

Ilm o Amal

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ISSUE FOCUS

Active Learning

A resource of activities and ideas that will add life to the Maths and Language lesson



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Dear Readers,

What lessons do you remember from school? We put this question to a group of office colleagues, all of whom had passed out of school years ago.

Someone recalled the scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which the ghost of Banquo arrives to haunt the protagonist at the banquet. That particular scene had been enacted by the person's class. Somebody else remembered an experiment she had conducted to find the weight of a brick using the concept of displacement of water, for a physics class. Another recalled the hand movements that go with the nursery rhyme *Incy Wincy Spider*. The answers were varied, but were united by a common thread. They all required that the student get up and 'do something' as opposed to sitting and listening to the teacher delivering a traditional lecture.

And that brings us to the issue focus of this *Ilm O Amal* for this and the next issue. In this issue, we turn the spotlight on applying active learning concepts to language and literacy and mathematics in the classroom. In the next issue we will embark upon active learning in the realm of the sciences and social sciences.

The main purpose of this issue is to get you comfortable with the idea of active learning and imbibe the view that people learn better if their experience of a concept is full of meaning and rich in images. Many educationists the world over believe that a concept is most likely to 'stick,' if its experience is as close to the learner's world as possible. Our lead article *Active Learning: Making Your Own Meaning* can help you understand this well, so do read it before you immerse yourself in the activities that follow. Much of the rest of this issue is meant to be used as a source of activities that will allow you to take a break from traditional learning methods in the classroom. So for a while at least you can put aside the textbook and the inflexibility that goes with it.

If used effectively, the activities in this issue offer students the chance to improve their fluency and enlarge their vocabulary in the language department and also clarify and reinforce mathematical concepts. Many of you will be able to use these activities to supplement your lessons, and once you get to grips with active learning, the activities could even inspire entire units of study!

Finally, if any of your students feel that they just don't have a head for numbers or that they don't have a way with words, we hope this issue of *Ilm O Amal* will help you reassure and inspire them to see the beauty in your area of interest.

Editor

Active Learning: Making Your Own Meaning

Young children learn best when they learn by doing, but it isn't only the young who can benefit from the countless benefits of active learning, says

Mahenaz Mahmud

Are you familiar with what Confucius said over 2400 years ago?

What I **hear**, I forget.

What I **see**, I remember.

What I **do**, I understand.

In the book, *Active Learning: 101 strategies to teach any subject* (1996), Mel Silberman says that these three simple statements speak volumes about the need for active learning. He has modified the wisdom of Confucius into what he calls the Active Learning Credo. It goes like this:

What I **hear**, I forget.

What I hear and **see**, I remember a little.

What I hear, see, and **ask questions about** or **discuss** with someone else, I begin to understand.

What I hear, see, discuss and **do**, I acquire knowledge and skill.

What I **teach** to another, I master.

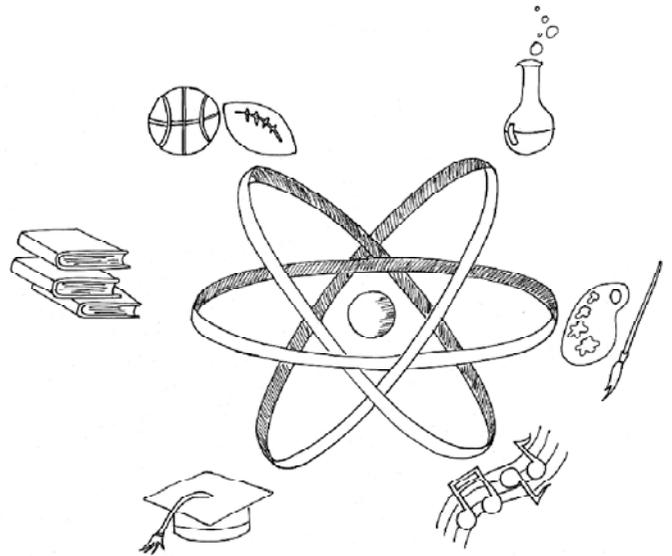
Learning by doing:

Let us focus on the '**doing**' part. Most people associate 'learning by doing,' with very young learners. In fact, learning by doing or active learning works well for adults too, it is only the methods and materials that we use that change, depending on the age group we are working with. An example of this is the TRC (Teachers' Resource Centre) workshops, where we help teachers learn new concepts and pedagogies through an active learning approach. Yet frequently when we go through the workshop evaluation forms that teachers fill in, there are complaints that there were not enough activities!

Let's move on to looking at some examples of active learning for different age groups.

