



Literacy Work Stations: Making Centers Work by Debbie Diller

Non-Negotiables for Literacy Work Stations

Not long after September 11 I heard Shelley Harwayne, superintendent of the New York City schools, speak about writing. She said that the tragedy had made her more closely examine what she believed about many things, and she then presented her non-negotiables for writing. Her talk made me think deeply about what I believed were the most important components of literacy work stations, and as soon as I got back to my hotel room I created a list of my own—my non-negotiables for literacy work stations.

Focus on practice and purposes, not the “stuff” of stations. One evening a dear friend called and asked if I could make a list for every six weeks of what needed to be placed in each work station in first grade. Her request made me think about what we often focus on in our lesson planning. Too many times we begin with the “stuff.” Many times when I give workshops, teachers ask me to just give them activities.

My thinking is just the opposite. I believe that if you begin with what it is you’re trying to teach—your purpose—then you can more easily figure out which materials to use. This book is organized to help you think about what your students need and to plan for the “stuff” accordingly.

Link to your teaching. When student practice is directly tied to instruction, you get more bang for your teaching buck. For example, you read aloud a picture book. Then you do shared writing of a personal response to that book. During this time you model how to write about favorite parts of a book, including examples students give you. If you have a special form for students to use for this piece of writing, you show them an enlarged model of that form. After you’ve shared the writing of several responses over several days, you move the personal response sheets into the classroom library or listening work station.

Slow down to speed up. When I ask teachers at the end of the year what they might do differently next year, they invariably tell me they will start out more slowly. They have come to recognize the value of starting out at a reduced pace and building momentum after establishing a strong foundation. They will not put out too many materials at once and will make sure that they have taught with what they place in the work stations.

In their book *Guided Reading* (1996), Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell recommend spending the first six weeks of first grade establishing routines for independent learning before pulling small guided reading groups. In kindergarten it takes even longer!

Balance process and product. Some teachers try to have students create a product at every center. I think this is counterproductive and makes too much work for the teacher. Celebrate the process of learning to read and write by letting students engage in practicing reading and writing! For example, at the Big Book work station, much of the time students will read Big Books together. As they read they are improving fluency and using phonics skills. This is much more effective practice for developing proficient readers than filling out pages in work-

books.

Include a balance of process and product. Include opportunities to create products at some, but not all, stations. Use the forms in the appendixes to assess your students' progress in reading and writing. Use conventional methods to grade some student products.

Less is more. Don't put out too much stuff at once. Sometimes teachers get upset because students aren't doing a good job of keeping centers tidy when there are just too many materials for the children to manage easily. If you notice this problem, scale back on the amount of materials you have provided at the station. The same rule of thumb applies to the classroom library. Don't put out your entire collection of 200 books at the start of the year and expect kindergartners to keep them orderly. Start small and add things over time.

Use novelty. Novelty gets students' attention (Jensen 1998), but this feature is often underutilized in our classrooms. Then again, we teachers love to get new ideas at workshops, and sometimes we return to our classrooms and try everything at once. When we do that, we actually exhaust the novelty. Try one new thing at a time. Introduce one new task or material at a time, and the novelty will last longer.

Simplify. Over the years I have tried many schemes for classroom management and have found that the simplest methods are usually the best. Keep your management system simple. Keep your materials simple, too. My cardinal rule is that if it takes longer to make something than it does for children to use it instructionally, then don't bother making it.

Making It Personal

As you read this book, make it personal. Feel free to write notes in the margins. Ask questions that pop into your mind as you read and discuss them with a colleague. If what you're already doing in your classroom is working effectively for your students, don't change it just because of this book. Use the parts that work for you and your students. Remember, there is no one way that will help each child. Follow the lead of your students. Ask for their input. They will show you the way.

Reflection and Dialogue

To help you make the most of the ideas presented in this book, each chapter concludes with a list of ideas for discussion and questions for personal reflection. Here is the list for this chapter.

1. Share your new ideas about literacy work stations with a colleague. Discuss the definition of work stations provided in this chapter (on page 2).
2. Think about your students and their level of engagement. What specific things most engaged them recently? Make a list of these and continue to plan similar kinds of activities.
3. Try using the gradual release of responsibility approach. Think about something new you've learned to do and how you probably went through a similar process. Plan for your first work stations using this model.
4. Make a list of your non-negotiables for your classroom. Determining these early in the year will help you create a successful plan. Share your list with someone from your grade level and discuss your ideas. Post your list somewhere in your classroom where you can see it as a daily reminder.