

## IMPROVING YOUR PACING

### Additional Techniques for Creating a Positive Rhythm in the Classroom

*Pacing* is a term most teachers are familiar with, but it lacks a clear and consistent definition. The obvious definition, that pacing is the speed at which you teach, doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Most teachers recognize a discrepancy between the actual rate at which teaching happens and the rate at which students perceive it to be happening. You can appear to race through a lesson in adding fractions with like denominators, for example, when ironically you are stretching the time you spend on the skill to ensure mastery. You double the time you actually spend on an objective but take certain steps to make it feel as if you were moving twice as quickly. Or you could spend insufficient time on an objective and thus go too fast in the academic sense, and at the same time your lesson could seem deathly slow and tedious to students. So pacing is clearly different from the rate at which you move through material.

An alternative way of defining *pacing* is "the illusion of speed." It isn't the rate at which material is presented, but rather the rate at which the lesson makes that material appear to unfold. Pacing is the skill of creating the perception that you are moving quickly. Or maybe better, since effective teaching can use a range of tempos from slow, steady reflection to bracing, energetic speed, pacing is the illusion of speed created as and when necessary. Students like to think they're doing something new more frequently than you can afford to change the topic of

their learning, and pacing taps into that desire. When you're maximizing pacing, your teaching engages and interests students, giving them a sense of progress and change. Things are happening; students feel the progress and never know what's next.

*Regardless of how fast you're actually flying, passengers' perception of how fast they're moving is influenced by the reference points they see (or don't see) passing.*

A vignette from life outside the classroom might help to clarify the point. When my son was five, we flew to visit my parents. As the jet touched down, he asked me whether the plane flew faster when it was landing. He thought we had sped up at exactly the time we had slowed down. I asked him why he thought so. "When we're landing," he said, "I can see the buildings

and the trees going by. I see that they're going past us fast, and I know that we're going fast too." This is a good analogy for pacing. Regardless of how fast you're actually flying, passengers' perception of how fast they're moving is influenced by the reference points they see (or don't see) passing. In the classroom, moments in which the activity shifts, a task is completed, or a new person enters the conversation can serve as reference points. When reference points appear to pass in rapid succession, they can make it seem like things are moving fast, regardless of your actual speed.

This chapter offers six techniques for managing the illusion of speed in your classroom.

### CHANGE THE PACE

One way to create the illusion of speed is by using a variety of activities to accomplish your objective and moving from one to the other throughout the course of a lesson—that is, to use **Change the Pace**. It's worth thinking about the difference between changing topics every ten to fifteen minutes for an hour, which is distracting, confusing, and unproductive, and changing the format of the work every ten to fifteen minutes as you seek to master a single topic. The latter is likely to improve your pacing, the former to distract and confuse students. Spending ten minutes on topic sentences, fifteen minutes on subject-verb agreement, and fifteen minutes on copyediting yields an unfocused lesson.

But a lesson on topic sentences might be both focused and fast-paced in this way:

- Start with a quick *Do Now* asking students to compare different topic sentences for a paragraph on an interesting topic.
- Move directly into a mini-lesson in which you define topic sentence and provide positive and negative examples.
- Teach a short song about the criteria for a good topic sentence.
- Guide students through three or four examples where they write an effective topic sentence for a given paragraph.
- Have your class write topic sentences for each paragraph in a humorous memoir you've written, analyzing the various suggestions for each, marking them up, and improving them.
- Move to independent work of drafting topic sentences for a set of widely varying paragraphs.
- Wrap with a quick review of your topic sentence song.
- Cap with an *Exit Ticket*.

"Nothing for more than ten minutes," advises Ryan Hill, principal of the highly successful TEAM Academy in Newark. I'd asked for guidance on pacing from some colleagues, and he pointed me to brain research suggesting that people of all ages tend to begin losing focus after ten minutes and need something new to engage them.

