

Learning Centers–Redeeming the Time

It is a well established fact that people remember and learn more through activity, participation, and personal involvement. We believe that using learning centers in Bible class is one of the best ways to help our students explore God’s Word, to help them discover truths and practical information from it, and to encourage them to apply what they learn. Aren’t those the main reasons we are Bible class teachers in the first place?

What are learning centers? Learning centers are activities set up around the classroom for students to work on before class and/or during the first few minutes of class. There should be at least one for each student in the class. The activities are designed to reinforce the lessons that students will be learning during the quarter. The same activities remain prepared for the entire quarter (i.e., not new activities each week), and the students will gradually move through each of the activities throughout the unit. The teacher keeps track of the progress of the student so that they know which activities have and have not been completed.

What is the purpose of a learning center? A learning center is a well-planned, Scripture-based, individualized activity designed to:

1. introduce, review, or reinforce Bible facts, biblical principles, and relevant historical facts.
2. help each child learn to search God’s Word for himself, to become a “discoverer of Truth.” With most centers, Scripture references are given so that the child can look for answers on his own. Other centers provide opportunities to use study aids like a concordance and a Bible dictionary. Using his Bible and these tools, he should become more and more comfortable with the Word and how to “search the scriptures daily.” We hope to instill in all our students while they are young that the Bible has answers for everyday living that will serve them well as they grow older.

“What we call knowledge is often a record of solved problems. Facts have been collected and tested and organized into laws and systems. They represent the results of facing situations and finding things out first hand.” (Excellence in Teaching with the Seven Laws, Carl Shafer, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985)

3. allow student participation, movement, activity, use of their senses. Educators know that students learn the most by being actively involved in their learning. As the Chinese proverb says, “Tell me – I forget. Show me – I remember. Involve me – I understand.”
4. give each child a sense of accomplishment. Each child should have a **progress chart** where he can keep a record of the centers he has completed. At the end of a unit or quarter, your students should be **rewarded** in some way for the number of centers which they successfully finished.
5. provide one-on-one time for the teacher and her students. Secular educators encourage you to make learning centers self-checking, i.e., to make the answers easily accessible to the children (on the back of a folder game, for example). In a Bible class setting, where class sizes are smaller than in schools, we believe this is not the best approach. Instead of providing the answers with the activities, the teacher must check each student’s work before he can move to another center. After many years of experience, we have found that children learn more and work harder if they know their teacher will be checking their work. If the student has answered questions in the center incorrectly, the teacher can help him, one-on-one, to use his Bible to find the correct answers. This is not only teaching time, but it is also time to hug, praise, encourage, and give individual attention to every child.
6. help prevent behavior problems. One of the biggest problems in Bible classes is that we do not take advantage of every teachable moment. Children who come to class early too often sit staring at the walls (or running from room to room!) because they were not immediately provided some kind of meaningful activity. Kids who have not been “reined in” with something to do quickly become behavior problems. Learning centers help prevent these problems by giving them something to *do* the minute they set foot in the classroom. *Very few of the children in our Bible classes receive any biblical instruction at home, so the few minutes we have to spend with them in Bible classes are very, very valuable. Every minute should be used to teach them something from God’s Word!*

7. add instant appeal to the classroom environment. The walls and tables and corners of every classroom should say “Come in! This is a place prepared especially for you!” Something to think about: *If your child’s classroom at school looked like your Bible class room, what would you think about his teacher and her commitment to your child’s education?*

If you may choose not to provide learning centers for your students,
PLEASE plan some activities in which they can participate as soon as they enter the classroom! You are responsible for making good use of every moment every child is in your classroom.
PLEASE take this responsibility seriously!

How to Use Learning Centers

When should they be used? We recommend using learning centers before Bible class actually begins through the first 5 or 10 minutes of the class period. This time frame allows students who come early as well as those who are a few minutes late to become involved right away in learning from God’s Word.

What about centers for non-readers? Non-readers can use matching (animal halves; adult/baby animals; numbers 1-6 with things made each day of creation week; etc.), lesson-related puzzles, lesson-related words to trace and/or copy, and Bible story picture blocks to put together. They also love to listen to stories on tape, with earphones.