Young children learn most effectively through 'real' experiences and by using their senses. When learning is strengthened with practical experiences, it lays a firm foundation for abstract learning later and so children learn best when they are active learners. While 'Actively Learning' children are actively involved – changing, moving, making things themselves, and not just passively watching or listening. Active Learning means children are acting and discovering things independently. Children are learning actively when they are given opportunities to handle materials. For example:

- mix water and sand and see the difference
- learn to use a pair of scissors and pour their own water, to gain valuable manipulative experiences;



this helps develop their motor skills, helping them move to higher levels of skill and precision

- freely express themselves through paint and make models of their own choice
- squeeze a sponge full of water and see what happens
- explore their surroundings; pretend to be someone or something else, to play out their observations and make sense of the world they live in

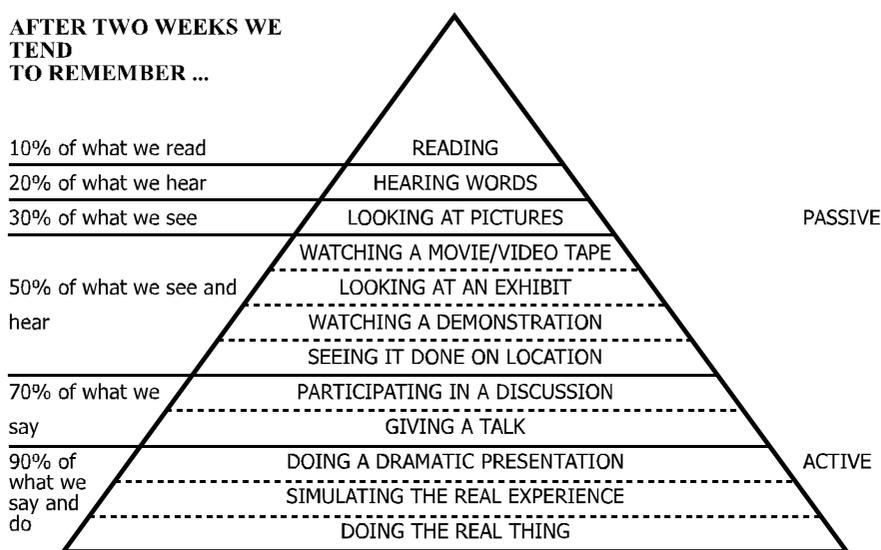
Through their participation in different activities, children learn concepts, learn attitudes, learn to share and cooperate, develop an enquiring mind, develop skills and acquire knowledge. They also acquire attitudes about themselves, others and their surroundings.

When we engage in active learning we are physically and mentally involved, because hands on, means minds on. Listening for long periods of time, tends to make minds switch off.

The four capacities:

The Curriculum for Excellence, in Scotland, sees active learning as an appropriate way for children to develop vital skills, knowledge and a positive attitude to learning. It describes active learning as learning which engages and challenges children’s thinking, using real-life and imaginary situations, taking full advantage of the opportunities for learning presented by: spontaneous play; planned, purposeful play; investigating and exploring; events and life experiences and focused learning and teaching. Children’s activities are, supported through sensitive intervention by teachers to support or extend learning.

The curriculum goes on to describe how active learning supports the development, of what they call ‘the four capacities.’ All schools and teachers are striving for these four capacities in their students. We certainly want our students to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. These four capacities sum up the qualities which are required for any country to progress, and are certainly the need of the hour in Pakistan. If we begin now, it will still take about 15 years by the time the children learning through more meaningful approaches, such as active learning, will become contributing members of our society.



Adapted from: Edgar Dale Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

According to the Scottish Curriculum, active learning in the early years can support the development of the four capacities in many ways. Students can develop as:

- **successful learners** through using their imagination and creativity, tackling new experiences and learning from them, and developing important skills including literacy and numeracy through exploring and investigating while following their own interests
- **confident individuals** through succeeding in their activities, having the satisfaction of a task accomplished, learning about bouncing back from setbacks, and dealing safely with risk
- **responsible citizens** through encountering different ways of seeing the world, learning to share and give and take, learning to respect themselves and others, and taking part in making decisions
- **effective contributors** through playing together in leading or supporting roles, tackling problems, extending communication skills, taking part in sustained talking and thinking, and respecting the opinions of others.

Active learning for older students:

And now to older students. It's the same concept ... 'doing' refers to any learning activity where the learner actually does something. For example, when students are asked to design a reservoir dam, that's engineering; when they conduct a school band: it's music education; when they design and/or conduct an experiment: it's natural and social sciences, when they critique a piece of writing: it's the humanities; when they investigate local historical resources, that's history of course and if they make an oral presentation: its language and communication.

