The Overhead Projector: Don’t Overlook It

by David Ginsburg

A key to keeping students on task is closing their window of opportunity to get off task. And never is that window more wide open than when you turn your back to write on the board. Case in point, my first-year classroom, where the antics kids pulled as I wrote on the board included fighting, rubbing gum into classmates’ hair, sneaking out of class, tossing things—backpacks, hats, keys, jackets, shoes—out the window, and yes, throwing books at me.

Even if your students are less rowdy or daring than mine were, they aren’t going to face forward with their hands folded, mouths shut, and eyes open as you write on the board. They’re going to pass notes or talk or rest their heads on their desks. Each time you finish writing, you must therefore regain students’ attention before resuming your lesson. In the process, you’ve lost everything: time, momentum, enthusiasm, patience, and, the more you go through this, your voice.

Fortunately, there’s an easy way to eliminate the chaos and inefficiency associated with writing on the board: don’t write on the board. Instead, use an overhead projector (or LCD projector or SMART Board™), guaranteed to provide a more orderly and, in turn, educational classroom. Think this overstates the power of the projector? Well, let’s first consider why it’s more effective than the board. Then we’ll move on to some pointers for using your projector to its full potential.

One reason students are likely to act out when you write on the board is that they can get away with it. (I never did find out who threw those books at me!) Another is that they need to wait for you to finish writing and get out of their way before they can copy your notes. You might address this by reading aloud as you write, but your voice tends to be muffled when you’re facing the board, adding to the commotion, with students yelling at you to repeat yourself or asking each other what you said. The projector prevents these problems by letting you face students at all times, and by letting students see your presentation, as you’re presenting it.

Still, using a projector won’t eliminate all temptations for kids to act out. But it will let you detect and nip misconduct without losing instructional time. Say, for instance, you’re presenting
at the projector when you notice John’s eyes shifting back and forth between Cathy to his left and Darrell to his right. John has a history of swiping stuff off classmates’ desks—something easy to do when you write on the board—so what he’s doing is obvious: stalking his next prey, Cathy’s eraser or Darrell’s notebook. But since you see what’s going on, and John realizes it, he keeps his hands to himself. And if John is undaunted, or unaware that you’re onto him, you can walk toward his desk and stand beside him, all the while continuing your presentation. Now you’re sure to thwart him, since few kids are bold enough to act out while being staked out. In either case, a potential interruption averted.

Once again, though, the reasons for using a projector go beyond deterring misconduct, for the projector is an incomparable instructional and classroom management aid, offering several other advantages over the board:

1. **You’re more mobile.** By preparing notes on transparencies (or the computer if you use an LCD or SMART Board™) ahead of time instead of writing them on the board during class, you can roam the room without delaying your lessons. This not only lets you stake out would-be troublemakers, but makes for a stronger style, with students more engaged when you stroll down the aisles or around the perimeter of the room than when you plant yourself at the front. (You could also gain mobility by pre-recording notes on the board, but space is limited, making it hard to fit all your notes—especially if you teach more than one subject. And the more notes you squeeze onto the board, the more confused or distracted students will be.)

2. **Students are more easily captivated.** As much time as kids spend in front of TV, video games, and computers, it stands to reason that they would be more drawn to a bright overhead screen than to a dull chalkboard or a whiteboard. Indeed, there’s no quicker—or quieter—way to captivate students than simply turning on the projector. Even when my students entered class keyed up about an upcoming party or last night’s game, they settled down once I turned on the projector.

3. **Notes are more visible and legible.** It’s much easier for students to see and read notes projected onto an overhead screen than those scrawled onto the board. Except, that is,
when you inadvertently block the screen. But after students bring this to your attention a few times—“excuse me, you’re not made of glass”—you’ll stop doing it.

4. **Student participation increases.** When you switch from the board to a projector, more students will be willing to present work in front of the class. Why the rise in participation? It’s hard to say for sure, but judging from students’ enthusiasm as they address the class from the projector, it appears that they feel “cooler” using a projector than they do writing on the board. And why blow a chance for students to feel cool through constructive behavior?

