Appendix B
Maximizing the Use of Time in Classrooms

If there is one constant theme running through the chatter in faculty lounges all over the United States, it is that there is not enough time to do what needs to be done in classrooms—whatever the grade level or subject area. This has probably always been the case and forever will be so. To make matters worse, standardized testing days and testing-prep days reduce the amount of time even further. Once the district calendars are set, there is a finite amount of class time devoted to instruction.

Thankfully, students who have access to the Internet can accomplish much more outside the classroom than when I was in school. After hours, students have access to teacher blogs, online learning platforms, teacher websites, and more resources than any Boomer ever thought possible. Teachers not concerned about being the CIO can turn their attention away from lecture and toward more meaningful engagement on the part of students who may not be all that interested in watching teachers work.

As teachers shift students from passive observers to active participants in their own learning during school hours, student-to-student interaction will increase as the time devoted to teacher talk and worksheets declines. When seatwork gives way to feetwork in classrooms, it makes perfect sense to use time wisely, avoiding when possible those things that are not productive or simply waste those precious minutes.

A few years ago, I was observing in an elementary classroom, and students were told they had five minutes to complete the task before them. The teacher asked if there were questions, got them started, and went to her desk to do some paperwork. Five minutes passed, then turned into ten. After twenty or so minutes, the teacher stood and got the attention of her students. The task they had been given should have taken no more than five minutes, had they believed they had only that

amount of time. My sense, as I looked at the students while they worked, was that they knew they had all the time in the world; there was no reason to hurry. Worse, the teacher sitting behind her desk sent the message that what *she* was doing was more important than what *they* were doing.

One middle school teacher gave her students a set of perhaps six or seven verbal instructions all at once, put them to work, and spent the next several minutes answering questions and clearing up misunderstandings. As soon as she told them to get started, hands popped up all over the room in popcorn fashion. The two minutes giving one direction after another in rapid-fire fashion was wasted time; students heard part, but not all, of what she said. For many of them, everything came to a halt as they waited for her to arrive to clear things up and sort things out. She looked harried as she scurried from desk to desk, taking time she would rather have spent on course content to deal with entirely process-related issues.

If the time allotted by the district is a sort of zero-sum game, at least in the classrooms, then teachers who want to optimize the time they have can begin by making sure it is not wasted. There are ways to ensure that things run smoothly and efficiently in classrooms at every level, and observing and coaching in hundreds of classrooms has brought me to some conclusions regarding these powerful timesavers. I have seen them all used effectively over the years.

Prepare Students to Work in Pairs and Groups

I long ago lost count of the number of teachers frustrated when they put students in collaborative situations, only to find out students have absolutely no idea how to actually interact and otherwise work together without confusion, chaos, and conflict. They don't know what it really means to attend to a partner or partners in conversations and more complicated group work. I covered this in more detail in Chapter 7, but it bears repeating. Much time is lost when students are placed in pairs, trios, or quartets without being properly trained in the use of good listening skills. In Chapter 5 we looked at the importance of perspective and empathy in collaborative work; students who run into perspectives alien to them may react in ways that quickly and completely derail the whole process. These concepts and related skills should be frontloaded in the first two weeks of school. It is not enough to say, "Remember, as you work on this project, treat your partners with respect and good will!" That means nothing if the partners have no idea what those things mean, and posters on the wall exhorting students to "Respect Others!" may not help.

After having a brainstorming session on what makes a good collaborative effort, some teachers have students develop a list of specific actions necessary to keep things going and actually accomplish something

worthwhile. In one classroom, the list was short (six items or so) and was composed of questions like the following:

Did we all contribute in a positive way today?

Did we ask questions when necessary?

Did we avoid interrupting someone who was talking?

What can we do to improve our interaction next time?

Students wrote in their reflective journals before responding, and shared the answers with their teammates during a reflective session. The teacher walked around listening to the conversations, asking someone on occasion to elaborate or give further particulars. When we plan lessons, we prepare the work for the students, but the job is only half done if we have not prepared the students for the work. Students who have no earthly idea what is going on when they are thrown together are going to waste everyone's time and the resulting confusion will serve as a barrier to progress every time.

Give One Direction at a Time

The teacher who wants to deal with content, not process, as she circulates while students begin their work can save time by giving directions one at a time. If students are about to pair up to share while standing, using their journals, it might go something like this:

Direction 1: "Open your journal to the page on which you wrote this morning." (Wait.)

Direction 2: "Take your journal in your left hand and stand behind your desk." (Wait.)

Direction 3: "With your journal in your left hand, raise your right hand and go shake hands with someone with whom you have not met today, someone other than your shoulder partner." (Play some upbeat music and wait.)

Direction 4: "Stand next to your partner and face me." (Wait.)

With every student in the room facing the teacher (with their journals and next to a partner), she is ready to put them to work. There is no need for them to know exactly what is going to happen *until they are where they need to be*. Get the process-related directions out of the way first; then deal with content.