

# How Teachers Manage Individual and Small-Group Work in Active Classrooms

**They define teacher and student work cycles, sort students into attention categories by assessing their work daily, and provide assistance to students according to need.**

Imagine a classroom setting where students are applying and extending basic skills and concepts by carrying out a variety of real-life activities that capture their interest and imagination. Individually and in groups, students are conducting opinion surveys, drafting lists of recommendations, writing announcements, compiling research data, sketching time lines, preparing for presentations, and so forth. They are engaged in what Bossert (1977) calls *multi-tasks*: individual or small-group projects in which students plan, select, and organize materials and activities.

In multi-task settings teachers are unable to control directly what each

student is doing or even to see at a glance exactly what each is accomplishing. Here the teacher must know how to control students indirectly—to keep track of what they are doing, give help when it is most needed, and ensure that they are accomplishing what's expected of them.

The management of students in the multi-task setting, though complex, need not be overwhelming. Many successful teachers have already discovered how to direct students in such settings, and they have developed some basic processes, which others can adapt for use in any subject area and at any grade level.

## A Three-Component Structured Environment

In the classrooms that I have studied, teachers allow the balance of control to shift to students during multi-task work periods by establishing, ahead of time, a three-component structured environment. One component is a curriculum of increasingly complex multi-tasks that defines *what* the students are to be working on (see Kierstead—1984a, 1984b, 1985—for a description of the multi-task curriculum). Another is the students' work cycle, a set of routines, procedures, rules, and consequences that spells out for students exactly what is expected of them: how they are to proceed and to account for the responsible use of their time (see fig. 1). The third component, the teachers' work cycle, is a set of routines and procedures that allows teachers to maximize the use of their own time in class: to automatically intercept students as they reach critical points in their work and to give them feedback and instruction when it is most needed (see fig. 2). Only after this three-component structure is well established are the students allowed to work independently.

## Specific Features of the Work Cycles

Some features of the work cycles are particularly notable. For one, students assume responsibility for pacing themselves appropriately and for signaling the teacher when their work is ready to be checked. Consequences for failure to carry out such procedures are established ahead of time: usually loss of play time for younger students and loss of points tied to the grading system for older students. With the conse-

quences clearly defined, teachers do not coax, nag, or even remind students of what they are expected to accomplish within a given time. Instead, to prompt students to work productively they rely on (1) students' inherent interest in what they are doing, (2) their tendency to do the "in" thing—to conform to the culture of the classroom that is established by routinely expecting students to behave responsibly, and (3) students' understanding that the teacher will carry out the established consequences.

Trusting students to act responsibly, teachers make little attempt to maintain constant surveillance over the entire group, which appears to set in motion a positive self-fulfilling cycle. First, students practice using their time productively, and, in classrooms where the structured environment is in place, they become remarkably responsible and independent. This frees the teacher to attend to students as the need arises in their work: to examine a student's line of reasoning, to question and probe to determine the source of difficulty, and to respond accordingly. As a result, work is closely matched to students' needs, strengths, and interests. Over time students become increasingly competent and independent, which in turn seems to heighten the teacher's original belief that they can be trusted. Increasingly confident that students can work productively on their own, the teacher spends less time watching over the entire group and more time giving feedback and instruction to individuals as they reach critical points in their work.

Another especially important feature is the fourth item in the student's work cycle—students are responsible for recording that work has been completed and approved by the teacher. Students seem to experience a gratifying sense of completion when they make the final mark, which signals that they are finished with their work. It's not unusual, for example, for a student who is checking off her name on the chart to remark with pride to someone passing by, "There, all done," or "Look, I'm finished." Further, when this record is kept on a class chart, it has the additional benefit of allowing the teacher to see at a glance how the class as a whole is proceeding.

## Attention Categories

The teachers I observed sort students into attention categories by assessing

their work daily. Relying on the two automatic checkpoints—requiring students to have their work checked and approved during the work period and reviewing students' work away from the hectic pace of classroom activity—the teachers categorize student work according to primary, secondary, and minimum attention needs. For example, students whose work is in the *primary* attention category need immediate help or correction, or are ready to be introduced to a new skill. Students with *secondary* attention needs are those the teacher intends to keep an eye on because they have recently started something new, look as if they are about ready to move on to a new stage, or have a chronic problem. Students slated for *minimum* attention can continue to work independently, usually because they have recently been in the primary attention category and are comfortable with what they are doing.