"Doing" may be direct or indirect. Case studies, role-playing and simulation activities are ways of indirectly engaging students in the 'doing' process. For example, if a senior school student is trying to learn how to conduct a junior school band, directly 'doing' would be to go to a primary school and direct the students there. An indirect "doing" for the same purpose would be to simulate this by having the student conduct a band of peers who were acting like (i.e. role playing) primary school students. Or in business courses, 'doing' case studies is, in essence, a simulation of the decision making process that many courses are aimed at teaching.

In effect then, 'learning by doing' and 'active learning' are the same thing. Research shows that active learning is better recalled, enjoyed and understood. Active learning methods require us to 'make our own meaning' that is, develop our own concepts about what we are learning. During this process we physically make neural connections in our brain, the process we call learning. Passive methods such as listening do not require us to make these neural connections or conceptualisations. Active learning methods also:

- give the learner feedback on their incomplete understandings and encourage them to fix this, for example by helping each other.
- give the teacher feedback on whether learners understand, and who needs help
- develop thinking skills such as analysis, problem solving, and evaluation
- help learners to use their learning in realistic and useful ways, and see its importance and relevance
- are more fun for everyone!

Research and active learning:

Why should we use an active learning approach? It takes too long and is a waste of time. Students have to be prepared for Board exams and there is no way we can complete the syllabus if we get into all this activity-based learning stuff! Sounds familiar? Research tells us a different story.

1. Research has shown that active learning is an exceptionally effective teaching technique. Regardless of the subject matter, when active learning is compared to traditional teaching methods (such as lecture/teacher talk), students learn more material, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more. Active learning allows students to learn in the classroom with the help of the instructor and other students, rather than on their own.
2. When active methods are compared with traditional methods in careful control group and experimental group comparisons, active methods produce much better achievement. This is true even though the control group (traditional didactic methods) has the same teaching time as the experimental (active learning) group. This is also true at every academic level.

Hence active learning happens when students are given the opportunity to engage in a more interactive relationship with the subject matter of a course. We as teachers, should encourage our students to generate rather than simply receive knowledge. Let us try and facilitate rather than dictate students' learning.

For more information:

Download Active Learning Works: <http://www.geoffpetty.com/activelearning.html>

For more details and research to support active learning see: <http://www.active-learning-site.com/sum1.htm>
*<http://www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk/buildingthecurriculum/Buildingthecurriculum2/index.asp>
http://courses.saiace-fall.edu/~rjordau/active_learning.htm

References:

Strong Foundations, A Guide for ECE Teachers. Mahenaz Mahmud. A TRC Publication (2002).
<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/active.htm>
<http://trc.ucdavis.edu/TRC/ta/tatips/activelearning.pdf>

Incorporate Active Learning in your Classroom

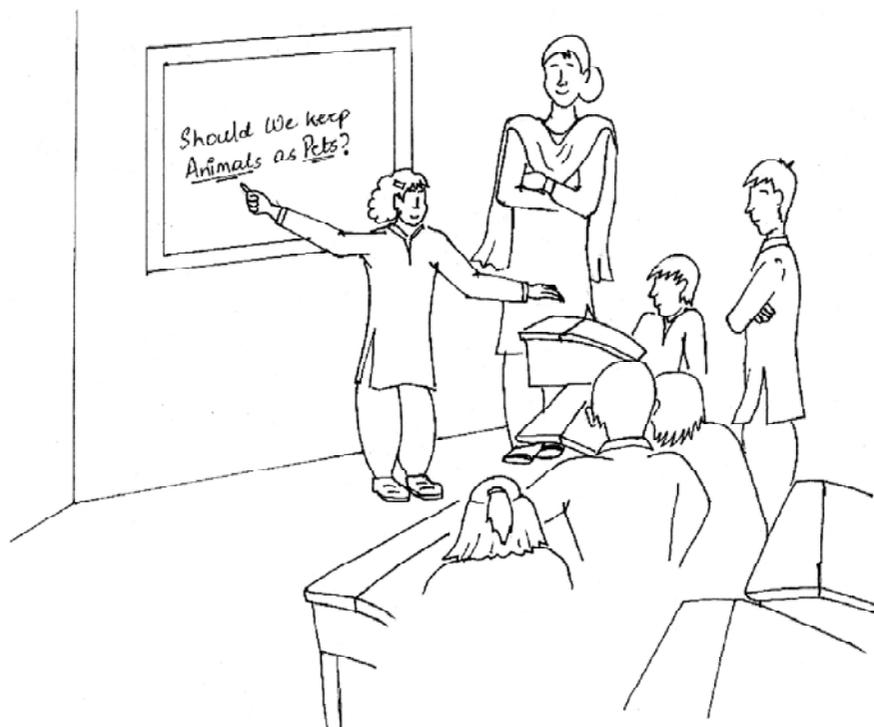
*Do you want your students to benefit from active learning, but don't know where to start? Here **Mahenaz Mahmud** shares tips on integrating active learning techniques in any classroom.*

Employing active learning techniques in the classroom can pose difficulties for teachers and students who are not accustomed to this mode of instruction. The teacher surrenders some of the control of the class as she becomes a facilitator, and the students take increased responsibility for not only what, but also how they learn. Incorporating active learning in the classroom, requires students to act.

