

Ben Slavic Storytelling Workshop Handouts – Shorter Version (see “workshop handouts” link for the longer version)

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“Getting Your Feet Wet”: Three Skills to Make It All Work

Before thinking about getting into stories, we need to get some degree of command of three (of the many) skills used in TPRS. Then we need to practice them at the beginning of the year in some simple activities (listed below).

Learning the three skills and applying them to the activities is a wonderful way to start the year when one is just learning TPRS. The activities are so simple that you can actually practice them in the first few months of the year while training your students in the rules and the game of CI, and then, only when you feel ready, start stories.

By making the first month or two of the year into a practice session for the teacher and a training session (especially in the establishment of rules!) for the students, the anxiety of the teacher new to TPRS goes down, and the teacher gets comfortable with the method right there in the classroom in the fall!

Here is a description of the three skills that I feel are crucial to success in TPRS - Pausing and Pointing, SLOW, and Circling. It is followed by descriptions of the five activities you can use them with before getting to stories, while you “get your feet wet”:

PAUSING AND POINTING

I present this skill first because I consider it the most important skill in TPRS. When you write your target language words or structures on the board or the overhead at any

point in class, write the translation of the word in English as well. Then, during class, point to the structures and question words each time you say them. Do this slowly.

Point, as well, to the question words whenever you use them. They should already be translated and on the wall in poster form. Do not assume that your students know the question words. Point to them when you say them and wait for a few seconds, looking at your students, before going on.

Again, write any new word down with its English translation and, pointing to both, pause in order to let the new information sink in. Even after you have established meaning and begun the story, continue at all times to reinforce meaning by pointing and pausing during PQA and beyond.

Pointing to and pausing at the question words as well as the target structures and any new vocabulary throughout the lesson results in much more highly engaged students. The students really need you to do that so they don't get lost. Overlooking this skill may explain why teachers sometimes feel that TPRS doesn't work for them.

When you pause, count to four or five, or until you feel a kind of invisible "kathunk!" as the words fall into the minds of your students. Remember, this is all new information to the students. So wait for that "kathunk" moment to happen, even if it takes up to ten seconds!

If you sense that the word did not stick in their minds, do not go on. Instead, stay on the word until you sense that they "have" it. Do this for anything new or anything unfamiliar at any point in the class.

The pause time is vastly superior to talking non-stop. The kids need time to absorb and process the new information. Pausing (and twin sister SLOW) helps assure that our pointing has its desired effect.

It is our choice. We can point, pausing with the intention to make sure they get it, or we can point without pausing and assume they get it. If we do the latter, they probably won't get it.

It takes months before the entire class truly locks on to the question words, and since the question words are always used in a TPRS class, are they not worth hammering in visually as well as auditorially?

In a recent community college class of motivated adults who were all in close physical proximity to me, I saw how valuable pointing really is. It was the first class of the term, and I literally pointed to everything I said.

Everything was on the white board, with English translations that were easy to see – all the question words, the two structures I was trying to teach, and a growing list of new words as they occurred in class.

I happened to be focusing on just this one skill in that class, hence I became firmly aware of its importance. I believe that had I not pointed to everything in that class, the students would not have been as engaged as they were. I am sold on the importance of this skill.

Be clear – we must physically point to the structure and its English version on the board or overhead each time that it is mentioned, remembering to pause. This is

especially true with the question words you use, particularly at the beginning of the year.

The question words are:

que veut dire___ – what does___mean
 qui – who
 que – what
 est-ce que – is it that
 qu'est-ce que – what is it that
 est-ce qu'il y a, y a-t-il – is there
 de quelle couleur est – what color is
 où – where
 quand – when
 combien – how much, how many
 pourquoi – why
 parce que – because
 comment – how, describe
 quel/quelle – which
 de quelle couleur est – what color is
 à qui (ownership) – whose
 de qui (relationship) – whose

I once heard someone say at a workshop: “They get a lot less than we think.” That sentence has stuck with me, and I feel that pointing but doing so in a way that we know they get it is the best way to guarantee that our students get a lot MORE than we think.

Needless to say, we never introduce a new word or expression without first making sure that the previous one has been circled into comprehension. Two planes can't take off on the same runway at the same time. This fact is obvious intellectually, but, in the heat of teaching, it is not so easy to remember. More than a few TPRS teachers have become untracked by using words without first making sure that those words had been acquired via sufficient repetitions.

Thus, point to everything you can: the structures for the story, the question words, and any new words! Make sure they get it! Doing this guarantees happy students.

SLOW

Are you going slowly? Next to circling, this is perhaps the most important skill in TPRS. Speaking too fast disempowers students. Speaking to your students slowly indicates respect. When you go slowly you acknowledge that you appreciate how hard it is for your students to understand the new and foreign language.

To quote from Blaine:

The reason we have to go so slowly is that we can't feel how hard it is. We have a feeling that the language is easy because that is our experience. By slowing down much more than we believe is necessary or possible, we are getting close to the best speed. We can only feel this by learning another language.

Blaine implies here that compassion is a necessary ingredient in proper story telling. One must put oneself in the position of the learner, and feel how hard it is. Much of the current training of new teachers in TPRS reflects this idea – there are hours and hours

at the national TPRS conferences in which novice teachers are asked to study languages they don't know. This truly puts the teacher in the position of the learner.

One day I was watching my class being taught by a teacher new to TPRS. She was working on circling and I was coaching her from the side of the room. Being new to it, she went very slowly. The kids responded so beautifully, due to the slowness. I felt the truth of SLOW at that moment. To put it simply, when the kids are with you, you are going slowly enough. If it is too fast for even one student who is trying to learn, it is too fast.

One student, whom I perceived as something of a jerk because he didn't pay "enough attention" in class, and whom I had given up on as a barometer student, was really hanging in there with this particular student teacher and her slower circling. I had to recognize that his problem was not entirely him but me as well. By slowly circling, this teacher was really getting some good teaching done. I watched in amazement at how powerful the two things, circling and SLOW, really are.

Some teachers even count seconds between structures while circling. They count "one thousand one, one thousand two" or something like that. What a wonderful idea! We can credit Mary Holmes for that one.

