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The Worth of Learning Centers and Self-Critique

Okay, so learning centers are certainly not just for elementary schools. My head is spinning with possibilities for the fall—for centers based around photos and poetry, short fiction, drama-based activities, etc. My fear is that creating the centers would be so time-consuming that I wouldn’t follow through, or that testing and school assessment would interfere with the activities I had planned…but, I have to start somewhere. No excuses.

Learning centers provide students with differentiated instruction and interactive ways to learn material. Research has proven that the traditional “garbage dumping” method of teaching doesn’t really work—students become bored, teachers become frustrated, and no one learns. Giving students opportunities to physically interact with a subject forces them to process the information teachers want them to know and to use that information to create some sort of product.

In addition, learning center time can be very valuable in creating built-in RTI and Gifted/Talented time with students without singling out particular students. As each group rotates, they may rotate into the teacher station, where they receive small-group instruction, either about a particular skill they are struggling to comprehend, a book they are reading, or a writing assignment they are finishing. The teacher still maintains control of the room, but students are (ideally) all actively engaged in various station activities and multiple stages of learning.

Like learning centers, self-critiquing activities force students to step out of their comfort zones and push their critical thinking skills in a positive direction. I love the idea of having students critique a neutral piece of literature, workshopping it in a group, then discussing it as a class before students critique their own work. This practice helps students gain confidence because they are judging a text whose author is absent and silent. They can react honestly, and sincerely look at strengths and weaknesses in the text, without fear of hurting someone’s feelings.