5. **Notes can be recycled.** You can store and reuse lessons prepared on transparencies (or the computer), sparing the hassle of erasing and rewriting notes on the board from year to year or, even more inefficient, one class period to the next.

The ultimate reason, of course, to use a projector is its effect on learning: students take more and better notes, ask more questions, and comprehend more material when you use a projector than they do when you rely on the board. The only catch is that you must be proficient with your projector, which you might think is a no-brainer, since using a projector seems so straightforward: just flip it on and you’re ready to go. Yet as with any teaching technique, there are things you must do when using a projector in order to realize its full benefits:

1. **Operate the on-off switch actively.** A typical class period involves a series of transitions, each requiring students to redirect their attention—from the overhead screen to a classmate, from a classmate to you, from you to the textbook, from the textbook back to the overhead screen, and so on. You can facilitate many of these transitions by making sure the projector is on when it should be on, and off (or covered or switched to a blank screen when using an LCD or SMART Board™) when it should be off. As a rule, only have the projector on when you want students to read, record, or refer to what’s on the screen. This may sound simple, but not when you consider how spontaneous some transitions are. Imagine, for example, that you’re presenting a lesson using the projector when a student asks a question that goes beyond the point currently being addressed. Still, it’s a question—as most of students’ questions are—that deserves your
and the entire class’ attention. It’s important, therefore, to shut off the projector before responding, to avoid dividing students’ attention between your response and what’s on the screen. By actively managing the on-off switch like this, you’ll establish a non-verbal cue telling students where their attention should be at any given time.

2. **Use a cover sheet.** When presenting lessons on the projector, use a cover sheet (or an automated scrolling feature if you’re using PowerPoint® or a SMART Board™) to keep students focused on the point you’re currently discussing. If, for example, I were presenting this list of overhead tips, I would begin with a sheet of paper covering the entire list except item #1, and would slide the paper down to reveal item #2 only after concluding the discussion of #1.

3. **Discuss handouts before distributing them.** Many students, in their zeal to start an assignment, tune you out as you go over the directions, resulting in lots of mistakes—and accusations that you hadn’t explained the assignment clearly. Prevent this by withholding assignments until you’ve reviewed the directions using the projector. The same goes for administrative documents such as a course syllabus, which you might be inclined to pass out to students before going over it. But if you do this, instead of following along with you, students will jump ahead to those sections that matter most to them: class requirements and grading policy, of course. A better idea is to first go over the syllabus on the overhead, one section at a time (using a cover sheet or scrolling feature as described above).

4. **Prepare notes on the computer.** Recall that one of the benefits of using a projector is that you can store and reuse your notes. Still, it’s inevitable that you’ll need to edit your notes from year to year. To make it easy to do so, and to make your notes as legible as possible, input and save your lessons on a computer—using word processing software, PowerPoint®, etc.—instead of writing them out by hand. (Note: be sure to use a font size students can read easily on the overhead screen—22 is about right for most common fonts.)
5. **Preserve original notes by using overlays.** Even when you prepare notes on transparencies ahead of time, you’ll often need to add to them during lessons. (I, in fact, omit key information on purpose, prompting students to come up with the missing information, which I then fill in on the projector.) In such cases, you’ll need to restore your transparencies to their original state before presenting the same lesson to another class. Unfortunately, as you wipe off the stuff you added, you’re bound to erase or smudge your original notes too. Guard against this by taping a blank transparency over your pre-printed transparency, allowing you to write over your original notes instead of directly onto them.

6. **Store extra bulbs.** The more you rely on the projector, the more lost you’ll be without it, so always keep a spare light bulb on hand. That way, there’s no need to frantically transfer notes onto the board when a bulb burns out. Just relax, and replace it, which only takes a minute or two for most machines. (Better yet, get a projector that houses two bulbs so that all you have to do is flip a switch to activate the second bulb when the first one burns out.)

7. **Use a cart.** Keep your projector on a cart rather than on a desk. Not only so you can roll it out of the way when you’re not using it, but also because your cart can double as an organizational center (e.g., I kept each day’s handouts in heavy duty file folders, one per class, taped to the sides of the cart).

Do these things and you’ll agree that the overhead projector is a key to maximizing instructional time and effectiveness. So don’t overlook it.