My colleague Chi Tschang of Achievement First has taken this idea a step further, advising teachers to switch activities within the lesson based on the Age Plus Two Rule, a concept I've seen attributed to various original sources. The rule states that a student's optimal attention span equals his or her age plus two, which means that in the case of fifth graders, his rule of thumb isn't far from Ryan Hill's. However, Chi believes that even if you change activities in a lesson at the right rate, things can still go wrong. He thinks of lesson activities as active or passive, and says activities should fluctuate between these two types: "If there are two (or three) highly active kinesthetic activities in a row," he writes, "the class's energy level can shoot off the charts, and kids can lose focus. Alternatively, if there are two (or three) highly passive activities in a row, the class can lose its energy entirely and also lose its focus."

*Change the Pace* carries with it a powerful potential to energize the classroom, yet I can't leave the discussion without sharing one caveat. While *Change the Pace* is useful for engaging students in many lessons at many points in their academic careers, it also risks exacerbating a problem to address: the shortness of attention spans. Think of the professions that require more sustained bouts of focused, disciplined attention than age plus 2: doctor, lawyer, airline pilot, and engineer spring to mind. Even if research proves them to exist, short attention spans are just as likely to be the product of environmental factors, some of which we can mitigate. I suspect that people in the seventeenth century did not need or crave intellectual change at the same median rate we do today, which means teachers can both recognize the usefulness of responding to limited attention spans and seek to gradually and persistently extend them. One of the greatest gifts a school can give a student is to increase his or her capacity to concentrate for extended periods of time. That said, the most successful way to do that is clearly not to immerse your students in an hour of sustained note taking on the first day of school.

### BRIGHTEN LINES

Every time you start an activity in a lesson, you're presented with an opportunity to **Brighten Lines**: to draw bright, clear lines at the beginning and end. Making activities begin and end crisply and clearly rather than melding together in an undifferentiated stew can have a positive effect on pacing. Beginnings and endings that are more visible to participants are more likely to be perceived as reference points and create the perception that you've done multiple discrete things. It makes the reference points you create more distinct and visible. Drawing a bright line can also improve pacing because the first and last minute of any activity play a large role in shaping students' perceptions of them. Get your activities off to a clean start, and students will perceive them to be energetic and dynamic.

A clean start is not always a fast start, however. It can be, and in fact a fast start is often fun and engaging, and moving quickly is one great way to create the illusion of speed. But you can also create the illusion of speed by adapting the language you use to introduce a quiet reflective activity from, "Take some time to answer the questions in front of you. Then we'll begin discussing the novel," to, "Take exactly three minutes to answer the questions in front of you. Then we'll begin discussing the novel." Bounding each activity with finite time limits

makes it appear to be more autonomous and makes its end point clear, and using odd increments of time—three minutes rather than five—draws students' attention to the fact that you are not meandering through time with vague estimates but actively managing each minute. You could make the transition even sharper and more visible by giving a start signal, upgrading with: "Take three minutes to answer the questions in front of you. Then we'll begin discussing the novel. Ready? Go!" Now your activity has a clear start time and a specific duration. Students can see others hop to it on cue, as if they were at the starting line of a race.

You can use a variation of this as students complete their work: telling them they're done can help make another bright, clear line. You might adapt the previous scenario, for example, by saying, "When I clap my hands three times, I'll want to see hands of those of you who want to share your answer to the first question." The claps emphasize that something has ended and something else quickly begun. This line can be drawn for individuals—"You're done, Trevor. You can start in on the reading"—or for groups—"Well done, fifth grade. Three stomps on two, and we're on to the next step." Finally, looking forward makes these transitions especially exciting. Telling Trevor or the fifth grade, "Here we go!" makes a sense of excitement and anticipation pervade.

### ALL HANDS

You can also create the illusion of speed by shifting rapidly among and involving a wide array of participants by using **All Hands**. This can be especially helpful when you aren't able to shift activities in your lesson as in *Change the Pace*, which you won't always be able to do. Let's say you are reading and discussing an extensive passage for much of a class period. Having multiple students read short segments from the passage and moving rapidly among them would create a sense of speed. Each time you shift among participants, you establish a reference point. Something has changed—something begun and ended—and a bit of suspense is created (Who will go next?). Using *All Hands* can help you react to and energize a lagging class quickly and simply.