Personally, I have learned through practice to speak in "chunks" of sound lasting three or four seconds. I have found that if I do not aim for that amount of time for each utterance, I lose the kids. When I frame an image or an idea in these "chunks" of sound, the kids understand me.

It is quite difficult to slow down in English, so why should we think it easy to do so when speaking to our students in the target language? SLOW requires strict discipline. The feeling is of driving 35 miles an hour in a 65 mile an hour zone.

Many of us work so hard at mastering the other skills involved in learning TPRS, but then when we forget SLOW, we miss the entire point and invalidate all our efforts in learning the other skills. The other skills have no effect unless we go slowly!

When we express something in three brief seconds when the students might require ten seconds to understand it, we often blame and complain internally that the students are "slow." This is a big mistake. Students are always exactly where they are, and if we express something in three seconds, and they are seven seconds behind us, it is up to us to slow our speech down to the level of the student and not expect the reverse.

We must develop empathy for what the student is experiencing. If we could develop and put into practice this empathy, we would derive results we could not have predicted or imagined.

Lynette Lang in Chicago is a real pro at this skill. She paces so slowly, and with such patience! Hers is a perfect pace and her students seem to hang on every word she says.

Moreover, Lynette actually takes the time in class to laugh with her students. It is honest laughter, and is a great tool for personalization because it is authentic. The laughter has the effect of slowing down the class. The class suggests things to her and it often strikes her as funny. She lets herself actually think about it and when she laughs they all laugh.

Lynette doesn't say, "No, that isn't it, I'm looking for something else." Laughing at funny things at the right moment is an advanced skill in TPRS, and it happens more

spontaneously when the teacher is teaching slowly. We should seek genuine laughter in the classroom not only because true learning is fun but also because of the enormous neurological benefits it has to the students and the teacher. We must, however, remember to avoid any comment that could be even remotely perceived as a personal comment, as the world of teens is most often a very sensitive one.

Another way Lynette slows her classes down is to whisper some of the CI to her students. She uses whispering in the same way professional storytellers do. Between the laughter and the whispering, it is no wonder that Lynette's students easily handle the AP French Language exam every year.

Can one go too slowly? In one class, I asked the students if I was going slowly enough (I knew I was), and one student said, "Mr. Slavic, do you know how when you ride a bike, if you go too slowly, you fall off? That's what this is like!" But that doesn't happen very often, and it is best to err on the side of caution.

It seems like a simple thing to go slowly, but it is not. It seems that most TPRS teachers, no matter how much experience they have, repeatedly forget this skill after even a few days. It requires constant vigilance, above all the other TPRS skills, and is, in my personal view at least, among the top three most important TPRS skills.

CIRCLING

In the same almost magical way that pausing and pointing properly creates more engaged students, the students become strongly engaged when you circle properly, as mentioned above. There is always a strong link between student engagement and good circling. In the early stages of learning this skill, you will probably refer frequently to your circling poster.

Circling is:

Statement
Question
Either/or
Negative
3 for 1
What
Who
When
Where
Why
Ask a detail

An example of circling was provided above in the Circling with Balls activity. Here is another example:

Statement: "Class, there is a boy." (ohh!)
Question: "Class, is there a boy?" (yes)
[You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]
Either/Or: "Class, is there a boy or a girl?" (boy)
[You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]
Negative: "Is there a girl?" (no)
[You add: That's correct, class, there is not a girl. There is a boy.]
3/1: "Is there a monkey?" (no)

[You add: That's correct, class, there is not a monkey. There is a boy.]

What: "Class, what is there?" (boy)

[You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]

Who: Class, what is the boy's name? (Howard Ino)

[You add: That's correct, class, the boy's name is Howard Ino.]

All research indicates that output cannot occur without having first been preceded by massive amounts of comprehensible input (listening). Thus, listening (CI) should be the pre-eminent focus of all foreign language instruction. Circling is the pre-eminent feature of CI. The astounding results gained by TPRS students would be impossible without circling.

The focus of circling in each sentence is on the part of the sentence new to the students. If you are in touch with what your students have already learned, then, when you circle, you can stress with an increase in sound in your voice the part of the sentence that is new to them.

One thought must be in the forefront of the instructor's mind when circling: the word or structure that you want the students to know must be repeated, repeated, and repeated again, and vocally accentuated at the same time.

Some instructors focus more on the circling than on the structure, thinking that there must be a "right" way to circle. Circling is not a formula to be blindly followed! Rather, repetitive questioning that accentuates and repeats the structure to be learned is proper circling.

By focusing less on the circling itself as a formula and more on the structure being circled, the structure quickly becomes comprehensible to the students. It becomes instantly recognizable to the students when it occurs later. Just remember that mixing up the questions and thus avoiding patterned responses is required for success.

It is possible to get ten questions from one sentence by circling all three parts of the sentence. If the structure is:

avait l'intention de (intended to)

I ask a student to stand next to me in front of the classroom. I ask, "Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday?" And then I circle that as below. I circle the subject, then the verb, then the object. Note that although there are twelve sentences below, the first in each group is the same so there are really only ten questions.

First, you circle the subject:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach or Derek intend to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Derek intend to drink some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Derek did not intend to drink some water yesterday. Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, who intended to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

Next, you circle the verb:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach intend to drink or eat some water yesterday? [Drink] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Zach intend to eat some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach did not intend to eat some water yesterday. He intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach intend to do yesterday? [Drink some water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

And then the object:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach intend to drink some water or some milk yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Zach intend to drink some milk yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach did not intend to drink some milk yesterday. He intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach intend to drink yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

It is not intended that you do all ten possibilities above. Instead, pick and choose depending on the situation. This technique gets good personalization of the structures, the students get needed repetitions, and the story will definitely roll along more easily with you having done this. Stop the circling when the class shows confidence in what you are saying.

Once the pattern is understood, you then have the option of mixing it up. This is a good way to make students process each question at a higher level, resulting in greater gains. You have mastered this aspect of the skill when you can circle at will in random order without glancing at the chart.

A word of caution, however. Too much random circling, though artful, can really confuse the students. It is the old trap that many teachers fall into with TPRS: they think that because they get it, that their students naturally do as well.