Try using the following techniques to offer your students the opportunity to participate actively in their learning.

- Think-pair-share is a simple activity you can use in any classroom format. Give students time to think about a topic, turn to their neighbour for a short discussion, and then share the results with the rest of the class.

- Minute Papers provide students with the opportunity to synthesize their knowledge and to ask unanswered questions. Give students a few minutes at the end of class to answer the following questions in writing: What was the most important thing you learned today? What important question remains unanswered? Variations of these questions, and the questions and answers that students generate, enhance their learning process. They also provide you with feedback on their understanding of the subject material.
- Free writing activities of many kinds offer students the opportunity to think about and process information. For example, in addition to minute papers, you could pose a question and then give students time to free write their answers. You could also give students time to free write about topics.
- Brainstorming is another simple technique that can involve the whole class in a discussion. Introduce a topic or problem and then ask for students' input, which you record on the board.
- Games related to the subject can easily be incorporated into the classroom to foster active learning and participation. Games can include matching, mysteries, group competitions and solving puzzles.
- Debates staged in class can be effective tools for encouraging students to think about several sides of an issue.
- Group work allows every participant the chance to speak, share personal views, and develop the skill of working with others. Cooperative group work requires all group members to work together to complete a given task. Divide the class into groups of 2-5 students. Give each group articles to read, questions to answer and discuss, information to share and subjects to teach to other groups.
- Case studies use real-life stories that describe what happened to a community, family, school, or individual to prompt students to integrate their classroom knowledge with their knowledge of real-world situations, actions, and consequences.



For More Information:

Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. The National Teaching & Learning Forum.
<http://trc.ucdavis.edu/TRC/ta/tatips/activelearning.pdf>

Preschool Maths through Play

With the most basic of props and plenty of imagination, **Maria Haque** shares ideas that will make Maths come alive in the preschool environment

A Bowl of Beans:

This activity introduces children to the concept of filling and emptying and also the concept of space.

Age: 3 years.



Materials: a set of spoons or scoopers of various sizes, a tub or large bowl, a cup for every child, kidney beans.

Fill a tub with beans and give each child a small bowl and a spoon. Tell them 'Today we are going to fill our bowls with beans.' As the children start filling and emptying, talk about the sizes of the spoon. Ask them to think about which spoon will scoop up the most beans and which spoon will scoop up the least. If a child has emptied his bowl, pick up his bowl and say, 'When a bowl doesn't have

anything in it, we say it is empty.' Then look for someone who has filled her bowl to the top and say 'When a cup is filled to the top with something, we say it is full.' Let children continue filling and emptying till they lose interest.



Matching lids to jars:

Matching is a key experience that helps children notice how two things may be similar and how they fit together. Age: 3 years.



Materials: bottles with caps, jars with lids, thick and thin markers and caps.

Place objects on a table and see what children do with the materials. Encourage children to match the correct lid with the correct container.

What Comes Next?:

Making patterns and determining what comes next is the basis of algebra which children will eventually encounter in later grades. Through activities such as this one, children will have a good idea of the patterns that they can create. Age: 4 years.

In a large group start a pattern by asking one child to sit and the next to stand. Encourage children to continue the pattern of sitting and standing till you reach the first child again. As children 'get' the idea, continue with more complex patterns, for example, sitting/ standing/bending.

Variation: Children can also make patterns through sound actions; for example, clap, snap, clap, snap, etc.

Five Little Lambs:

Counting is a core preschool skill and what better way to teach it than through songs? Students will enjoy using their fingers to count as they sing this fun rhyme. Age: 3 – 4 years.

Teach children the following counting rhyme. Recite it as a class. Ask children to hold up the corresponding number of fingers as they recite the rhyme.

One little lamb with nothing to do,
Along came another one,
And then there were two.
Two little lambs standing under a tree,
Along came another one,
And then there were three.
Three little lambs by the barn door,
Along came another one,
And then there were four.
Four little lambs by a beehive,
Along came another one,
And then there were five!
Five little lambs are happy to say
That you learned to count to five today!
One, two, three, four, five little lambs
Say "Good-bye!"

Roll of the Dice:

Roll of the dice is a fun and lively activity where children learn counting, as well as have the opportunity to move in non-locomotor ways. This activity also helps build a new vocabulary of verbs. Age: 3 – 4 years.

