

Bell Work and Closure like Train Coupling and Uncoupling

by Yunbo Gu

When the bell rings, some students are still running round in the classroom, pushing each other; other students are slouching against desks, chatting, laughing and even gossiping about who is whose boyfriend or girlfriend and even quiet students are seated at their desks, throwing their disconcerting glances at their teacher who is trying to direct their attention to her or his lesson. This chaos often happens at the beginning of a class period. A typical class cannot get started until five or eight minutes after the bell rings. And this also happens at the end of a period. Some students close their books or notebooks, waiting for recess and others put away supplies and equipment and shut down their minds. If this is a fifty-minute class period, teachers consume at least one-fifth of their instructional time if they take five minutes for cooling-down every day. That is a high price to pay for it. Therefore, the bell-to-bell instruction like train coupling is very critical to effective teachers because it is conducive to productivity, effectivity and connectivity.

Success-oriented Bell Work and Closure

Keeping students on task the moment when they enter the classroom is a challenge to teachers because students think their social behavior like talking, chatting, laughing, joking when the bell rings is the normal way of starting a class period because most teachers do not regard such a behavior as a problem and do not establish the firm classroom routines to keep students accountable, either. This is why we emphasize Bell Work and Closure today. Bell Work is a term for a warm-up assignment upon entering the classroom. Normally it lasts around 4 or 5 minutes. Chinese people always say that well begun is half done. Bell Work sets the mood that encourages students to get involved in learning. Therefore, Bell Work must be a short and meaningful assignment directly related to the lesson or student prior knowledge, such as a provoking question or an activity designed to get students thinking about the lesson ahead or an activity reviewing the previous lesson. Students are most likely to take it seriously. Consistency is also important for students to achieve success at the beginning through the end of a class period. For example, teachers write today's lesson objectives on the whiteboard and let their students choose one of them that they need by asking them a question, "What is your today's learning target?" If they know that they are expected to do bell work as soon as they walk into the classroom and are not given any chance to socialize, this makes the classroom an environment that is conducive to learning. Closure is also another excellent classroom management tool. Closure is the cool-down, wrap-up or conclusion of the class before students leave the classroom. It also lasts 4 or 5 minutes. It is a quick review, summary or a brief planning. It is still an integral part of teachers' lessons because it reinforces what students learned. In fact, it is not easy for teachers to wrap up their lessons because it is difficult to estimate how much time will be left and also hard to keep students on task at the end of the class. However, if they bulge their instructional time appropriately for grade and age-level, plan ahead for any unexpected daily disruptions that might occur and keep students practicing bell work and closure, they

can free up more time for students to learn and also maximize teaching effectivity and learning productivity.

Bell Work and Closure Make Connections between Lessons and even between Disciplines like Train Coupling and Uncoupling

Knowledge alone is useless until students can make connections between what they know. Whether this connection is connecting what students learned before with what they are going to learn in one discipline or connecting ideas and concepts across disciplines, the daily-based connection is Bell Work or Closure like train coupling. Image what a train looks like and how each rolling car in a train is coupled and uncoupled. First of all, a coupler is never locked in a closed position because it is allowed to mate with another coupler. Cars are coupled together for flexibility and convenience and sometimes they are uncoupled and dropped at any number of locations for delivery or pick-up. An individual lesson is like a rolling car; a unit is like a train. When separated lessons need to be connected together as a unit, bell work and closure are couplers. Bell work couples yesterday's lesson with today's lesson and closure couples today's lesson with tomorrow's lesson. Bell work can be anything from an activity, like Quick Write designed to ask students to write what they think about yesterday's topic for 5 minutes or self-learning assessment which communicates learning objectives to them in the first five minutes of today's lesson, such as "what are we going to learn today?" If tomorrow's lesson is still part of today's lesson, closure may be preview like KWL chart in which students share with one another their thoughts about an assigned topic related to tomorrow's lesson or still self-learning assessment, like "what did I do well on?", "what did I still struggle with?" and "what is my plan to improve?". If tomorrow's lesson is the first one of a new unit, closure is the end of a train to wrap up the last lesson.

Sometimes, Bell Work and Closure are train uncouples, based on instructional objectives and student learning needs. When a teacher teaches a new concept without background information support, his or her students are left behind. They have no idea what he or she is talking about. For example, in a sophomore English class, the teacher introduces African Literature by talking about the 20th century anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the students do not understand what anti-apartheid means no matter how dutifully they take notes because Bell Work does not build or activate their background knowledge. At this point, Bell Work should uncouple what students are going to learn with English Language Arts and then couples it with World History to build up their background information, like "How much do you know about anti-apartheid in South Africa?". By the end of this lesson, Closure uncouples what they learned with World History and then couples it back with English Language Arts, for instance, "What would you sacrifice for justice?". The first question (Social Studies) helps the students better understand what they are learning and the latter one (Language Arts) introduces the theme of this story. This example clearly indicates how Bell Work and Closure are used to relate student background knowledge to their new knowledge so as to make learning connected and integrated.

In conclusion, Bell Work and Closure, which most teachers do not pay attention to, are important integral parts of a lesson. They help manage classroom, save learning time, hold students accountable, increase learning productivity and effectivity and bridge between lessons and across curricula like train coupling and uncoupling. Nowadays, more and more educators believe that knowledge connectivity in

one discipline or even across disciplines can bring about intelligence and creativity. Let's utilize Bell Work and Closure efficiently and effectively.

References:

Jones, Fred. "Beginning the New School Year: Bell Work".

http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/columnists/jones/jones020.shtml

Frey, Nancy and Fisher, Douglas. "Building and Activating Background Knowledge".

http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=Building_and_Activating_Background_Knowledge

Margie and Cosmato, Donna. (2012). "Keep Students On-Task: Using Bell Work".

<http://www.brighthubeducation.com/classroom-management/2945-bell-work-tool-to-keep-students-on-task/>