How many learning centers do I need to prepare? *For readers:* Before each curriculum unit (O.T. units have 7 lessons; N.T. units have 6 and typically, a bonus lesson), prepare enough centers for each student in your class to have at least one per week. If you have 10 students, you will need a minimum of 10 learning centers. (It is a good idea to have 2 or 3 extras for kids who come early or who work quickly.) The centers should encompass *all* of the lessons in the unit. You might have 2 centers related to each lesson in a unit. As the kids rotate through the centers, they will be exposed to repetitions of the lessons they have heard and will be introduced to lessons they will hear soon. *For non-readers:* The children can work together in pairs or groups of three. So, you will need only 6 or 7 centers for one unit. ***You do not need to provide new centers every week.***

You may want to make enough learning centers to use for 12-14 weeks (instead of 6-7), covering 2 units instead of one. This gives you more material from which to pull information for centers. However, it may also deprive your class of the more concentrated repetition of the unit's material that they may need.

	1 unit (6-7 lessons)	2 units (12-14 units)
	Minimum # Centers for Readers:	Minimum # Centers for Readers:
6 students	6	12
8 students	8	12
10 students	10	12
12 students	12	14
14 students	14	16

How do the children know what center to do each week? We have two tried-and-true methods to suggest. (1) With a marker or Sharpie® pen, write each child's name on a decorated card or on a sheet from a colorful notepad. Each week, place each name card at a center which the student has *not* completed; you can easily determine what he needs to do by checking his personal progress chart. (If he started a center last week but did not finish, leave his name card there so he can come back and complete his work.) (2) If you want to use a group chart, write the names of all the centers on the side of a sheet of poster board and the kids' names on the top. Draw a grid on which the kids can put stickers to show which centers they have finished. With a Sharpie® pen, write each child's name on a clothespin. You can attach the clothespins to the names of learning centers so that the kids can see where they should go when they arrive in class.

How should these centers be set up in my classroom? If you have a file cabinet in your room, you can put a student desk on one or both sides and use the metallic surfaces for magnetic games. If you have a large metal storage cabinet in your room, you can use the doors and/or sides in the same way. If you have a wooden cabinet on the floor, you can attach cork (or corkboard) to the doors and/or sides to use with a center. If you have enough space, set up tables along the walls so that you can leave the learning centers out from week to week.

If you can't leave the centers out, those in file folders and boxes are easy to store. (Attach self-closing plastic bags or zippered school supply bags to file folders for small pieces.) Sturdy mailing boxes with lids are great for self-contained, self-storing centers. These can be purchased, in various sizes, from stores like Office Depot, Office Max, or Staples. (Large manila envelopes for storage can also be purchased from these stores. Envelopes large enough for posters can be ordered through Office Depot.)

Where can I find patterns for learning centers? The best places to find pattern books (and to stir your imagination) are teachers' supply stores. Not only will they have good pattern books available, they will also have numerous sets of matching notepads and sticky notes, and packages of sturdy, colorful cut-outs that are great. "Ideashop" magazine for Bible class teachers (from Gospel Advocate) frequently publishes patterns for learning centers. The "Imaginality" series is an excellent source of patterns for learning centers [www.imaginalityplus.com].

When you are making learning centers (or games or flipcharts), remember to (1) **use glue sticks** instead of rubber cement or white glue; (2) **laminates everything possible**. Clear contact paper works for a while, but eventually the permanent marker you might have used will bleed, making the writing blurry; the rubber cement you might have used will show through as brown, ugly discolorations.

Ideas for Learning Centers

Which Can Be Adapted for Almost Any Lesson

- **Using a Bible dictionary:** Choose 6-10 key words from the unit. Choose matching patterns or notepad/sticky-note sets. Examples:
 - “**Take a Closer Look:**” Write a definition on a magnifying glass shape, and the matching word on a butterfly shape.
 - “**Point and Match:**” Write a definition on a tennis racket shape and the matching word on a tennis ball shape.
 - “**Jellybean Joy:**” Write the definitions of the words on jar-shapes which you then glue inside a legal size file folder. Write the matching words on plastic jelly beans. Use Velcro to connect the jellybeans with the matching correct jar-shapes.