Material: A large dice

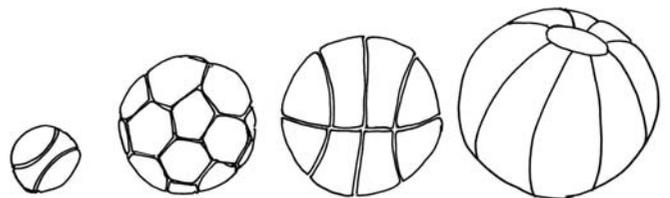
Divide the children into small groups and let them take turns rolling the dice. The child who rolls the dice will read out the number. For example, if she rolls the number ‘three’ she can choose any action, say clapping and then clap three times. The rest of her group will follow her by clapping three times. Encourage children to think of different actions such as jumping, hopping, winking, snapping and standing, that they can count. For older children the teacher can also introduce the concept of ‘more or less’ by asking questions such as “Maya clapped 8 times and Bilal jumped 5 times. Who did more of their action?”

Seriating Objects:

Children need concrete experiences in comparing and ordering objects of varying sizes. This is called seriation. Age: 2-3 years.

Collect 5-10 balls of various sizes. For instance you could have a ping-pong ball, a tennis ball, a softball, rubber playground balls of various sizes, a basketball, an inflatable beach ball.

Place the balls in a line. Show each ball, in random order, to the children and briefly discuss them. Say, ‘Now we are going to put the balls in order from the smallest to the largest.’ Vary the activity and order the objects from largest to smallest.

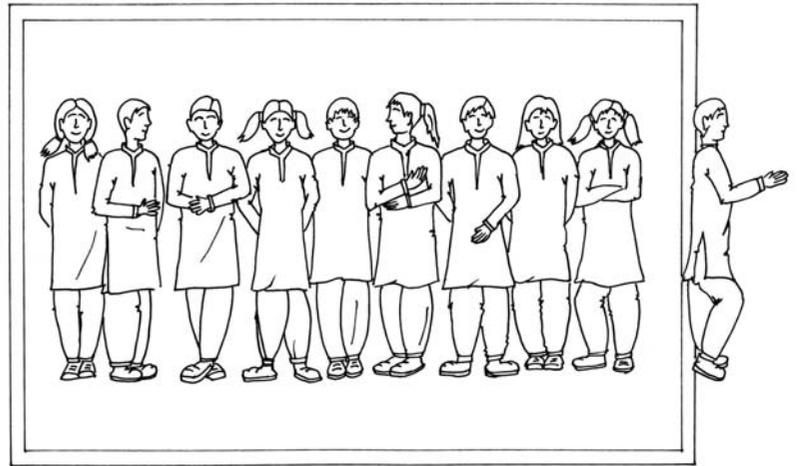


Ten in Bed:

Children will have fun practicing the concept of subtraction while singing this maths rhyme. Age: 5 – 6 years.

Practice the concept of subtraction by dramatising it. Using masking tape, create a 'bed' area on your classroom floor. Select ten children to 'sleep' on the bed. Write the numeral 10 on the chalkboard to show how many children are in the bed. As children sing each stanza, change the numeral on the board to show the number of children left in the bed.

There were ten in bed,
 And the little one said,
 Roll over, roll over.
 There were nine in bed,
 (Repeat the rest of the first stanza.)
 There were eight in bed...
 There were seven in bed...
 There were six in bed...
 There were five in bed...
 There were four in bed...
 There were three in bed...
 There were two in bed...
 There was one in bed,
 And the little one said,
 I've got the whole mattress to myself!
 (Ho hum. I think I'll go to sleep!)



Variation: Have children use their fingers to count while singing this math rhyme.

Popcorn Math:

This activity introduces children to the concept of weight and estimates and the class can have a tasty snack at the end of it! Age: 4-5 years

Materials: Electric popcorn popper, popcorn kernels, kitchen scales, measuring cup, several clear plastic cups

Ask students, 'Which do you think takes up more room –unpopped or popped popcorn?' Record students' answers on the chalkboard by using tally marks. Then place a half cup of popcorn kernels in one of the plastic cups. Count out the same amount of kernels and pop them separately. As you are popping, sing the poem given below. Take the popped corn and place it in as many plastic cups as necessary. Have students count how many more cups the popped corn filled than the unpopped corn. Record the results on the chalkboard. Ask students, 'Which weighs more–unpopped or popped popcorn?' Record the responses. Then place the popped corn on the scale and record the weight. Do the same with the popcorn kernels.

