

# Classroom Routines for Real Learning

*Daily management exercises that empower  
and engage students*

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# Introduction

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"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit."

Aristotle

We all have routines. Even those among us who say they despise routines have routines. The coffee in the morning, the laying out of clothes the night before, the route we drive to school, the way we organize our photocopies—they are all routines.

As an educator, it is a conundrum. The essence of our teaching is trying to empower and engage our students; yet here we are, discussing what is arguably the most traditional, teacher-directed element of school—routines. Routines are rules. They are the sequence and the order that students are asked to follow—be it walking in line down the hall, raising hands to sharpen pencils, or answering when their names are called for attendance. Established routines run themselves, they are the well-oiled machines that can make a classroom function. They are the backbone of our teaching practice. And typically, they are the most teacher-directed part of any school day.

So why take time to ponder the professional routines in our classrooms? Because we need to rethink what routines we use and how those routines affect our students. We want routines to run smoothly and to be effective. And we want to model that efficiency. However, we also want our students to feel empowered, motivated, and engaged during even the most mundane classroom routine.

In our last book, *Student-Driven Learning*, we wrote about creating a framework for developing a classroom that fosters inquiry-based student-centric learning. This book continues as an extension of our first; how can we use routines to create more students who are willing to take risks, be creative, think critically, and be more resilient, self-regulated, curious, and empathic? We realized that we needed to redefine the concept of routines and explore how we use routines within our classrooms in ways that engage students.

To write this book, we began with backward design (thanks to Wiggins & McTighe) and thought about our role as educators. We wanted to have a framework for what we do within our schools, so we began with *What is expected of us?* Here's what we came up with:

- Curriculum expectations
- Academic progress for each student
- Communication with the school community

With these factors in place, we asked ourselves the most important question: *What do we want for our students?*

- Empathy: We want our students to be able to relate to others through various perspectives. We want them to be emotionally sensitive with kind and generous hearts toward others.
- Curiosity: We want students to wonder, ask questions, and investigate.
- Creativity: We want students to be adventurous, to build, experiment, create, and try out various techniques and strategies.

- Critical thinking: We want students to seek the answers to their questions, to connect what they find, sort it, rank it, and prioritize key points, and to come out with a richer understanding.
- Motivation: We want students to be passionate about learning and to be trying their best. We want them to be driven internally.
- Resilience: We want students to feel free to make mistakes and then learn from them. We want them to bounce back, knowing that mistakes are essential for learning.
- Self-regulation: We want students to be mindful of themselves, their space, and their interactions with others. We want them to foster their own independence.

We would like all this for each student; moreover, we feel that these concepts are essential for them to navigate and embrace their learning.

How do routines fit within this list? How do we use routines to provide what we want for our students? We began to think about how we could foster and develop what we want for our students within the expectations of our teaching role. Where can we fit in the big concepts? Where do we squeeze in empathy? Or critical thinking? When do we teach our students to be resilient or self-regulated? How do we find time to communicate with parents? To share ideas with colleagues? Where do we find those teachable moments to solidify curriculum goals?

As we thought about these questions, we realized that routines provide the opportunity to meet our professional obligations and to create a learning environment that cultivates student-driven learning. We realized that even the most mundane of routines, such as collecting homework, can be a chance to develop accountability and motivation in our students. Our school day is filled with routines. These routines—arriving in class, taking attendance, handing in homework, sharpening pencils, moving through the hallways, recess, lunch—are an essential part of every school day and every childhood. Thoughtfully implemented and used, routines can build classroom community, foster independent work, and encourage collaboration.

This book is designed as a bank of learning experiences, instructions, tips, ideas, and strategies for everyday classroom routines. We developed, collected, and experimented with routines to help you establish routines as the building blocks of dynamic classrooms, where students are engaged, empowered, and independent in their learning.

Our routines are written to follow you through a typical teaching day. After sharing strategies to establish routines in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on morning routines and getting students into the classroom, where they are set up for success. Chapter 3 includes routines that help foster a caring classroom and build a classroom community; Chapter 4 focuses on routines for independent work and helping students improve their executive functioning skills; Chapter 5 presents a bank of routines around collaborative work; routines in Chapter 6 focus on assessment. Finally, Chapter 7 routines end the school day, and Chapter 8 looks at routines that extend beyond the classroom walls.

This book offers a variety of routines you can use and modify as you like: in the fresh start of the year; at the bump a few months in, when routines need tweaking; to restart after the mid-year break when order needs to be reestablished; and all the way to the end of the school year, when we need new tricks to get our students scrambling to the finish line.

## Routines for Celebrating the Individual

These routines are intended to endure through the school year—buzzing fresh in September and October, trudging through the dreary mid-year months, and pulling the class back into shape when the end is in sight. In a gentle, subtle way, these routines unite the class because they provide each student with what they need: recognition and celebration. And when we need it most, these routines direct our class back onto the positive track.

For celebrations of the individual, we need to ensure that all students are recognized. Keeping track on a class list goes a long way toward making sure no one is forgotten or that someone is not celebrated more frequently than others.

### Understanding the Individual

**Objective:**

To learn about each classmate through a character assessment or learning-styles assessment.

**Key Words:** independence, reflection

**Suggested Grades:** Junior/Middle

- Have students reflect on themselves and how they act in various situations.
- Introduce the survey, explaining the various types of results.
- Have each student complete the survey or have them identify the traits on it they recognize as their own.
- Give students a moment to reflect on the results. Do they agree? Disagree?
- Talk about the strengths and how they might be used in situations?
- Use the traits as a springboard to talk about passions and learning.

There are a variety of online surveys for students that will give them a sense of their strengths. We have always used the VIA Institute Character Survey because it accounts for cultural differences.  
<http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>

### Debrief

There are many online tools and resources available to assess character traits. The trick is to really talk with students so that they understand they are not categorizing themselves or depicting themselves as one-dimensional. They need to understand that learning about their personality or learning styles can enhance their understanding of how they act in situations, how they respond to others, and how they learn. This is information that they will use to help them develop their passions and grow.

### Filling the Emotional Bank

This routine was inspired by *Have You Filled Your Bucket Today: A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids* by Carol McCloud.

- Have a short conversation with students about how the banking system works, with deposits and withdrawals.
- Create a space for each student's "bank" on a central bulletin board, beside each desk, or in class mailboxes.

**Objective:**

To use feedback from peers to create an opportunity for each student to shine.

**Key Words:** community-building, reflection, motivation

**Suggested Grades:** Early Primary/Primary/Junior/Middle