The attention categories help teachers determine which students they will seek out during the next class period and how they will intervene. Through-

out the class period teachers are, of course, responding to student requests for help, but they have a plan for using their own time when they enter the period. At the beginning, teachers spend most of their time initiating contact with the primary attention students, while keeping an eye on those in the secondary category. As the period progresses, they become alert for signs of difficulty or a readiness to begin something new.

Since sorting work according to need is a continuing process, students regularly circulate through all three categories, probably not remaining in the same one for more than a few days. The exception would be a student with serious chronic difficulty, who would seldom be in the minimum attention category.

### Equal Consideration of Student Work and Attention According to Need

Underlying these processes is the teacher's decision to give equal *consideration* to student work and *atten-*

*tion according to need.* By requiring that each student have work checked and by routinely reviewing work outside of class, teachers ensure that they consider the needs of all their students. By forming attention categories based on this automatic daily assessment and intercepting students with primary needs during the next class period, teachers provide for attention according to need. Lacking this process, the teacher would be at the beck and call of the more assertive students. Given the rapid flow of events during the multi-task work period, some students would probably be overlooked.

In a misguided attempt to avoid overlooking any of their students, teachers who have not discovered how to form attention categories usually divide their attention equally among their students. They schedule regular meetings with small groups established far in advance, usually according to test scores or perceived ability. But *equal concern* for the needs of individual students does not call for equal attention. Scheduling group meetings to give them equal

Students are taught to follow this procedure as they work on their multi-tasks.

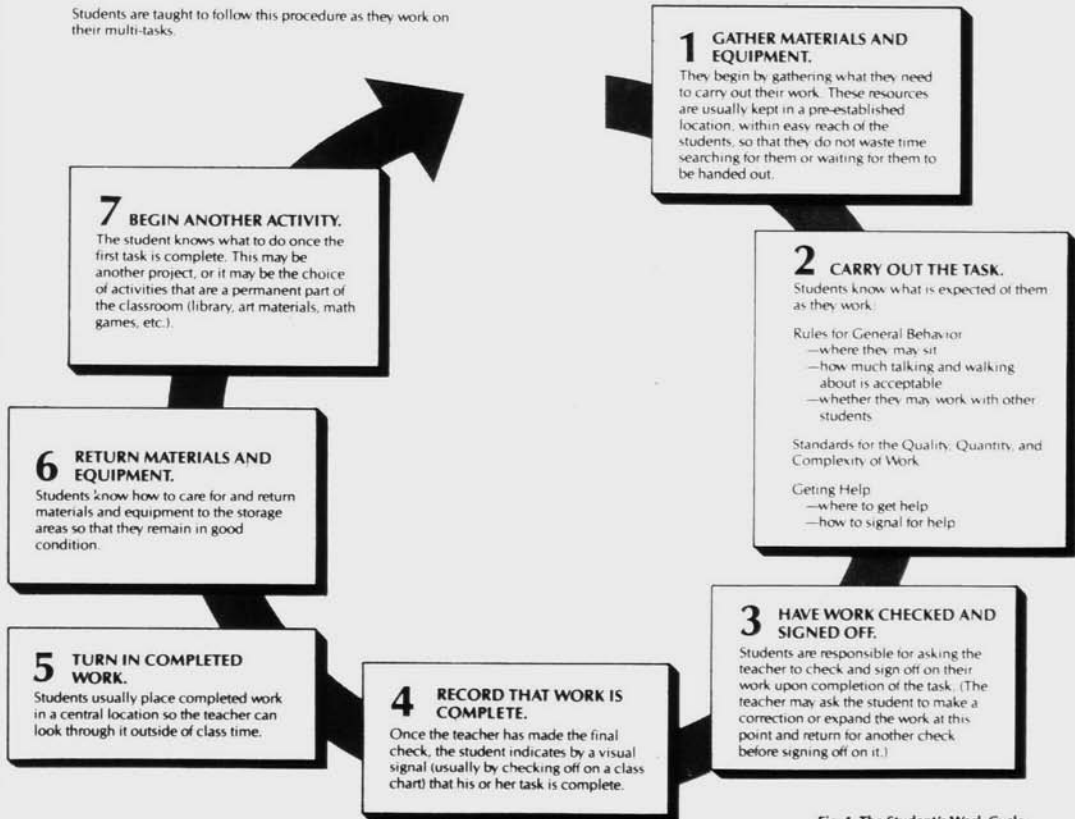


Fig. 1. The Student's Work Cycle

attention wastes valuable class time. Students' needs constantly fluctuate, differing in intensity in ways that cannot be foreseen. The same student, within the same day, will have some needs that are simple and quickly met and others that require more of the teacher's time. Moreover, particularly intense needs—reaching a developmental level of readiness for reading, coming to grips with a basic scientific or historical concept, and the like—will surface at different times during the year for different students. Giving students equal attention probably impedes their progress by unnecessarily taking them away from their work, and necessarily limits the teacher's time to respond fully to students when they are most in need of help.

