

Using One Executive Function Strategy to Meet Multiple Skill Need

The creative aspect of teaching extends beyond designing an inviting and engaging learning environment. Daily, we use our creative juices to:

- Deliver meaningful and engaging instructional content,
- Adapt, modify, or reteach curriculum for specific students,
- Develop and implement enrichment activities,
- Meet curricular timelines,
- Design instructional materials and resources, and
- Teach strategies to support instructional content or the everyday skills a student needs to understand, retain and generalize the content taught.

Strategies have become part of our everyday instructional toolbox. There are numerous curricular based strategies for math, reading, writing, and remembering information which can be easily woven into our daily instructional practices because they meld with the content being taught and do not detract from instructional time. As well, there are executive function (EF) skill strategies that every student needs to have as part of their skill set. We define EF skills as a group of brain-based skills that help students to self-regulate in both an academic and personal environment. Executive function skills continue to develop through adolescence. Since many of these EF skills do not directly link to instructional content and processes, the teaching of EF skills can be thought of as a daunting task that detracts from much needed instructional time. But, using your creative skills as a teacher you can overcome this roadblock by teaching one strategy that can be tweaked to meet my EF skill needs.

Dreamweaver is one such strategy that is easy to learn and with a bit of creative, flexible thinking, can be used in a variety of ways. This strategy is described below.

Have the participants form a circle. You, as the teacher, start the strategy by stating the purpose that is an icebreaker in this case. The next step is to model the strategy. Holding a ball of twine in one hand, and the end of the twine in the other hand, model an appropriate response. For example, “My name is Mrs. Hale, and I teach fourth grade at Grove Park Elementary School. My favorite food is spaghetti”. Next, toss the ball of twine to another student in the circle while continuing to hold on to the end. That student then introduces him or herself. A rule of the activity is that the only one who can speak is the one holding the ball of twine. This process is continued until each participant has had a turn. The tossing of the twine from student to student creates an intricate web design which the students enjoy seeing. If a person in the circle does not wish to take part in the activity, allow them to pass and move on to the next student. For younger students, the students may be seated on the floor in a circle and roll the ball to each other. Now, let’s take the Dreamweaver Strategy and add our creative spin, leading to a diverse use of this strategy resulting in the addressing of several executive function skills.

The beauty of this strategy is that it works for diverse age groups, students with and without disabilities, different cognitive levels, etc. The end result of using this strategy is also multi-faceted in that students will be using different executive functions through the process of participating in the Dreamweaver Strategy. Let’s look at the diversity of this strategy based on different executive functions and how it might be used for the various EFs.

If the Dreamweaver is being used as an icebreaker as in the example above, executive function areas targeted include:

1. **Working Memory**—Students must remember the directions for what they need to say about themselves when it is their turn. Students with working memory issues can be asked to name types of items. This requires them to retrieve items from their memory while others are waiting for their response thus increasing processing and response speed. It also requires them to remember what items have already been named.
2. **Organization of Thoughts and Materials**—Students may be asked to give their name, age and favorite food in that order. Students also must keep the twine in an organized ball so that it throws in a straight line. It is important to keep the ball tightly wound before throwing so that it goes in a straight line.
3. **Sequencing**—Students need to remember who has and has not caught the twine.
4. **Prioritization**—Students may be asked to name their “favorite” team.

5. **Attending**—Students are required to pay attention to see when the ball will be tossed to them. Also, students need to pay attention in order to follow the topic at hand.
6. **Initiating**—Students must start to talk immediately rather than having much wait time. This helps with processing speed.
7. **Communication**—Students get practice speaking in a group. They also have to verbally respond to the topic at hand.
8. **Inhibiting**—Students are required to wait until their turn to speak by being the target of the throw.
9. **Planning**—Students have to think about what he or she is going to say before they catch the twine.
10. **Cognitive Flexibility**—Students are required to think about catching the ball and planning what he or she is going to say. It also requires the student to look at who has not had a turn, decide who to throw it to and determine how hard to throw or roll the ball so that it gets there.
11. **Focusing**—Students must maintain focus so that he or she knows when the ball is coming their way.
12. **Social/emotional**—The student is the main point of attention for a brief time. This is good practice for students who are hesitant to volunteer to speak in groups.
13. **Managing Time**—Students must think about how long it will take to say what they want to say and stay within that time limit.

In addition to using Dreamweaver as an icebreaker, it can be used to review routines, steps in a task, recall of events, sharing information, practicing appropriate communication skills, etc.