Circling need not be limited to normal classroom discussion (PQA and stories). TPR commands, including those in the Three Ring Circus described later in this text, can be circled as well. If you command Mark to "run," once Mark has done so the instructor can then ask the class:

- Class, did Mark run? (yes)
- Did Mark or Ryan run? (Mark)
- Did Ryan run? (no)
- Did Derek run? (no)
- Did Mark run or walk? (run)
- Did Mark walk? (not)
- Did Mark swim? (no)
- Class, who ran? (Mark)

If Mark then "ran to the left," you can see how adding just this one simple detail greatly increases the number of questions you can ask. Every time you add a detail to a discussion you greatly increase what you can do with circling.

Circling TPR commands and sentences in the Three Ring Circus builds great confidence in teachers new to TPRS because they are so easy to do. See Skill 8 for more information on the Three Ring Circus.

I often repeat the same exact question three or four times in a row using different emotions. One would think that this would bore the kids, but the kids can be fooled into decoding the same sentence multiple times by asking them questions in different ways using different emotions.

C'est vrai?/Is that true? said in a timid way, for example, conveys a completely different meaning than the same expression said with anger, or with embarrassment, or with surprise. The emotions override the meaning, and the students don't notice that the words are the same. This keeps interest high in the structure, resulting in more meaningful repetitions and greater acquisition.

A multitude of studies support this trickery, stating that most of human communication is non-verbal. If these studies are accurate, it means that many language teachers plan their teaching around less than 10% of what is actually happening in the classroom!

If you want to prove the accuracy of this research, simply point to something in class while you are speaking, but do not connect what you are saying with what you are pointing at. All heads will turn and focus at what you are pointing at, and the kids will completely tune out your verbal message in favor of the (fake) visual message. The effective TPRS teacher will explore the role of the voice to convey meaning in their own classroom.

Another way to make input meaningful to the students using circling is to add a parallel sentence to the one you are already circling. A parallel sentence can be described as a sentence which has the same verbal core, but whose subject and object are different.

If you are trying to teach voudrait avoir/would like to have, instead of circling just one sentence around that expression, you introduce a similar sentence and circle both of them.

If your original sentence is:

Classe, Elliot voudrait avoir une voiture /Class, Elliot would like to have a car!

You add another, parallel, sentence into the circling:

Classe, Jane voudrait avoir un Sprite /Class, Jane would like to have a Sprite!

Adding this second sentence expands the size of the circling "field" in which you are working. It instantly adds many more possible questions to your circling, because you can do more with two sentences than you can with one. Adding a second, parallel sentence into your circling brings more repetitions, and whenever there are greater repetitions, there are greater levels of comprehensible input and learning.

I consider this technique of bringing in a second sentence to mirror another one during circling to be one of the truly great little tricks in TPRS – you will feel immediately more relaxed when you have that extra sentence to ask questions about.

Having had a look now at the three key mechanical skills (in my opinion) of TPRS, we can take a look at the five activities that will “give you your wings” when you apply the three skills in your classroom during the first few months of the year:

Handout/Segments #1: Word Association

Making associations with single words from wall charts (65 words per month on the wall – we do about five words a day using this activity) can be considered a simple training wheel exercise that impacts everything I do in TPRS very heavily. In the same way that we put physical actions into our bodies with TPR, word associations take the form of gestures, sounds, or images that enable us to remember the meaning of a certain word.

For example, if, on the word list, I want to teach the word “voiture” in French (car, pronounced “vwature”), I ask my students, in English, if anyone can think of “some way to remember that voiture means car...”.

Different suggestions come up, some very outlandish but which are somehow, ironically, often the most effective ones, and we just discuss those sounds or images and then go to the next word. In the case of “voiture”, someone may suggest that we can remember that it means “car” with the associative phrase, “What year (sounds like voiture) is your Toyota?”

Another example is “les yeux” in French. The kids associate that sound with laser eye surgery or lazy eye. Sound associations are the most powerful. I once asked a student who score a perfect score on the National French Exam one year what part of the instruction he felt most contributed to his score, and he immediately replied, “...those word activities we did at the beginning of the year...” Anyone who has done this kind of gesturing and association, knows how strangely powerful it is as a teaching tool, especially as set up work toward building successful stories later.

A few details: (1) if no one can come up with an association, we just go on to the next word; (2) we never do more than five words in one class period, and we are fairly quick about it. (3) a key point is to be specific in the sequencing of questions during this short word association activity. First I tell them *what the word means*, and then I ask them *how they can remember what it means or I say “Show me _____”*. Doing this creates a pleasant sharing of ideas. Using L1 in this way at the beginning of class allows us to connect *in a social way* first, before getting into the harder challenges of connecting in L2. It is a nice way to settle into class, highly recommended because it creates the proper mood right away and leads to a more personalized classroom. How?

Each time that we introduce a new word in the word association activity, we ask the class how WE can remember what the word means, as in:

Students, the first of our five words from this big list for today is les yeux. Les yeux means eyes. How can we remember what les yeux means?

When the class as a group chooses to remember that les yeux means eyes by making associations in their own minds and by expressing those associations out loud in the group in their own voices, *they create a community*. When the instructor says

Oh, class, Bryan said that we can remember that les yeux means eyes because of lazy eye!

she acknowledges Bryan and his immediate contribution to the group at the beginning of the class. Michael is also acknowledged for his equally intelligent and creative suggestion (expressed in his own voice) linking of *les yeux* to laser eye surgery.

The teacher, like Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, sends an

I'm going to like this class!

message out to the kids at the beginning of every class! That is a fine way to start a class - not commonly done in schools - with plenty of personal acknowledgement of how smart that particular group is. Flattery gets us everywhere in TPRS.

The phrase “how can we remember” is of key importance when we do the word association activity. How can WE remember it? Here we are all together, about to embark, after this brief period of doing five word associations, into L2 for the rest of the class period, and the inquisitive message from the instructor is

How can we all work together?

What can I learn from you?

How smart you kids are!

and the kids’ message to the class and to the instructor is,

Look how smart we are!

There is a tonal difference here. This inclusion of the individual in the group, this attention to what their own life experience has been enough to ask them how their life experience (how can WE remember) can help the larger group, this attention to the student as a person, is significant and merits further discussion in our discussion about what personalization really is.