### Responsibility and Control Over Decision Making

Teachers need not choose between *either* the tight teacher control characteristic of traditional, large-group direct instruction *or* the abdication of teacher control often associated with

experiential learning. If we intend to encourage our students to learn to work independently, to use their time productively, and to apply and extend their basic skills and concepts to real-life problem-solving situations, we must learn to share responsibility and control over decision making with them. To do so we must first recognize that control over decisions regarding the pace, sequence, and content of instruction exists on three levels: long-term goals, short-term goals, and minute-by-minute decisions. Figure 3 illustrates how the balance shifts between the three levels.

As shown, the teacher, as the agent of society, must determine the long-term goals, can share with students decisions regarding the short-term goals, and must allow students to make the minute-by-minute decisions needed to plan and carry out their projects. Before allowing students to assume control over decision making at the third level, however, teachers must accomplish two things: (1) provide enough instruction in the basic

skills and concepts to prepare students to plan and carry out their projects; and (2) establish the three-component structured environment, which provides students with enough feedback and instruction *during* the work period to enable them to proceed, and makes them accountable for using their time responsibly.

### Effects on Students

What are the effects of sharing control over decision making with students? First, shared control allows students the latitude they need to practice using higher-level thinking skills.

Research on student motivation suggests a second powerful effect: a heightened willingness to use the skills being developed. Deci (1985) has found that rigid, controlling teacher behavior lessens students' intrinsic motivation and impairs their creative performance. He and his colleagues have found that children in the classrooms of control-oriented teachers show less intrinsic motivation, per-

