

Taking the Time: How Block Scheduling Affects Writing

By Dana Sabatino

The introduction of block scheduling to teachers of the traditional fifty-minute schedule was a frightening concept because it meant abandoning all the experience that backed up the traditional model, including veteran teacher advice and a surplus of valuable lesson plan ideas. Taking this step into the unknown territory of ninety-minute classes meant restructuring not only the class schedule, but also the way that teachers knew how to effectively teach. Since the implementation of block scheduling has become more and more prevalent, the fears and uncertainties of this structure have not completely disappeared, but have diminished because the results have shown a promising future. With over fifty percent of the nation's high schools employing block scheduling (Canady and Rettig 1), there is now substantial information on how block scheduling affects learners. It has become more apparent which strategies work within this model and which former strategies have to adapt to the new format. For teachers of English, block scheduling proves to be both useful and hindering as the journey through the new schedule progresses. The question is how to strengthen the useful aspects of block scheduling in English classes to improve student and teacher experiences. When applied to the teaching of writing, block scheduling offers a better learning experience for students because classes become more learner-centered, positively affecting the outcome of the students' overall educational experience.

The direct applications of block scheduling differ from discipline to discipline, but the overall advantages are similar. Most importantly, block scheduling allows more in-depth learning across disciplines. "Block periods allow – and eventually require – an increase in the extent to which students are active learners and set directions for their own

learning” (Marshak 56). This increase in learning is reflected in the possibilities within the English classroom. In literature lessons, students are able to work collaboratively towards a better reading comprehension as well as partake in more learner-centered activities to also increase understanding. Similarly, writing lessons in block scheduling allow for more time for in-class collaboration among students as well as between students and teachers. Ninety-minute writing classes thrive on enhanced communication; “longer classes mean not only fewer daily preparations for teachers, but also increased, more productive student/teacher interaction during class” (Wonacott 4). The resulting emphasis on a more active learning environment overcomes the negative factors found within the traditional schedule. Learning is not fragmented into short and impersonal meetings or restricted in dull instructional activities (Canady and Retting 3-4). English class can evolve from something more than a fifty-minute lecture into an extensive period of discussion, interaction, and enlightenment.

When considering the effects of block scheduling on the teaching of writing, the opportunities are nearly endless. The first requirement of a serious writer is time- time to think, write, revise, and write again. This is also true for high school students. In fact, “Time constraints often cause students to ‘go through the motions’ to complete a school project according to a prescribed procedure” (Smith 4). This idea is not only contrary to the goals of education today, but also just plain depressing. The majority of teachers do not want robots for students, churning out meaningless assignments; they want learners who can develop significant creations. Ninety-minute classes foster this creativity in writing by allowing time for imagination as well as organization within writing workshops. Traditionally, students have just enough time to sit in their seats before the

bell rings and the teacher starts lecturing. It seems almost too obvious that allowing for more time for organization will lead to a more effective lesson. In block scheduling, “students actually have time to come in, get their materials organized and work on their assignments” (Komandosky 15). This simple factor creates an environment more suited for learning than the normal hustle and bustle of the fifty-minute period. Teachers are aware that writing takes time, but the importance of the time spent writing within the classroom is heavily overlooked. “Block periods provide time for students to explore, question, engage, initiate, research, develop, build, and create – in class!” (Marshak 56). Outside the block, students barely have enough time to research, let alone build upon all the aforementioned activities.

Evaluation in classes that revolve around the process of writing becomes easier in block scheduling. Usually, writing classes that concentrate on the writing process use some variation of a basic portfolio for evaluation. Considerations should be made concerning the importance of process over product:

The key to insure that portfolios are more meaningful and process-directed rather than limited and product-oriented is to provide students with time to periodically review their portfolio collections and reflect on strengths, needs, and goals that result from creating the final product over time (Mondock 59).

Block scheduling allows this time needed to create a meaningful portfolio because students are able to see others as well as themselves during the creation period. Emphasis on the process of writing can be explored in a ninety-minute class without as much fragmentation and interruption that exists in the fifty-minute class. Since a portfolio is supposed to be an example of students’ writing, it should reflect all of the work that went

into it as well as the contents of the final project. In block scheduling, teachers are able to see this work up close as students are given ample time in class to write and revise.

The extra time per class available in block scheduling allows for more time for students to concentrate on the writing process as well as time for more assistance in the process itself. Many fifty-minute writing classes do not allow much writing time during class; the actual writing process is considered homework. With the extended classes in block scheduling, however, students are encouraged to work through the writing process during class. This ability allows students to work collaboratively with other students, bouncing ideas off each other and getting past bumps in the writing process. It also allows the student to ask for assistance from the teacher. Students who do most of the writing outside of class are more apt to write what they can in a limited amount of time and turn in a less than perfect paper. Conversely, students who are afforded the opportunity to discuss ideas and troubles with peers and teachers are more likely to concentrate on their personal writing process and develop a well-written paper. Not only does block scheduling permit students to learn throughout the process of writing, but it also contributes to their confidence as a good writer because they are constantly given advice and encouragement. This support most often leads to more learning about writing than if the student was given a topic to write about outside of class. Too often, students write a paper just to complete an assignment by adhering to the conventions of writing, as in the trite five-paragraph essay structure.

