondary teachers rarely have a permanent classroom and tend to move around a school, they should arrange extra resources and materials into a system that works for them—different folders or plastic pockets that are easy to carry, or morning/afternoon bundles that can be carried in a hand basket. Here are some ideas:

- Have a spare lesson prepared for when your best-laid plans do not work. Base this lesson on an approach you know the class enjoys—sometimes a class is difficult or tricky, and you need to use 'plan b'.
- Spare worksheets for early finishers.
- Extra activities for gaps or unexpected time that appears in the lesson.
- Quiet activities for settling students.

Early years and primary years

Early years and primary teachers have a permanent classroom so it comes down to what they have prepared and what they have sitting on your desk. The ideas above for secondary teachers can be used by early years and primary teachers, in addition to these two:

- Websites bookmarked for moments when you need to break concentration, re-invigorate a room or break tension (i.e. amusing videos that are based on a content area or topic).
- Spare copies of everything—always print three or four extras.

Supply teaching

Supply teaching is fraught with 'empty lessons'—unless a teacher knows they will be absent the following day or are able to think of something for each class when they are calling in sick, often the supply teacher will have to tell students to generally 'work on assignments' or something similar. A good strategy is to be armed with age-specific activities that the students can do, just in case. These can include:

- Worksheets that are game-based, for example, crosswords.
- DVDs, for example documentaries on a relevant subject.
- Conversation activities, such as games, serious discussions, debates, 'tell me about ...' etc.