

FIRST PERSON

The Lost Art of Teaching Soundly Structured Lessons

By Mike Schmoker Published Online: June 4, 2013

.....There are only a few such game-changing interventions available to educators, but they do more to determine how many students we can educate than all else. One of them is a well-structured lesson, built around certain primary elements. These familiar elements (which I'll describe shortly) are at or near the top of the list of the most effective known instructional practices. They have an impeccable pedigree, going back nearly half a century. They are critical, moreover, to the success of the most quintessential factors that promote college and career preparedness: coherent, content-rich curriculum, and authentic literacy (all of which the Common Core State Standards are happily, if imperfectly, attempting to clarify for us). Unfortunately, for decades, the elements of a well-structured lesson have been marginalized or ignored in most schools, forced to compete for time and attention with unending, successive waves of (mostly) unproven innovations and policy requirements. This prevents the kind of sustained practice educators need to master these elements well enough to enjoy the profound impact they would have on student learning.

So, what are the widely agreed-upon elements of an effective lesson that are so powerful that researcher and author Robert Marzano insists they should be "routine components" of virtually any lesson in every subject area (including so-called "inquiry" or "project-based" lessons)? The terms most often used to describe them are recognized by virtually every educator: An effective lesson starts with a carefully-formulated, clearly-stated purpose or "learning objective" accompanied by a brief preview or explanation of why that objective is worth learning and—of particular importance—how it will be assessed. This is followed by "modeling" or "demonstrating"—whereby teachers not only explain but explicitly show students, in very small, deliberately-calibrated steps, how to do the working and thinking necessary to succeed on that day's assessment. Throughout the lesson, it is imperative that the teacher continually scan the entire room—to ensure that every student is attentive and engaged.

This brings us to the soul of the lesson: the recursive cycle that starts with students applying or practicing each small step that the teacher has just modeled (think "guided practice"). These initial practice attempts must occur under the observant eye of the teacher, who in turn must look to see if the class as a whole is succeeding on each successive step (think "check for understanding"—or "formative assessment"). There are a variety of simple ways to do such formative "checks"—e.g., by simply circulating around the room for a few minutes to see how well a sampling of students are progressing. If not enough students are succeeding—which is often the case—the teacher must resist the understandable (but time-wasting) temptation to begin frantically trying to tutor individual students while the rest of the class waits for the lesson to resume. Instead, when the teacher notes that some students are struggling, he or she must immediately "adjust instruction"—by re-teaching or enlisting students' expertise by having them work in pairs to help each other.

The name of the game is to repeat this cycle for each phase of the lesson until all or almost all students are ready to complete the day's assignment, project, or assessment by themselves (think "independent practice"). At this point, the teacher can, if necessary, help or tutor those students who need additional assistance.

The 'Scandal' of Bad Lessons

There are other important sub-elements and actions one might add here, such as the strategies detailed in helpful books by Doug Lemov, Robert Marzano and others. But these are the core components of good teaching in any discipline, no matter how creative or "constructivist" we wish to be. Our highest-achieving teachers know that these elements reduce boredom, increase student engagement, and guarantee significantly higher rates of student success on assessments of everything from content mastery to critical and creative thinking, to close reading, writing,

and problem-solving. In my case, these lesson elements allowed me to be doubly effective within weeks of learning and implementing them.

And what does the research say? Numerous studies indicate that just three years of highly effective instruction will allow students to make average gains between 35 and 50 percentile points—effectively altering their academic trajectory. Dylan Wiliam's oft-cited research (PDF) found that when instruction embodies these elements, students will gain an additional six to nine months of academic progress each year. He estimates that such lessons would have as much as 20 times the impact on student outcomes as our most popular current initiatives. Other eminent researchers like John Hattie, James Popham, and Robert Marzano confirm these findings. Matched with even decent curriculum and increased opportunities for academic reading, writing, and discussion, the impact of such lessons would indeed be game-changing.

And yet. ... Accompanied by local educators, I visit dozens of schools every year all around the United States. I assure you that the lessons we witness in the great majority of classrooms violate most of the elements of well-structured lessons. We seldom see clear, posted learning objectives; instead, multiple segments of instruction are often breezily conveyed as students sit mystified or are visibly inattentive or tuned out. And it is the rare lesson where we see instruction that seeks to ensure success for every student on each phase of the lesson, with multiple attempts to clarify or re-teach.

This is a scandal on the order of refusing to administer life-saving antibiotics to needy patients. And it is wholly unnecessary, because the solution is so simple: All we need to do is devote serious time and attention to ensuring that every pre-service student, current teacher, and administrator learn, revisit, and practice (and practice and practice) these hugely effective components until they are mastered and consistently implemented in all of our classrooms. We should make them the focus of faculty, team, and department meetings, as well as professional development sessions. If we do this, we won't have to wait long to see their impact, which will surpass the effects of all other initiatives thus far launched in this confused, distracted era of "reform."

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