Put in the oil.
 Fill up the pot.
 Plop go the kernels.
 Now, wait till it's hot.
 Pop goes the first kernel.
 Pop goes the next.
 Then pop, pop...explosion.
 There go all the rest!
 --Linda Holliman



Infuse Life into your Preschool Language Class

Students who interact and are engaged regularly in the preschool classroom are more likely to achieve competence in language and literacy skills. Maria Haque shares activities that will enhance your preschool class' communication skills

Listen to the Environment:

This activity encourages children to listen to the sounds in the environment helping them develop auditory discrimination skills. Age: 2- 3 years

Ask children to sit quietly and listen to the sounds that are all around them, for a few minutes. They may hear the wind blowing, leaves rustling, birds singing, or cars honking. Ask them to tell you what is making the sound. This activity can be conducted indoors or outdoors.



Exploring our Voices:

This activity encourages children's need to explore and identify sounds so that eventually they are able to hear the differences in the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. Age: 2 - 3 years

Materials: A tape recorder and a tape.

Gather everyone and sing "Who's come to school today?" in a loud and gruff voice. Sing various other songs and vary your voice with every song – making it high, low, gruff, whisper or silly. Children love variations and the different voices will maintain their interest.

Variation: Tell children "Today we are going to record our voices and then listen to them." Bring a tape recorder and sing a song, recording your voice. Later play it back for the children to hear. Give everyone a chance to sing into the tape recorder. Finally play the tape back and see if the children can identify the voices.

Fun with Language:

Activities that focus on rhyming words help develop awareness of speech sounds. When a child hears words that rhyme, she pays attention to the way a word ends, rather than how it begins. Age: 4-6 years

Incy Wincy Spider

Incy Wincy spider climbed up the water spout.

(alternately touch the index finger of one hand to the thumb of the opposite)

Down came the rain

(hold both hands up and wiggle the fingers as you lower the hands)

And washed the spider out.

(sweep the hands to the side)

Out came the sun

(bring both hands up and then to the sides to sweep out a semi-circle –the sun)

And dried up all the rain.

(Then wiggle the fingers upwards –to show the rain drying in the sun)

And Incy Wincy spider climbed up the spout again.

(repeat climbing motion)

Children sing the poem associating the words with actions. Ask children if they can hear any rhyming words. For example sing “The Incy Wincy spider climbed up the water spout, down came the rain and washed the spider out.” Then ask ‘Do you hear any words that rhyme? Which words rhyme?’

Reread the poem from a chart at a later date and cover up some of the rhyming words.

Incy Wincy spider
climbed up the water _____.
Down came the rain
And washed the spider _____.
Out came the sun
And dried up all the _____.
And the Incy Wincy spider
Climbed up the spout _____.

Ask the children to fill in the blanks.

Variation: This activity can be done with other rhymes such as:

“Hickory, Dickory Dock. The mouse ran up the _____”

“Rain, Rain go away. Come again another _____”



Storybook Theatre:

If your students have a favorite book, turn the make-believe story into a real-live play, with masks, props, and costumes. Watch the children’s delight as familiar characters leap from the page and onto the stage! Age: 3- 7 years

Choose a storybook that your children enjoy and have read many times. Allow them to choose the characters they would like to be. Create the costumes and props and designate an area in the middle of a room to make a stage. Let children act out the story.

Letters in a name:

While a child’s name plays an important role in expressing his identity, it also affects his early reading skills. Research suggests that young children often use their names as a basis for further learning in reading and writing. Age: 3- 4 years

Materials: A basket for each child, three-dimensional letters, cards with each child’s name. Give each child a set of 12 or more of three dimensional letters. In each child’s set include the letters of his name as well as a card with the child’s name. Tell children ‘Today in your baskets you have all the letters in your name. See if you can find the letters in your name in the basket. Let children look for the letters and try to form their names.

Phonic Activities

One of the most crucial tasks for preschool teachers is preparing children for reading. For this children need to become acquainted with letters and their corresponding sounds. The following activities provide motivating introductions and practice in important pre-reading and writing skills. Age: 3- 6 years

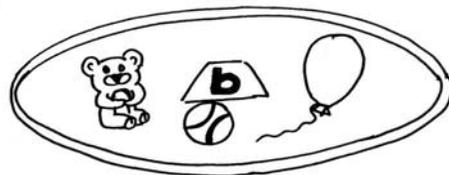
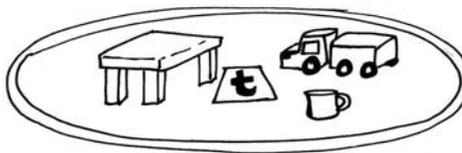
Sound sorting:

Place two hula hoops in the centre of the classroom. Place a letter in each hoop. Ask children to look around the classroom, identify objects that begin with that letter. Children then place the objects in the correct hoop.