Handout/Segment #2: One Word Images

“One Word Images” is a term that I use to describe a way I have of using principles of storytelling to teach exploratory classes that are not ready to do full stories, although I also use this technique with more experienced classes as well. It is a lot of fun for the kids, because it is about one of them, and is my own favorite TPRS activity, one that I could do for hours and hours on end, just to see what the kids come up with. It involves word lists and large amounts of personalization, and is very free form.

Just pick a word from a word list and ask the kids a specific set of questions about it, choosing from questions about:

- its quantity
- its size
- its color
- its intelligence level
- rich or poor
- mean or kind
- hair color
- eye color
- other physical characteristics – see *TPRS in a Year!*, Portrait Physique
- its mood
- where it is

- o when this occurred (time, day of the week, etc.)

Then just use circling to see where the class takes it as you ask more and more questions.

This simple process is actually very much like asking a story, but without the complexity. All that is needed for exploratory classes is to work first with a single noun, ask the questions listed above, and expand things, seeing how far the original word can go via simple circling with the students.

Keep in mind that the purpose of circling is not only to add repetitions to words but also to permit the adding in of details. The repetitions build the CI, and the new details build the (personalized) interest.

Such little images may not take things as far as a regular story, but so what? They are a lot easier to do, and they carry a feeling of real safety for those new to the method. Building confidence in new teachers is not something that TPRS is known for.

So the new teacher can just take a word like “casa”. Just say casa in front of the class in a tone of expectancy, like it is a special word that you and the kids are going to talk about in a special way. Repeat it like it is special.

Next, to establish meaning, write casa on the board and then in English. Point to the Spanish and then to the English and then pause to let it sink in to the student’s minds.

Next, you may want to associate the sound of the new word with some other image or sound or gesture - you could just put your hands over your head like a roof, and have the students do that. With other words, you may instead want to associate a sound, etc.

When you do this, the neurology is such that the kids will quickly decode it when it comes up later, relative to the number of repetitions you are able to get in via the circling you do around the word.

This word - casa - is just the first brick of a little image you are going to build! It may or may not become a scene, but for now it is just a little image, a little brick.

But in that image is a potential story! Each new word added to casa, as you work with your students without English to build the image, can contribute to the eventual building of a beautiful and hilarious story - a home run story.

So you say casa and if the students are beginners you then say una casa and then you ask about a color for the house and then you ask if the house is big or small and big or small in relation to what and soon a person walks into it and something happens and you are off and running with a story.

That’s it! You just build a little red house together and if it develops into anything more than that, great, if not, the kids are hearing and understanding the language via the circling you are doing, which is the point of the whole thing. And you are getting valuable training that will lead to your building an entire story using TPRS.

To repeat, the purpose of circling is to get these repetitions, of course, but circling also sets up little gaps after each question you ask into which the students can suggest details in the form of cute answers. When students suggest cute answers to your circled questions you are going to be successful with TPRS because your students will then have ownership in the process - it will be their image, their story.

It is normal! The kids in a TPRS class have to feel a fairly large degree of ownership in the building of the story or the story won't be interesting to them.

Thus, the building of a story must always be done by the group, not by the teacher alone. It also must be done without English except when you write each new word and its translation on the board, or when you allow the kids their two word suggestions in response to your questions.

So people new to TPRS may want to consider this idea. Instead of swinging for the fences, just try for the bunt or the single - just make contact with the ball by circling single words into little images first, and only after that into little scenes, and finally, when you are ready, ramp one of those little scenes into a story.

It is further suggested that this technique of building images from a single word, in addition to the PQA technique of circling with balls, be used to in all TPRS exploratory classes, as well as in all TPRS first year classes during the first 3-6 weeks of the year.

Handout/Segment #3: Circling with Balls

Each student has a half sheet of colored card stock. (I use a different color for each class I teach.) The students have written their names clearly in large letters across the top of the sheet, and below it a picture of a sport or musical instrument they play, adding a favorite pet or animal as well.

I teach in a middle school, and many of them draw a picture of a sport ball. If they don't have a favorite activity or a pet, I ask them to draw a picture of something they would like to be good at, or a pet they would like to have. Whether the information is imagined or real does not matter. The students will learn that in my class imagination is a great thing to have.

By asking the kids to do this on the first day of class, I catch their attention. The students see that their interests, and not a textbook, are going to be the subject of the class.

For the next several days, I ask the kids to place their papers facing me. Then, I just walk around the room, expressing authentic interest in each one while engaging them in conversation in the target language about what they have drawn.

As I walk around, I may notice is that Casey has drawn a volleyball under her name. So I say:

Classe, Casey joue au volley!

Next, I go to the board and write:

Casey joue au volley/Casey plays volleyball!

Then, pointing to and pausing at each single word I say, I begin a series of circled repetitive questions based on the original statement. While making these statements, I ask the class to respond to each one in some way, as indicated below in parentheses:

Statement: Class, Casey plays volleyball! (ohh!)

Question: Class, does Casey play volleyball? (yes)

Either/Or: Class, does Casey play volleyball or does Casey play soccer? (volleyball)

That's right, class, Casey plays volleyball! (ohh!)

Negative: Does Casey play soccer? (no) No, class, Casey doesn't play soccer. She plays volleyball! (ohh!)

3 for 1: Class, does Casey write novels? (no) That's right class, that's ridiculous, Casey doesn't write novels! She plays volleyball.

What: Class, what does Casey play? (volleyball) That's right, class, she plays volleyball!

Who: Class, who plays volleyball? (Casey) Correct, class, Casey plays volleyball.

When, where, why and other details can be added into this process, but only if relevant and only later in the year.

This questioning pattern is a staple of TPRS. Circling in this way has two big advantages:

It is personalized and hence interesting

It is easily comprehensible to students via the circled repetition of information

Circling is an amazing thing. When we circle slowly in the target language, our students understand what we are trying to say. They gain confidence and trust as they experience our efforts to reach them on a personal level.

Two things are required when circling: 1) that the instructor go extremely slowly and 2) that the instructor point to and pause at every single word they say. Thus, when I ask the class the question as per the above pattern:

Classe, est-ce que Casey joue au volley?/Class, does Casey play volleyball?

I must then go to a list of question words on the wall and point to the word that I just used, which in French is "est-ce que". Next to the word is its English translation, "is it that". I have three sets of question words and their translations in large poster form in different parts of my classroom.

