

Tabula Rasa

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All teachers are faced with the dilemma of keeping students engaged in classroom activities. Making activities relevant to students' lives is one way teachers do this. Another way is by accessing different learning styles and preferences during instruction. Using miniature white boards accomplishes this task successfully.

To obtain white boards, some teachers go to the "Dollar Store" and purchase them. However, these boards usually last one month in class because, well, they are from the "Dollar Store." I went to Home Depot and purchased an 8 foot by 4 foot sheet of double sided white board material for about \$30.00. Then, I brought the sheet to my school's Building Trades class, which cut the sheet into 32 one-foot square tablets. Other teachers have done this and told the staff at the store that they are teachers and the staff cut the white boards for them. Next, I gave the students one day to bring in clean socks and dry erase markers for extra credit. Finally, I had 32 one by one foot white boards and enough erasing cloths and markers to last the rest of the year.

I call the use of the white boards, "Tabula Rasa" and explain to the students what that means. I also get very excited when students earn detentions in my class because that means they spend their lunch hour cleaning the boards. In addition, I keep the boards, markers and socks on a cart so that any teacher can borrow them at any time.

Here are some of the activities I do with "Tabula Rasa"

- ✿ Quick surprise quizzes to assess where kids are at or how much they are paying attention or to gauge how fast and in what direction to move class
- ✿ Students keep questions on it throughout the hour and ask them at the end of the discussion/class. For example, "What does personify mean?" or "When is it due?"
- ✿ Students write questions on them as teacher is explaining items. When teacher is done explaining, student will have record of their thoughts so they don't forget. "What does allegory mean?" "I don't get it yet."
- ✿ Students do samples problems in math.
- ✿ Vocabulary specific
 - Students pick one vocab word and write the word and part of speech on one side and the definition on the other. Three other students have to get the word right before a student can put his/her white board put away.
 - Students pick one vocab and write a synonym for the word on one side and an antonym on the other side. Three other students have to get the word right before a student can put his/her white board put away.

- Students pick two vocab words and draw a picture of each word on opposite sides of the board. Three other students have to get the words right before a student can put his/her white board put away.
 - Students categorize the words into parts of speech or common ideas. For example, write all of the nouns on the front and all the words that are causes for taxation on the back of the white board.
 - Write the word in a sentence (or a few). Then, erase the word(s), leave the white board on your desk. Travel around the room and fill in as many words as you can on other students' boards.
 - Students pick their best friend and most unknown stranger in class. One on side, write what you think your friend thinks a particular vocabulary word means; on the other side write what you think the stranger thinks it means. Share with your friend and with the stranger.
 - Students pick one word and put the word in a tri-bond. For example, the vocab word of “crucible” would be the answer to the tri-bond of a picture of a bowl from chemistry class and the word “exam” and an “X”
 - Memory. This is my class’s favorite. Two contestants wait in the hall and study their vocabulary words while partners form in the room. One partner has the word and the other has the definition. Partners sit in new desks to scatter. The contestants then come in and call on random kids to find out pairs of words-definitions. When a kid is called, they stand and loudly recite what they have. When a contestant gets a pair right, the word-definition kids erase their boards and stack them next to the contestant. The contestant with the highest stack of white boards at the end of the game wins. See video
- ✿ Mr. Foster’s favorite: Students simply write answers to class wide lecture questions to prevent the dominant personalities from overwhelming the conversation in class. See video.

With every strong teaching strategy come problems. The only major problem I encounter is when kids just draw and not pay attention. This especially happens right when they get the boards and are without something to do with the boards. The solution is to not let the students get the boards unless there is a task to do with them. Also, if logistics prevent this solution, I tell students to keep the markers capped until I give the word.