Variations: Make this activity more challenging by using three hula hoops and three different sounds. You can also use ending sounds to sort objects or make up tongue twisters using the names of the some of the objects in one of the hoops – ‘Bears bounce big balloons’.

Alphabet Book:

Make a class alphabet book. Start with the letters in your students’ names. Place photographs of the children on their letter page. Magazine, photos, familiar products labels and children’s drawings can also be included. This should be placed in the library corner as children will want to look at it over and over again.



Clap-a-Sound:

Choose a consonant sound, /b/ for example. Explain that you will read a list of words. Each time the children hear a word that begins with /b/, they are to clap once. If they hear a word that does not begin with the /b/ sound, they are not to clap.

Here is a sample list:

- | | | |
|-------|--------|--------|
| book | boy | bottle |
| glass | bug | bacon |
| milk | baby | barrel |
| dog | fish | banjo |
| bear | beetle | bell |

Variation: Substitute other actions for clapping to create variations that children are sure to enjoy, for example: jump in place, stamp feet, snap fingers, thumbs up for the correct sound, and thumbs down for an incorrect sound.

Understanding Integers

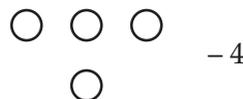
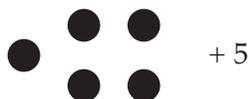
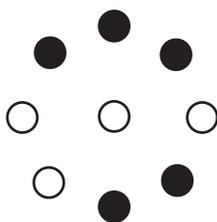
What are positive and negative numbers? And how can you add and subtract them. The following activity contributed by **Rabeea Minai** will help your students understand this better.

Integers: This activity helps develop a better understanding of positive and negative numbers. Grade: 6 and 7.

Material: Flat marbles that are painted black on one side and white on the other, a dice shaker.

Explain to the students that the black side of the marble is + (positive) and the white side is - (negative). Students are asked to shake the marbles in the shaker and draw marbles. The result could be something like the one below i.e. 5 blacks (+5) and 4 whites (-4).

e.g. ,



Next explain that you get a zero if you pair the positives with the negatives. Thus students are asked to pair the white and black marbles to form zeros. Hence:

e.g., ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ● (left with +1)

Positive and negative cancel each other and so we are left with +1.

Inspiring Creative Writing

Are you stumped for ideas when it comes to assigning topics for creative writing?

David Ford explores imaginative ways to generate topics that will get students' creative juices flowing

Creative writing is an excellent way to encourage students to write naturally and in different voices. Use your own imagination to come up with topics that students find interesting or fun and the results will generally be much better. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

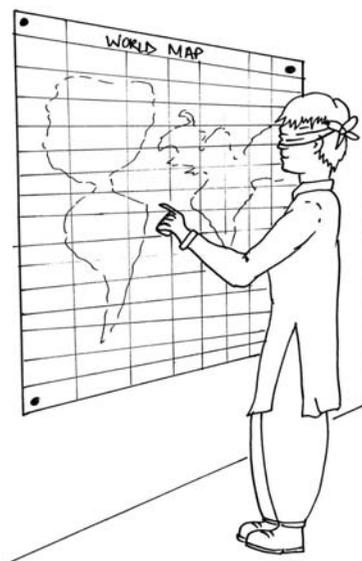
Biography: This is a great way to start the year, or begin working with a new class. Split students into pairs, but try to keep good friends that know each other well from being partners. Instruct each student to interview the other and take notes. Based on these notes, they should write a biography of their partner. You can set the time frame of the biography based on the length of the assignment, for example: last year at school, summer vacation, childhood, or their entire lives. To add a fictional element, have students take the "facts" from their notes and then use them to create a story about their partner's life.

Pair Up: This writing activity has been around for a while, but it is still an effective way for students to appreciate the development of plot and creativity. Assign everyone a writing partner. One student begins by writing the first paragraph of a story. The next student continues the story with his or her own paragraph. This continues until the story is complete. They should not consult on the story ideas, but rather use their imagination to work with whatever direction the story takes. You can assign a specific number of paragraphs to complete the story, or a specific time-frame. This can also be done over a long period of time, or even over email, so that students have plenty of time to develop the story.

Mix and Match: Split the board into three columns and label them: Objects, Locations, and Professions. Have students brainstorm these categories and write down several interesting and creative items for each one. Have the students choose two from each list and write a story that uses them effectively. Make sure you emphasise that each element should be used effectively and not just thrown into the story because it is required. This allows students to flex their creative muscle in tying disparate elements



together. This activity can also be done with slips of paper in hats, so that students draw story elements at random.