Having three posters enables me to point to the question words wherever I happen to be in the room, which could be anywhere because I want to spend all my time walking around the room looking at and marveling at my kids' identity sheets, looking them in the eyes, getting to know them, and speaking to them in the target language.

I always give my students time to absorb all the words I say by including long enough pauses, up to five seconds. I must remember to continue to do this slow pointing and pausing all of the time, for the whole year.

As the students' familiarity with the question words grows, I stop pointing to things that they easily comprehend, but I continue pointing to anything that they do not yet know with ease. With anything new, I write it down with its translation before moving on.

I never say anything that they don't understand without writing it down in both the target language and in English, and pausing and pointing to it to let it sink in. I have two goals: 1) to make the language fully accessible to my students, and 2) to make the class about them.

As mentioned, in most beginning classes (in which the kids are between thirteen and fifteen years old), more than half of the students draw a picture of a sport. This, then, immediately brings a sense of play into the first few weeks of discussion. All you need is a number of sports balls of different types in your classroom.

I have three smaller sized basketballs (with a goal in the corner for relaxing between classes), two footballs, a soccer ball, a volleyball, a tennis ball, a plastic softball, etc. Some real balls (basketballs, softballs, footballs) are too unwieldy (they bend little fingers), so get the smaller ones.

As I circle in the target language about one kid's interest in their sport, I hold the ball associated with their sport, maybe tossing it around the room once or twice. I keep the ball away from the kid I'm talking about. This builds tension and interest.

When the kid finally gets the ball at the end of the circled PQA about them, they get to sit there with the ball in their hands or in front of them, now an important member of the group.

There is something about being able to toss the balls around that relaxes the students. Thus, if you walk by a desk and see the name "Reed" and there is a drawing of a basketball there, you say in amazement, "Class, Reed plays basketball!"

As you hold the basketball it is clear to everyone that Reed wants it, because he knows that being a basketball player is going to be an identity for him in your class this year. In fact, you may have already decided that he is Willis Reed, an old New York Knick from the Walt Frasier days of Knick glory in the NBA.

But you hold on to the basketball, tossing it to a few kids, but not to Reed, circling away:

Class, Willis Reed plays basketball! (Ohh!) Class, does Willis Reed play basketball? (yes) Class, does Willis Reed play basketball or does Abe Lincoln play basketball? (Willis Reed!) That's correct, class, Willis Reed plays basketball. Class, does Willis Reed play volleyball? (no!) Correct again, class, you are very smart! Willis Reed does not play volleyball, he plays basketball! Class, who plays basketball? That's right, class, Willis Reed plays basketball!

The circling with the balls builds tension and interest in the class. Whatever Reed's typical level of academic achievement in his other classes is, here he is 100% focused.

The kids are hearing language that is meaningful to them. They can understand this simple language that is about them. Waiting to give the ball to Reed only when the circling about him is over, as mentioned, somehow keeps the interest up and going through the entire process.

The great advantage of circling becomes apparent during these discussions about sports: circling keeps things going in the target language! You keep asking questions from the question word chart, and in just a few moments, almost magically, you have circled your way into personalized details. You learn from the class that Reed plays basketball behind Best Buy at five p.m. on Wednesdays in the summer, but only in the month of July. Your reaction to each one of these facts is, of course, one of incredulity.

As long as the instructor:

listens to the students' cute answers (which are in English but not more than one or two words long),
makes certain that student-provided information is driving the class,
pauses and points to all question words,
writes down all new words with their English translation,
pauses and points to any new words, doing comprehension checks and barometer checks (see below on assessment),
goes slowly and circles, using absolutely simple language,
conveys an honest sense of wonderment that these students do such wonderful things,

then the fluency portion of your year long language program is being addressed.

When circling, certain protocols must be established immediately about what kind of comments are acceptable. *The student is always the star*, and no derogatory comments are allowed for any reason in any way. We must always keep in mind the fragile nature of the egos of many of our students, in spite of how they may behave in class.

Therefore, if you are circling information about a certain student, and another student makes a comment about her boyfriend or some other personal bit of information, the teacher must channel that personal information into something imagined, usually in the direction of some celebrity. It is much easier for a student to be talked about in front of the class about having a celebrity as a boyfriend than something personal.

Any cute comment that is made at the expense of someone must be rigorously refuted by the teacher, and it must be made clear, even if a parent conference is necessary, that this rule will be followed to the letter. If a student does not feel safe in a classroom, they cannot learn. That is why we work so hard to build positive community through personalization early in the year, as per Alfie Kohn's research mentioned later in this text.

By thus starting the first class of the year in the target language, I send many messages to my students:

By speaking only in French I am sending the message that French, not English, is the language that we will be focusing on in class this year.

By slowly circling in the first minutes of the first class of the year, I am sending the message that slow circling will be the rule in my classroom all year. I am also sending the message that it is my job to make my message clear, and that all they have to do is sit back and listen.

By taking time to stop and laugh if something is funny, I am sending the message that we will laugh in my class this year.

By requiring that my students react with (Ohh!) when I state something, I am sending the message that everything I say is totally fascinating to them, and that it is their job to make sure I understand that they know that.

By immediately writing any new words on the board with their translations, pausing and pointing to Monsieur, Madame, Docteur, le Président, and le Petit Cochon, so that they can see and process every new word I use in English, I send

the message that we will use English as a basis for understanding words in French this year.

By praising them at every turn, I am sending the message that they will not be criticized on even the smallest level in my class this year, and that any hostile or controlling personality they may have brought with them as protection won't be needed.

By making constant eye contact with each of them, I send the message that I care if they are learning.

By discussing myself (my name and a sport that I do) first, I am sending the message that this class will be about us, the people in the room.

By supplying card stock for this activity, and by having the cards carefully collected and rubber banded at the end of class, I send the message that we keep our classroom clean and neat.

When I begin talking about THEIR cards, doing so with joy and a sense of great interest, I send the message that they are very important to me.

By giving a five minute assessment at the end of the class, I am sending the message that they will be tested often in the form of short, unannounced quizzes in my class, and that they won't have to memorize a lot of material outside of class for long, meaningless tests.

