

# Hanlon's Razor

Bill Hanlon

Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity

*What works is work!*

## ~Time on Task~ Warm-ups

State and local school districts usually determine the classroom time available to teachers and students. However, regardless of the quantity of time allocated to classroom instruction, it is the classroom teacher and school administrator who determine the effectiveness of the time allotted.

According to a survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators, teachers identify student discipline as the single greatest factor that decreases time on task in the classroom. Generally, teachers with well-managed classrooms, have fewer disciplinary problems. These classrooms typically have teachers who have established rules and procedures are in the classroom when the students arrive, and begin class promptly. They reduce the “wear and tear” on themselves and students by establishing procedures for make-up work, they arrange their room to accommodate their teaching philosophy and style, and they develop routines that increase overall efficiency. The benefits of establishing these classroom procedures and routines become apparent as the total time on task approaches the allocated time.

The amount of instructional time wasted on “warm-ups” approaches 25% in a typical instructional period in many math classrooms. That’s way over the top! A typical math class seems to start with the warm-up, teachers give the students 15 to 20 minutes to complete it, then spend time going over it. For students that don’t know how to do the problems, this results in a lot of wasted time. Warm-ups were introduced as a classroom management tool, a way to get students in class and on task, not leaving students opportunity to find trouble. It has somehow evolved and intruded upon instructional time.

My recommendation is to use class time more effectively to support student learning. Rather than starting class with a warm-up, teachers should start class immediately by being in the front of the room reviewing recently learned material. A suggestion might be to quickly review the material taught the day before by going over one or two problems from the previous day’s student notes or homework assignment to refresh their memory. Quickly reviewing definitions, formula, or procedures. **The review should be quick, crisp, focused and with purpose.** Teachers then might briefly explain how that material will be used as a building block in today’s lesson.

Quickly reviewing the material from the day before by choosing either homework problems or examples that were used in the notes, this could also cut down on the time needed to address homework difficulties since they are being addressed in the review.

Here's what the research says about starting class immediately:

*When teachers begin class immediately, students view them as better prepared, more organized and systematic in instruction, and better able to explain the material. Students also see these teachers as better classroom managers, friendlier, less punitive, more consistent and predictable, and as one who values student learning.*

Besides supposedly keeping students busy and out of trouble, some teachers argue they use warm-ups to address student deficiencies. While I'd like to agree, my experience tells me these are not very effective. The recommendation to address student deficiencies is to use the long-term review scheduled at the end of the class. With four to seven minutes left in class, teachers would identify a deficiency, take a minute or two to review that concept or skill, then have students try a problem or two. That skill can be worked on for a few days depending upon the need of the students. The knowledge, concept or skill being addressed in a review should be based on data – not a whim.

Through testing, a number of areas of weaknesses have been identified. If you visit the rpdp website, [www.rpdp.net](http://www.rpdp.net), click on math, then link to the appropriate grade level or HSPE, you will find Long-Term Memory Reviews (LTMR) based on the standards that teachers can quickly download and use in their classroom to address student deficiencies.

Routines like beginning class immediately, quickly reviewing recently taught material using examples from student notes or homework assignments, orally reciting new material, and using a long term review will result in more focused lessons that more effectively use the amount of instructional time. That time will allow teachers to more fully and appropriately develop concepts and skills to make students more comfortable in their knowledge, understanding, an application of math – resulting in increased student achievement.

School administrators should not only check to ensure that instructional time is being maximized by effective routines, they should also check to make sure students come to class prepared. That would suggest they have pencils, notebooks, and their textbooks. These should be school-wide expectations.

Quality time on task is not the “silver bullet” that can cure all the problems facing education. However, using the allotted instructional time more effectively and efficiently will increase instructional time resulting in increased student achievement. The cost to implement – nothing!