To maximize your ability to use *All Hands*, several other skills and techniques may prove useful, especially *Cold Call* (technique 22), *Pepper* (technique 24), "Unbundle" and "Half-Statement" from *Ratio* (technique 17), and *Control the Game* (Chapter Ten). *Cold Call* and *Pepper* allow you to call on everybody, which means more people feel part of the action. They also allow you to call on participants more quickly and with less linguistic mucking around. There is no

asking who would like to add to that, no awkwardly coddling folks to raise their hands. You just say a name and get started. “Unbundle” allows you to parse a potentially broad question out to more students and in smaller, and thus faster, increments. You take a slow answer from one student and make it three quick answers from three students from the far corners of the room. Half-statements allow you to involve all students quickly using *Call and Response* but at very low transaction cost. Control the Game also builds pacing.

One barrier to pacing is the long-winded and meandering student comment offered at the wrong time. You can use *All Hands* to address this challenge by socializing students to give succinct answers, using an upbeat stock phrase—“Hold it!” “Time out!” “Pause!” or “Freeze,” for example—to make a quick interruption when appropriate, reminding students of the question and diverting it to another student. You can follow up with a reminder to focus on the question, answer in two sentences, or “save that thought for later” if useful. If you do this consistently, students will intuit the pacing expectations in your classroom and respond accordingly.

A final piece of *All Hands* is managing questions, requests, and comments that are either off task (“Are we going to be writing in our journals later?”) or persist on a topic you are ready to dispense with (“I wanted to read what I wrote about Tabitha, too”). Such benign distractions can pose a serious threat to pacing, and even hands raised to ask questions can waste time and disrupt the energy and timing of an otherwise perfect class. The best teachers seem to be especially attentive to this, using a version of the “Do Not Engage” portion of *Strong Voice* (technique 38) and telling students “No hands right now,” or something similar when the time is not right.

### EVERY MINUTE MATTERS

Time is water in the desert, a teacher’s most precious resource: to be husbanded, guarded, and conserved. Every minute matters. And yet in a variety of situations, we risk letting the minutes slip by. The last few minutes of class, for example, are sometimes blithely given away. We say, “We don’t have time to start anything new,” or “We worked hard, so I’m giving you guys a few minutes to relax.” Let’s say this kind of thinking applies to just the last four minutes of class. That adds up to roughly twelve and a half hours of “last few minutes” during each of perhaps six classes in each school year. If you did that every day, you’d give away seventy-five hours of instruction—several weeks of school.

Instead, use *Every Minute Matters* and reward students for their hard work with a high-energy review of all they’ve learned or with a challenge problem. Keep a series of short learning activities ready so you’re prepared when a two-minute opportunity emerges: at the end of class, in the hallway, while waiting for buses. A walk to the bathroom is a perfect time for a vocabulary review. Packing up backpacks at the end of the day is a great opportunity for reading aloud to the students from an inspiring novel. There’s no better way to keep kids from getting off task while lining up for lunch than by peppering them with multiplication problems and mental math. Getting out to the bus to go home? Have every student think of an adjective to describe the bus.

You can always be teaching.

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Every few months I reinspire myself by watching a short video of Jamey Verilli managing his minutes one afternoon at North Star Academy. Waiting with most of his students outside a history classroom for the last few students to arrive, he begins quizzing students on their vocabulary words:

- “What does it mean to be ‘bound’ to do something?”
- “Can you use it in a sentence, John?”
- “Who would have been bound to the land in a Middle Ages town?”
- “What are you bound to be doing right now?”

The students are standing in a line in the hallway just outside his classroom. Class has not even started yet. Not in the classroom, not during class time and Jamey doesn’t care: there’s learning to be done. Meanwhile his students are excited, smiling, happy to engaged and showing off their knowledge.