Map it out: Here's a fun one. If you don't have a world map in your classroom, fix one to the wall for this activity, or you could also use a large atlas. Blindfold each student one by one, spin them around a few times, and then have them point to the map. Whatever country their finger lands on becomes the setting for their new story. Have them research their country and present you with a "fact sheet" containing the basic information and any interesting facts they have discovered. Based on these facts, they should brainstorm and outline a story in that setting. Besides the location, you should give the students freedom to create characters of any age in any situation. Students generally enjoy taking ownership of their new country and gain an appreciation of research and setting in the writing process.

Poetry: Meaningful Lessons

Poems have multiple layers which can make them difficult to teach, but guiding the students to find meaning in poetry can be a rewarding journey, says David Ford

"For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences."

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Dealing with poetry can be intimidating for both teachers and students. There is always the danger that students will find poetry boring and irrelevant to their lives. In most cases, this is because students are being told what a poem 'means' by their teacher. If students are prodded, rather than pushed, towards finding meaning in poetry themselves, the journey of discovery can be very rewarding. Poets, as a rule, try to pack as much meaning into as few words as possible. This means that most poems are very dense; there are multiple layers of images, meaning and interpretation.

Wading through the layers of meaning

Here are some tips to help you guide your students through the layers of meaning:

- **First Impressions:** Always allow students to form their first impressions of a poem before delving into the specifics. After reading through the poem and explaining any of the vocabulary, have students write a short personal response to the poem. Later, when you have explored the entire poem and the poet's life, students can be asked to write another response detailing how their appreciation of the poem has changed.
- **Emphasise the Visual:** In essence, poetry is metaphor. Poets do not have paragraphs to describe an object or emotion; sometimes they must accomplish this in a single image. Ask students what they "see" in particular images. What do they imagine when they read the words, and how does this contribute to the meaning? You can even have students attempt to draw or paint an image, or series of images, with reference to a poem.
- **Embrace the Personal:** Poetry is meant to generate a very personal response. It is meant to be evocative and emotional. You should never discourage a student's interpretation. Yes, there are accepted interpretations of poetry that we have been studying for years, but this does not mean that they are the only "correct" answer. As long as students are shown how to support their interpretation, it is essentially correct.
- **Try it:** Nothing brings an appreciation of a poet's task faster than attempting it yourself. If you are studying a structured poetic form, like sonnets or villanelles, have students try to emulate the same form. You may be surprised by the results. (see box on page 17)

The elements of poetry

As students become more familiar with poetry and poetic forms, you can have them work with poems in groups or as a class. Although every poem and every poet is different, here are a few elements that are common to most poetry.

- Imagery
- Diction
- Rhythm, Rhyme and Sound
- Form
- Voice
- Context

Ensure that the students are well aware of each of these elements. Divide them into groups and have them focus on a single element. Ask them to think about that element and how it contributes to the meaning of the poem. They should write down points and specific examples. Afterward, write down all of their ideas on the board, keeping the brainstorming open to the whole class, and add any other points. By the end of class, you should have a vivid picture of the entire poem.

Poetry Ideas

Here are poetry writing ideas to get students' creative juices really flowing.

1. Read out a poem such as "Tyger Tyger" by William Blake and ask students to write a poem in which they ask questions of mysterious and fascinating creatures.
2. Read Shakespeare's "Come Unto These Yellow Sands," and ask student to write a poem which is an invitation to a strange place full of colors and sounds.
3. Read out a poem such as the one given below:

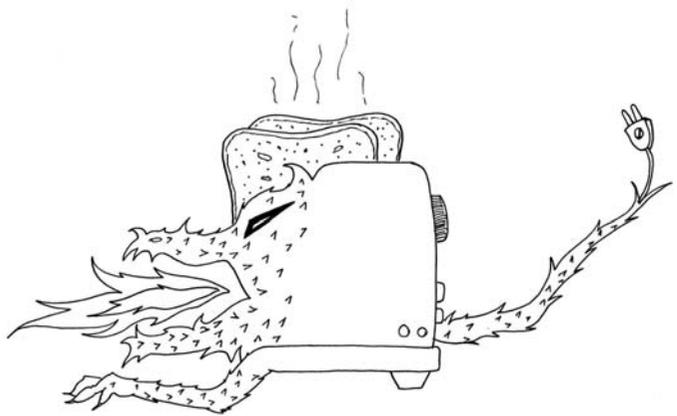
The Toaster

A silver-scaled dragon with jaws flaming red

Sits at my elbow and toasts my bread.
I hand him fat slices, and then, one by one,

He hands them back when he sees they are done.

--William Jay Smith



Say to your students that they are going to describe something metaphorically without naming the object explicitly. Pick an everyday object, such as a rolling pin, a light bulb or an iron. Now ask students to list some things that it reminds them of. Then ask them to write four lines to describe their chosen object –remember no naming the object!

Source: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~rayser3/image.txt>