



Learning Centers in Action **by Gabrielle Corley**

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Walking into Mr. Gomez's 6th grade classroom is a unique experience. As you enter, there is a low-level buzz of conversation, and a feel of excited energy in the room. You see several students on beanbag chairs reading quietly. Another group of students is huddled over a table full of art supplies, busily crafting what looks like a small village. A third group is using laptops while sitting in a circle on the floor, viewing videos from [Educate.Today](#) that are providing background information on the subject they are engaging with. You know that Mr. Gomez teaches Language Arts, but he is currently listening to a student who is proposing a project to him, while the rest of the class goes about their own work. What's going on in here? You are witnessing Learning Centers in action!

A learning center is an area within the classroom that provides students with exciting and interesting experiences to practice, enrich, reteach, and enhance their learning. They are typically filled with the tools the students need to do those activities. Far from allowing Mr. Gomez to relax and have a cup of coffee, the activities are carefully crafted to allow student choice while exploring concepts and making connections. Mr. Gomez has spent a lot of time getting to know his students, and their needs and abilities. He knows they need differentiation in terms of their interests, readiness and learning styles, and he knows they will retain learning best by applying it in authentic ways. He has spent time teaching the students how to learn on their own by creating, communicating, and practicing procedures. He groups the students with intention based on the nature and purpose of the activities. He makes sure the tasks are interesting, challenging, and will provide students the opportunity to practice skills in authentic ways. And, although he looks like he is just chatting with a student, he has a plan in place to monitor student progress so that he knows when they need support or scaffolding, and when they need a further challenge.

How do I know all that? Because Mr. Gomez (not his real name or grade level) was a teacher I had the pleasure of working with during my career. I witnessed his classroom go from chaos to calm focused learning as he practiced the art of using Learning Centers. Problem-based learning was becoming a focus for our district's teaching staff, and we worked to establish this practice in many ways.

Learning Centers are a great way to provide students with authentic learning, and the chance to explore personal interests. Mr. Gomez's students had read a novel together, but as an alternative to books reports, he wanted them to explore characterization, setting, and theme from their

readings. These key concepts were the goal of the learning, but students could choose how to get there from a menu of options. Using Learning Centers allows students to develop a sense of ownership over their learning, while using critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

And what exactly were the students doing that day in Mr. Gomez's classroom to keep learning from their reading of *Milkweed*, (2003 by Jerry Spinelli)? The group on the beanbag chairs was reading background information on the main theme of the novel – war and the Holocaust and the impact on the Jewish community to make connections with their existing knowledge. The students at the arts table were re-creating the ghetto that main character lived in during WWII in Warsaw, Poland to make comparisons to life today and help viewers understand the setting. The students using the laptops needed some visuals to understand the experiences of Holocaust survivors and other people affected by the war, so they were viewing resources from [Educate.Today](#), which has a rich collection of first person authentic videos on many topics. Mr. Gomez? He finished conferencing with the student who wanted to do an independent choice project, and then he had that well-deserved cup of coffee.

Bibliography:

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