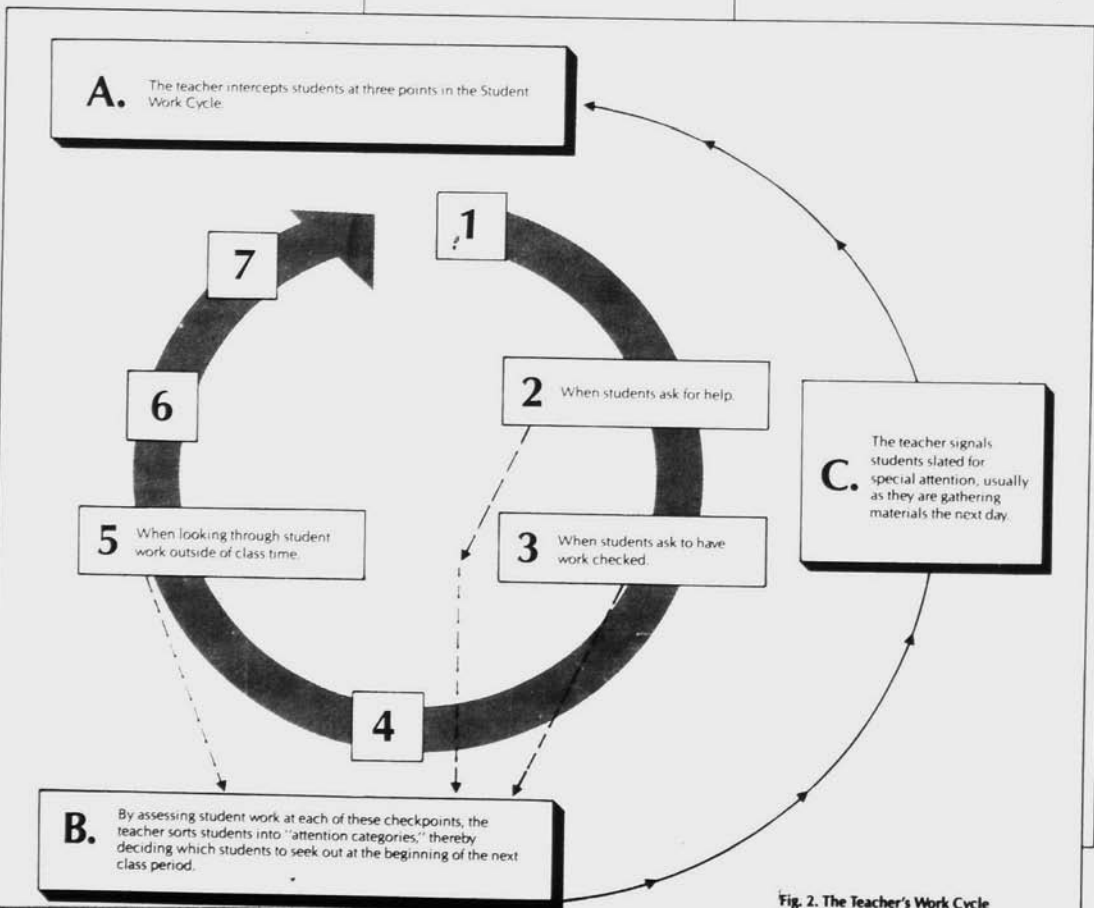


Fig. 2. The Teacher's Work Cycle

Thus, the teacher retains control over the selection and organization of materials, but shares control with the student over the selection and organization of materials. The teacher retains indirect control through the structured environment.

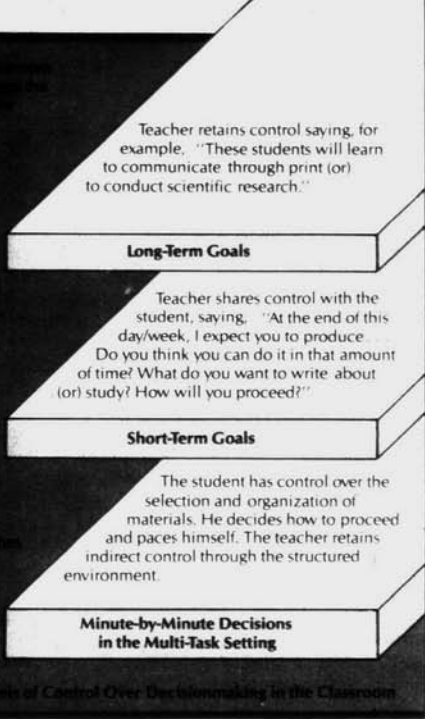


Figure 3. The Three Levels of Control Over Decision-making in the Classroom

ceive themselves to be less competent, and hold lower feelings of self-worth than students in control classrooms.)

Looking at the long-term effects of sharing control with students, Maehr (1976) reaches a similar conclusion. He distinguishes between short-lived, on-task behaviors and *continuing motivation*—student willingness to continue working or take up a task in a different context when relatively free from external constraint, either at home or later in the class period. Maehr's analysis of literature on achievement motivation suggests that continuing motivation is promoted by the student's perception that he or she: (1) is somewhat autonomous, (2) is competent in performing tasks, and (3) is growing to become like others held in high regard.

Findings from my study of primary classrooms (Kierstead 1984a) tend to support Maehr's conclusions. I selected classrooms known to be unusually effective in promoting literacy skills and highly regarded beyond the boundaries of their own school for independence and motivation of students. In formal and informal interviews, students overwhelmingly expressed perceptions Maehr has associated with continuing motivation: (1) they were doing their work be-

cause they liked it and wanted to learn, and (2) their work was "closest to the best" in the class.

My experience in the field supports these findings. Indeed, one of the most common remarks I have heard over the years from parents, support personnel, and visitors in classrooms where students share in decision making and control within a structured environment is that students seem to be unusually inner-directed, working with a sense of purpose and a feeling of competence. This is in addition to their being highly interested in and willing to carry out their multi-tasks at home as well as in school.

**A Word About the Future**

The renewed interest in higher-level thinking skills is part of a movement from a narrow to a broader, more humanistic view of education. We seem to be reaching agreement that we want our students to acquire the basics, but we also want them to be willing and able to use their basic skills and concepts for real-life purposes.

A note of caution is in order, however. Historically in education, we have allowed the proverbial pendulum to swing from teaching students using traditional instructional methods to al-

lowing students complete freedom. This time, as we move toward a more humanistic emphasis on developing higher-level thinking skills, creativity, independence, and an inner sense of responsibility, we must not let the pendulum swing too far.

Rather than abandon what has been learned during the back-to-basics era about making traditional methods more effective, we can achieve an appropriate balance by incorporating these methods within a wider range of management and organizational strategies. □

1. Deci (1985, p. 53) also reports, "In other research, we found that intrinsically motivated students displayed greater conceptual learning than extrinsically motivated students did, although both groups did equally well on rote memorization tasks."

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