### LOOK FORWARD

Even mild suspense creates tension, excitement, and anticipation. You can harvest that in your classroom to make your pacing feel more vibrant by using *Look Forward*. If you put an agenda on the board for a lesson or the morning, you can start students looking forward. If you add a catchy name to some of the topics on your agenda, they seem all the more intriguing. If you call one “Mystery Activity,” you can make the anticipation even more intense. You can go further

by referring to it occasionally: "We're almost there. Charles thinks he knows what it is but . . . oh, no. He has no idea."

Bob Zimmerli once entranced a class of fifth graders during a lesson on place value by writing a number with twelve digits on the board and announcing, "At the end of class today, somebody's going to stand up and read this number correctly to the class. Everyone's going to be able to, but one of you is going to get to represent! You're going to march up here and show us how. Be ready. It might be you." Here are a few other ways to refer to the future:

- "Later we'll be making this really tricky, so stay with me now, even if it seems easy [or hard]."
- "By the end of class you'll be able to [or you'll know the true story behind] . . ."
- "This is the first step in a skill that you'll want to show off to all your friends."

There are simpler ways to look forward. Consider the difference in the example we looked at in *Brighten Lines* in this chapter. While, "Take exactly three minutes to answer the questions in front of you. Then we'll begin discussing the novel," is better than, "Take some time to answer the questions in front of you. Then we'll begin discussing the novel," both are better than, "Take some time to answer the questions in front of you," with no reference to what's next. After hearing the first version, the second almost pleads for an answer to, "and then what?" even if it's only, "and then we'll move on to the next step."

### WORK THE CLOCK

The teachers interviewed for this book constantly talk about time in their classrooms, and they **Work the Clock**. They count it down, parcel it out in highly specific increments, often announcing an allotted time for each activity: "Take three minutes to answer the questions in front of you." They mix in frequent countdowns to pace their class in completing tasks and emphasize the importance of each second: "Pencils down and eyes on me in 5-4-3-2-1." The countdown lends a sense of urgency to class time, reminding students that time matters and hastening them along to the next step. What's more, a countdown allows them to acknowledge productive behavior in an especially effective way.

Imagine you acknowledged two students, Brooklyn and Brian, because they were ready in exactly the manner you'd asked. If you acknowledge them in the middle of a countdown (for example, by saying: "5, 4 . . . Brooklyn's ready! . . . 3, 2 . . . Brian's sitting up and ready to roll! . . . and 1. Eyes on me and away we go!"), you are calling attention to behavior that not only meets but exceeds expectations. You gave students until you reached one, but Brooklyn was ready at 4! She did more than comply with your wishes: she set the bar high. Only by counting down the seconds did you make it evident to everyone that Brooklyn and Brian were ready early. Without the countdown, calling attention to their readiness ("I see that Brooklyn is ready; Brian is ready too") leaves you sounding weak, almost as if you were pleading with other students to comply with your expectations by praising a few students who had complied or at least come close. After all there's no way to tell, without the countdown, whether you're reinforcing excellence or mediocrity.

Finally, using countdowns can allow you to continually set goals for your class's speed in meeting expectations: "I know we can do this in 10, but we're Homeroom Hamilton. Let's see if we can get ready in 6!" Now your standard can be ever-increasing success rather than mere compliance. In a recent lesson in Patrick Pastore's reading class at Rochester Prep, Patrick began his countdown at 10. When he got to 4, all of his students were ready, so he announced: "And we don't even need the rest. Let's get started!"

### REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

1. Go through a lesson plan you're likely to use in the next week, and if you don't do this already, assign the time you think each activity is likely to take. Now that you have general parameters, go through and find every direction you'll give to your students during the lesson, and designate an amount of time you'll allot to each activity. Write a short script for each that makes the amount of time available clear and gives a beginning and end prompt to brighten lines.
2. Take the biggest single block of activity in your lesson (as measured in minutes) and try to break it into two or three activities with

the same objective but with slightly different presentations. For example, if you had a section of problems for a math lesson on rounding, you might divide it in half, with a clear line between numerical and word problems. Then you might insert a brief reflection on what rounding is and why we'd do it between the two sections to make it seem like three.