By choosing test questions that are reasonable and straightforward, I send the message that it is not my purpose to trick them on tests, but instead to grade them fairly. This motivates them.

By speaking French in such a simple and straightforward way on the first day of class, I build good will and ensure my students' success, thus insuring myself against the "October Collapse", which happens when the kids' gas tanks of good will that were full in August are empty because the teacher has insisted on teaching a simple thing in a complex and boring way.

A tip is to print the questionnaires on the back of the Circling with Balls cards, combining the third and fifth activities described herein. During the Circling with Balls activity, you can pick up the card and glance on the back.

When I did that in my session last week, my eyes fell on "a name that you would like to be called and why", and, when I flipped the card over, it said, "Her Majesty". I proceeded to incorporate that name during the circling.

Instead of just being a cardboard cutout in your class, Carol the Faceless Student becomes Her Majesty the Dancer. This brings important details about the student in much earlier than if you just circle with balls in the normal way. You therefore have the advantage of being a lot further along into the details right from the beginning of the class.

When you do that, you don't have to build interest in the class, it starts out interesting and skyrockets from there. The kids can't wait until you get to them. They don't even consciously notice that everything is in the target language, as per Krashen.

I remember when Michel took over the controls of our session from me, she had us fill out our Circling with Balls cards, and, although I was supposedly the instructor in that session, I deeply felt the needs of Ben, the Guy Who Rides Bikes, to be noticed by my classmates. I was unable to fully stay in my role as her circling coach, and this realization quite blew me away.

I will certainly combine the "name they want to be called" piece here with the regular Circling with Balls activity on the first day of class on the first day of each school year. I want to be clear - I am saying that, on the first day of class, when a student is talked about in terms of what they do and then when the name that they want to be called is used in that discussion, it is much more powerful than the Circling with Balls activity alone.

Handout/Segment #4: Word Chunk Team Activity

Chunking – grouping words – offers students new to the language simple comprehensible input (CI), paving the way for more complex language and, eventually, stories. At the same time, this activity engages students in fun and meaningful group activities.

It is used in exploratory classes and at the beginning of the year in year long classes. It reinforces the words, builds a sense of play, group trust, group identities, and teaches the kids to carefully listen to L2. We use our wall word lists in this activity. Here is the process:

1. After teaching, gesturing, and working individually with the words on the wall list (whatever words you are using to start the year – mine align with district benchmarks), you then put the kids into groups, and ask them to come up with a silly group name, plus a motion or sound to go with that name.
2. Then make up little combos (chunks) of words from the wall list, keeping them really simple at first. For example, you look at the list and see the word “hand” and the word “yell” and so you say, “the hand yells” in L2. It doesn’t have to make sense, and is often better if it doesn’t, because it teaches them to decode with greater attention.
3. Each group then tries to translate what they hear after consulting with each other. They work together to come up with the correct translation. You call on the first group to raise their hand, trying to get a correct translation of the word chunk question you asked, and, if it is right, their group gets six attempts at a basket (in under one minute) or some other little reward in class. I have a small basketball court, fairly authentic like in arcades, and it really works to get them to listen, because they all want to shoot for points and show off for their classmates.
4. Just remember that their group name and sign is a big part of this. When I call on them they have to make their group sign *in perfect synchronization* between all group members. If they can’t do that, they don’t get the question. I know that sounds over the top, but if you see it in action you can see what this synchronization detail does for the game. This activity does all sorts of things for the class chemistry. It is fun, the time goes by quickly, there is a lot of laughter, and there is a tremendous level of auditory focus on L2, with readily apparent auditory gains early on in the year, setting the stage for successful stories later in the year.

For example, the members of the group known as the “Conquistadores”, when I say something like “the house is not red” (house and red being on the word list), have to jump up and, exactly at the same moment, clap and yell “Olé” (the group sign they

made up to go with their name) together. All have to do it. If it isn't perfect, the class bemoans them for their slackness, and other groups vie for the privilege of answering the question.

Eventually, a group does their group sign perfectly and answers correctly, and so they get to go to "the line" at the basketball hoop, for three shots for every correct answer. They take the scoring very seriously, and just about any kid in class can tell you how many points each group has at any time during the week, a thing that has never ceased to amaze me about middle school students.

So, when I say it is a chunking activity, I mean that I am moving them, right at the beginning of the year, from knowing just single words to knowing words that I arbitrarily chunk together during our game.

You should see the level of involvement. They think they are playing a game, but they are doing some serious auditory decoding in the first weeks of the year, beautifully preparing for stories.

I once wrote a response to a question on this Word Chunk Activity from a colleague who asked about sourpusses – how to get them involved in this game? I include part of it here:

Whenever the team has to synchronize their team sign, little Joyless Johnny, bless his young heart, is put on the spot by the rest of the group to participate. Even if his mind is clearly not going to participate, his body must, or face the wrath of the class. That is why it works in my room, anyway - it is the synchronized sign that keeps the sourpusses in the game.

But, if there is a REAL sourpuss, I tell them that I need their help to judge the synchronicity reactions of the teams, and that kid takes a stool and sits next to me and look at one half of the room and I look at the other half and we decide together who had their hand up first. They don't get to play, but now they have a job that I need them for, and the result is that the sourpuss is neutralized. I also authentically need this judge to see what group got their hand up first.

This asking kids to judge the action also works for native speakers. I put them in front of the room with me and they pick out which group was first. They also help me by making up questions. They just look at the word chart and make up chunks and alternate with me in directing the action. The native speakers really get into making up word chunk questions and being like referees in choosing the first group with their hand up and, really, doing everything the teacher is doing, which is what native speakers should be doing in classrooms that they shouldn't, in the first place, even be in.

As a powerful tool for CI and for team building, I highly recommend the Word Chunk Team activity. It works best in seventh grade exploratories, whose (usually six week classes) are too short to get into stories, but my eighth graders want to play it everyday and when I say no they see it as a form of punishment! I allow them fifteen minutes of this game at the end of the week as a reward for good storytelling work.

By the way, this activity, along with dictation, keeps them focused at the end of the year when many kids and teachers have checked out already. That is something to remember. It is fun, and the synchronicity aspect described above

seems to be a factor in making the WCT activity work at a higher, more focused, level.