By encouraging students to move beyond convenient structures and to enter into the intricate process of creating what goes into those structures, teachers can help them discover that what they have to say is important and that there are many ways to organize their thoughts (Smith 4).

Block scheduling includes the writing process as a significant part in students' learning, which highlights their individual potential as the force behind the final portfolio, something that could truly represent how well they write. According to David Marshak, an assistant professor in the Seattle University School of Education, "teachers and students can connect learning to the students' lives outside of school and to other subjects and disciplines, and together they can explore those connections in depth" (57).

Concentration on the writing process over the product allowed for in block scheduling directly affects this connection and leads to a deeper understanding of education for both students and teachers.

Block scheduling offers many general advantages over the traditional fifty-minute model including extensive class time, more effective collaborative work, and a better connection between teachers and students as a result of valuable interaction. More specifically, block scheduling impacts writing classes by providing the opportunities for improved class activities and access to more resources. One activity that relies on the length of a class is the Socratic seminar. Although this method is widely used to further reading comprehension, it could also be applied to the writing process in prewriting stages. In the Socratic seminar method, "participants sit in a circle, and prompted by their teacher's open-ended, provocative questions, engage each other in thoughtful dialogue" (Canady and Rettig 29). Too often, brainstorming techniques are left to ambiguous ideas written across the chalkboard that fail to facilitate any useful ideas for students. In a Socratic seminar, ideas could be discussed in depth while students realize the potential for their writing choices. This method seems especially significant in the writing of research papers because, all too often, students choose topics without giving

much thought to their value or relevance. It is important to help students realize that their writing is relevant to an audience that consists of more than the teacher. Through implementing a Socratic seminar as a prewriting strategy, students can “explore a reading, back up their opinions with textual evidence, challenge each other’s views, and, most importantly, find, articulate, and develop their ‘voice’” (Canady and Rettig 30). Not only can students possibly find their voice through this discussion, they can “gain confidence as they direct the discussion, listen to their peers, and hear their own intelligent thoughts” (Canady and Retting 30). The success of a Socratic seminar relies on the students’ input as well as the right environment for students to share their ideas. As long as teachers are able to create a comfortable learning environment for their students, block scheduling provides the time necessary for the seminar to be productive and rewarding.

Another specific advantage of block scheduling is the increased access to technological resources. Although not all teachers are as enthusiastic as others about including technology as an integral part of their classrooms, they all have to accept the fact that society is extremely centered around technology. Teachers want their students to learn in order to be successful in the “real” world; familiarity with technological advances will help students to keep up with our ever-changing technology-based society. The complexities of technology almost seem too inhibiting to incorporate into the classroom since extended instruction on how to use the technology must come before it could even be put to use. However, block scheduling allows instructional and experimental time for teaching new technology. “In the future, only schools with block period scheduling will be able to provide students with the opportunities to master

computer-based technology effectively (Marshak 57). Once technology is introduced into the curriculum, teachers could expand the possible activities done within the class. With the addition of technology into the curriculum, more complex activities are possible, expectations are raised, and higher order cognitive abilities are exercised. In addition, the classroom becomes more student-centered and more accommodating to students' various learning styles (Canady and Retting 193-4). Incorporating technology into writing can help students become familiar with computer programs and electronic portfolios. Educating students on certain writing programs will enable them to improve their writing formally as well as to feel comfortable writing at a computer station. Some teachers may not feel comfortable forcing students to write on a computer, but the fast-paced world of technology forces students to be fluent in such programs. Again, the addition of technology in the classroom will better prepare students for the "real" world. Another benefit of incorporating technology into writing classes is the growing popularity of electronic portfolios. Students are able to create an electronic portfolio by using simple technology. These portfolios are similar to actual portfolios in that they represent students' work. However, electronic portfolios can also be used to show students' work from other classes while still concentrating on the writing portion of the portfolio. The lengthened time per class in block scheduling allows the students to learn about this technological opportunity as well as to create their own electronic portfolio with the aid of the teacher and other students. "In block periods, students have adequate time to use computers for productivity, research, communication, and creativity" (Marshak 57) and, therefore, could expand and improve on their writing abilities simply because of the addition of technology.

The impact of block scheduling on students' writing abilities is enforced through longer class periods, which allows for effective collaboration and teacher-student interaction. Writing classes are strengthened because of block scheduling's concentration on a student-centered environment in which strategies like the Socratic seminar and access to technology are possible. Block scheduling does not just mean longer classes and fewer classes per day; it means that there can be more concentration on genuine learning instead of the standardized learning that describes many traditional schedule models. "In block period structures, teachers abandon coverage of the curriculum as the key curricular goal and focus their attention on the breadth and depth of student learning" (Marshak 56). Instead of memorizing and mechanically taking in information, students in block scheduling can expand their learning into something worthwhile and relevant to the rest of their lives, instead of the rest of the day.

Works Cited

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