- **Using a Bible concordance:** Give the student a list of things to look up in the concordance and ask him to write down the Scripture references. Examples: 3 passages where snow/hail/rain are mentioned; reference for “Immanuel”; 5 passages that mention animals
- **True or False:** Put together a shallow 8 x 11 (or 9 x 12) gift box or an empty label box. Type up true and false statements and glue them to the top of the box. Punch holes in the top of the box with an ice pick. The student should put one color golf tee in the holes beside the true statements and another color golf tee in the holes beside the false statements. The cardboard around which fabric is wrapped at a fabric store is also good for this kind of activity. Holes can be punched into the cardboard for golf tees, or colored pushpins can be stuck into it.
- **Clothespins and Question Boards / “Clip-ons”:**
 - **“Days of Creation”:** Divide a cardboard or poster board circle into at least 7 sections. Put stickers or small pictures of things that will remind the child of what happened on each day of creation. Have one clothespin for each section; write a number (1-7) on each clothespin.
 - **“12 Sons / 12 Apostles”:** Divide a cardboard or poster board rectangle into 12 equal sections. Write a sentence in each section to describe each of Jacob’s sons (or the apostles). Write the sons’ (or apostles) names on clothespins.
 - **“Which One?”:** Divide a cardboard or poster board circle or rectangle into sections. Write a sentence in each section to describe Saul, David, or Jonathan. Have one clothespin for each section; write these men’s names on the appropriate number of clothespins.
- **Egg Cartons:**
 - **“Jacob’s Dirty Dozen”** Write the names of each of Jacob’s sons in the sections of an egg carton. Type something about each son and glue or tape that description onto a plastic

egg. Do the same thing with the 12 apostles (“Jesus’ Grade A Select”), or Moses’ life (“Moses Scrambled Eggs”).

- **Matching:**

Find patterns, cut-outs, or notepads that go together (dogs/doghouses, frogs/lily pads, flowers/bees, birds/bird nests, pies/pie slices, etc.). Write questions on larger pattern, answers on smaller pattern. Use to match sons and fathers, Scriptures and their reference, quotations and who said them, mountains and what happened on them, etc.

- **Library Pockets:**

Use in legal size file folders or on the cardboard around which fabric is wrapped (from fabric stores). Write scriptures on the pockets, their reference on tongue depressors; quotations on pockets, who said them on tongue depressors; attributes of God, Scripture references on tongue depressors; etc. (Instead of tongue depressors, can use strips of cardstock or cutouts of crayons.)

- **Square Tissue Boxes:**

“**Apostle Boxes:**” Glue library pockets on the sides of tissue boxes. Write a brief description of an apostle on each pocket. Have a corresponding strip of cardstock or tongue depressor for each apostle that can be put in the correct pocket.

“**Solomon’s Temple:**” Write questions about the Temple on each pocket, with Scriptures to find the answers. Write the answers on index cards, or cutouts.

- **Calculator Games:**

Make up math problems and let them use a calculator to find the answers. Example: the number of days Jesus spent in the wilderness after His baptism, minus the number of apostles, plus the number of N.T. books that start with the letter “M” equals Jesus’ age when He began to His ministry. (answer: 30). Non-readers can “fill in the blanks” for simple math problems with a teacher’s help. Example: the number of lions on the ark plus the number of frogs on the ark equals the number of men on the ark. (answer: 4)

- **Word Searches, Crossword Puzzles and Mazes:**

You can use these as they are printed or put them in a file folder and laminate them.

Your students can use them over and over by marking on the laminate with a dry erase pen. You can also enlarge cross word puzzles on a copy machine, laminate, and put it on a magnetic board. Then make your own magnetic letters to solve the puzzle by typing the necessary letters (in large capitals) on your computer and putting them on magnetic tape.