Every once in a while, with the word lists, you can do a rote two minute activity to reinforce vocabulary. Just point the laser pointer at *only one* of the columns of words on the word lists (only one list is given above, but I have a total of nine covering all the required district vocabulary for one year]. Chorally go down the list. Great vocabulary builder and the kids seem to really enjoy it.

Spanish Sample Word List

levántate	boca	carro
siéntate	ojos	tira la pelota
rápido	mesa	corta
espacio	nariz	le da, dale
camina	chico	a la derecha
salta	muchacho	a la izquierda
parate	chica	pelo
da una vuelta	muchacha	pecho
adelante	silla	pie
atrás	piso	reloj
levanta	techo	toma
baja	puerta	casa
mano	ventana	brazo
pierna	come	lápiz
grita	pescado	pluma
suave	llora	grande
fuerte	rie	pequeño
toca	escribe	pone
señala	dibuja	hermosa
pega	oreja	sonríe
cabeza	rodilla	una vez
		me gusta

French Sample Word List

on se lève	tête	voiture
on s'assied	bouche	lance
rapidement	les yeux	coupe
lentement	table	lui donne
marche	nez	lui dit
saute	garçon	coupe
arrête	filie	prend
on se tourne	chaise	boit
devant	plafond	maison
derrière	plancher	bras
lève	porte	crayon
baisse	fenêtre	style
main	mange	à gauche
jambe	poisson	à droite
crie	pleure	cheveux
doucement	rit	poitrine
fort	écrit	ped
touche	dessine	montre (n.)
montre (v.)	oreille	grand
frappe	genou	petit

pose
joli

sourit
une fois

j'aime

Handout/Segment #5: Questionnaires

The questionnaire below was created by Anne Lambert. It can be used all year as an amazing source of information to you. If you learn that Catherine has two horses, developing that true statement into all kinds of imaginative comprehensible input over the course of the year greatly strengthens the quality of the PQA and extended PQA that you provide in your classroom.

Whether you use the questionnaire as a means of embellishing PQA, or just as a way to get to know the kids better at the start of the year, which is our topic here, you will find it *a most useful tool* in PQA and extended PQA. Think of the questionnaire as a sort of foundation on which you can build truly personalized and meaningful classes. A downloadable version can be found at www.benslavic.com – posters, etc. – for your use.

Here Anne describes how she uses her questionnaires at the beginning of the year., year:

“I feel strongly that, besides the three phrases, the rest of the language in a story script should be, at the very least, familiar to the students, if not previously acquired and thus already part of their repertoire. In order to build that repertoire, I do not start the year with stories per se; rather, I work intensively with material provided in the students’ responses to questions on my TPRS questionnaire. I scan the questionnaires for an interesting piece of information and spin little scenes out of it. I choose one or two students to talk about each day. In this way, I cover structures such as *likes, is, wants, goes, has, eats, and plays*, in the first 6-8 weeks of school. This creates a body of acquired language from which we may begin working with the scripts. It also gives me a chance to get to know the students, and communicates to them that they are important in my class. Below is an example of what one such scene, circled (PQA’d) out of the information that Chris plays bass guitar and Elliot sings.”

Chris plays bass guitar in a band. Elliot sings in the band. The band is called “Mr. Rogers’ Band”. It is a gospel band. Elliot sings in Pig Latin. The concert is in jail. Mini-Me is in jail because he is too short. Mini-Me cries and dances the Macarena.

I asked Anne to elaborate on the above:

Q. How long do scenes like that take to create?

A. *That little scene probably took about one 40-minute period, very early in the year.*

Q. Do you work with two kids per class like this for three academic weeks (15 classes x 2 kids)?

A. *The two kids per class thing is not carved in stone. With music, it was easy to find two kids and put them in a band. When I talk about what someone likes to eat, for example, I might make it only about them. I don’t really know going in. Normally I start each class having chosen one fact about one kid from his questionnaire. Sometimes others get added in, sometimes they don’t. Three weeks is not long enough. It’s more like 4-6 weeks. In between we may do a little song or some counting, or Simon says. But 90% of what we do is these little stories.*

Q. Do you get into more or less detail than in the scene you described above?

A. *The amount of detail is about right. Maybe more as time passes. But not necessarily.*

Anne concluded:

I call the use of the questionnaires my first quarter curriculum. It's easy to write a curriculum guide with it. Students will be able to tell where they live, how old they are, what they like, etc. Sounds just like the old textbook days, doesn't it?

Here is Anne's questionnaire:

Questionnaire

Directions: please fill this out *thoughtfully*, combining made up and real answers. Blend *a little* of your real personality into *a lot* of a make believe personality:

Name _____

Nickname _____

Name you wish you could have

Job: _____

A job you would like to have

Any interesting or unusual facts about you

A celebrity you find attractive and why

Favorite musical groups/athletes and why

A pet and their name _____

A pet you would like to have and their name

Something you don't like and why

Something you don't have but really want

Some unusual thing you have

Talents/abilities, however strange

Someone or something you fear and why

Weird chores you have to do

A food you don't like

If the kids don't fill out the questionnaires with a lot of really cool detail and well thought out answers, it is because you are somehow sending them the message that you aren't really that interested in what they write on them.

If, on the other hand, in the first few weeks of the year, they see that you attach a lot of importance to them, and use them a lot in the classroom, then many of them will get that the class is about them, and that their peers will be forming opinions about them from what you say about them and from the little scenes you create with the information from the questionnaires, etc.

Then they will ask for their questionnaires back. When that happens, you know that you are then using the questionnaires to their maximum effectiveness, and that your classroom is well on its way to being a real TPRS classroom, complete with plenty of P.

Note that there is room for three names in the questionnaire. I strongly feel that one of the prime ways to personalize a classroom at the beginning of the year is to cultivate as many names for each student as possible during the course of the year. It is so easy to let even more than three names emerge from the fun of the PQA, as described in the next section.

Handout/Segments #6: The Naming Process

[Note: the naming process is not a specific activity but one that is constantly going on during all L2 personalization activities described herein, all year long]

Building identities for our students via the right names is arguably the most important aspect of all pre-story personalization activities, indeed, of all activities we do all year. Finding the right names and using them often injects a level of fun and interest to the class that is impossible to describe. It results in fantastic gains and is a pillar of TPRS overall.

There is no rush to get the names out. Instead, the names emerge organically, that is to say, from basic and authentic human interaction as it occurs with your students in a natural way.

You dance into an identity with a kid. You may perhaps learn a little fact in class while circling with sports balls or in some other identity building activity. Or the fact may emerge in the hallway. It may look so small. But you keep it, keep it, in your mind, like a treasure, and when the right moment arrives in class, you play the name.

Names emerge. This is such a fine thing. You are a watcher of the process, a contributor, to be sure, but you don't have to be clever and put the naming game all on yourself. They don't want you to. They want in on their names.

They may act amused if you tell them that they are Pablo, but they resent it on some level. You labeled them without getting to know them. Why do that, when the creation of funny, organically emerging names that reflect the real kid, is so crucial, so crucial, to your success.

When they have seen you pull an organic name from one kid, they are just waiting to see what you do with them. Even if it takes seven months, it is still better than the other way of branding.

So go ahead, get to know them, and wait, wait, and the right name - the one most honoring to them - will emerge. Some names happen in the first interchange of the first class because of something the kid did that was unique and worthy of a cool name right away.

Or it may take forever, like with The Boy Who Goes in Front (who had walls up, walls). So I waited, waited, and moved my chair figuratively closer just a few millimeters every day for six months, waiting for his name to emerge.

Naming kids is a very delicate little art form of waiting, waiting, and then a little thought will appear in class, or some little event that no one but you notice happens, because you are watching, watching, because you know that meaningfully personalizing your classroom is what you want to do.

You would no more tell a kid their name then tell them a story. Instead, by asking, asking for information about them, about them, you suggest from what you know, and you house it in humor.

As you stand by your door on hall duty between classes, you notice that a kid over there who never says anything in class just said to a friend in the hallway (walking by your door) that he ate nine donuts from Albertson's in five minutes this summer."

This is major information. So you yell down the hallway how impressed you are with that and ask him if you can use that in class and he mumbles something but you see in his eye a look of recognition and from that little look emerges not just the name but him as your student with an identity and now, only now, can you set yourself to the task of teaching Donut Master.

Because when a kid has an identity everything changes. In class, now, you cleverly work Donut Master into the discussion. Notice I didn't say story - it's too early for that and also I think that in TPRS we put way too much focus on the story.

Then, when and if you sense that the kid who ate all the donuts wants and invites you to circle that poached information into the class discussion, you go for it.

And because of this one little thing you have done, the class works for this kid. You have done what your most important charge is as a teacher - you have made a kid feel important in your classroom.

And you have done so without bringing up anything of a truly personal nature. These aren't good days to do that. We focus on the wonderful, funny things about them only. So, me at least, I wait, wait, and use names as glue in the classroom process, and the kids become more than mere Pablos and Marie-Laures, etc.

Conclusions

Before even thinking about getting into stories, we need to get some degree of command of at least three (of the many) skills used in TPRS. Then we need to practice them in the form of the five simple activities described above. *It only looks like* the five activities are designed to teach the language - that is not their real purpose. They are designed to train the students in the rules of their TPRS classroom, to train the students in the game of CI, to place the focus on the kids and personalize the classroom, and to give the teacher new to storytelling some "batting practice" in the skills of Pause and Point, SLOW, and Circling before actually "taking the field" in stories.

Here, then, is the *hidden agenda* of each activity described above:

Word Association Activity - by asking students "how can we remember that _____ means _____", or "show me _____" we immediately involve them in the classroom

process, using English. To start out each class in the target language would immediately create a kind of artificial distance between the instructor and the student. Once a few students have made their suggestions, and after a few others have suggested a gesture for each of the five words (all done in just a few minutes), the way is opened for the instructor *to praise them* for their suggestions. *This praise creates a positive bond between everyone in the classroom.*

One Word Images – by asking the class questions about the details of the image, the *students create the image*, not the instructor. All the instructor does is ask questions from the list on page 10 above. This empowers and unifies the class. It prepares the way for stories. It gives the instructor all sorts of options to bring in other images, make comparisons, and generally follow a very free, thus interesting, CI process. Moreover, four supremely important goals are achieved through one word images: 1) the rules are taught, 2) the game of CI is taught, 3) the focus is on what *the kids* can create, and 4) the teacher gets valuable practice in the three crucial TPRS skills of Point and Pause, SLOW, and Circling.

Circling With Balls – this brings the personalization. The instructor is able in this activity *to draw attention to the unique real life skills and personal interests of each student* in the room, thus establishing a set of basic classroom information about each student which is then integrated into stories weeks later, at the end of this starting the year process.

Word Chunk Team Activity – this is about *inclusion*. By becoming a member of a smaller subgroup of kids from the beginning of the year, students who normally create a distance between themselves and the class are brought into accountability with those few other students on their team. This creates a more cohesive class. A second goal of this activity is to apply the single words learned in the word association activity to chunks of words, thus training the students to decipher more than just individual words, a necessary skill for stories.

Questionnaires – an expansion of the Circling with Balls activity, the questionnaires *further personalize the classroom*, paving the way for personalized stories in a powerful way. When the instructor creates little scenes, PQA and extended PQA, from the information in the questionnaires, besides moving towards greater personalization, the class is given excellent *practice in following the rules*, and *the instructor is able to get further practice* in the use of CI before beginning stories.

One Further Note

As the five above activities are going on, one student generates quizzes as described above and another writes down the details about the story or PQA for that day. I use differently colored composition notebooks for this, red for the student who writes the quizzes, and green for the student who writes down the story line.

The idea with the red notebook is that, when a bright student writes the quiz, it is ready to go in those hurried last few minutes of class when the quiz must be given quickly. This is based on the idea that we need grades for our gradebooks. When the student during class writes simple quizzes in L1 that have simple (either yes or no spelled correctly in L2) answers, everything is made easier for the teacher.

The idea with the green notebook is that, lacking a simplified description of some of the main details of the story, the teacher is unable to remember them to create the

reading for the next day. When a student writes down in the green notebook the details of the CI (not necessarily a story but any PQA, etc. – we can test on anything) as they happen in class, the way is paved for the teacher to write the reading for the next day of class without trying doing so from memory, which is impossible after a day of five classes.