Writing a Master Plan

Pressures to cover content and engage students can sabotage the best laid curricular plans. Here’s how to put your lesson plans back on track with long-term goals.

"When I began teaching," recalls chemistry education specialist Amy Fowler Murphy, "the focus of my lesson and unit planning was pacing. I wanted to make sure I ‘covered’ all of the content in the chemistry textbook within the time allotted by the school calendar. Of course, that never happened.”

When it comes to planning instruction, teachers have to balance the endless amounts of content introduced in phonebook-thick textbooks, high-stakes tests, and a proliferation of standards. Meanwhile, a room full of students is ready to check out if the learning isn’t engaging. These pressures make it easy to lose sight of long-term learning goals, and that throws a major wrench in successful plans. To help teachers prioritize what they do day-to-day, teaching experts have identified common planning pitfalls and how to avoid them.

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Establish an End Game

"In high school planning, usually the first thought is, what's the content and how am I going to cover it?" notes author Grant Wiggins. Planning, he claims, shouldn't be about what book you are reading, but "how students are different when they're finished reading it."

Sharing a clear learning target with students reframes learning around outcomes, not coverage. Learning goals should spell out what students will understand at the end of a lesson or unit, says Posie Wood, director of academics at LearnZillion, a company that works with teachers to design and distribute standards-aligned lesson plans.

For example, chimes in LearnZillion math content expert Belinda Thompson, "Adding fractions isn't a learning goal. Getting students to 'understand that to add fractions, we need to add same-size pieces' makes it clear that you want students to understand why fractions need common denominators."

To get out from under the burden of coverage, Wiggins and Jay McTighe, co-authors of Solving 25 Problems in Unit Design: How do I refine my units to enhance student learning? (ASCD, 2015), suggest planning backwards from the performance goals that describe what you want students to do with their learning.

"Just like a coach plans with the game in mind, teach individual skills and knowledge with the performance in mind, not as ends in themselves," McTighe explains.

Now with the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative at the University of Montevallo, Murphy followed that logic when she shifted her planning to focus on the big, relevant ideas her students needed to learn to improve their scientific literacy.

Avoid Cotton Candy Curriculum

You've got your goal in mind, now how will you teach it? Kendra Hearn, chair of Secondary Teacher Education at the University of Michigan, relates that the pressure of designing differentiated, engaging instruction for 20 or more students can lead many preservice teachers to fall into the "fun trap." This means the planning is guided by activities that look cool but don't necessarily align with learning goals—and that could lead to superficial outcomes.

"It's possible to build a model of a working roller coaster but not learn any physics," quips Wiggins.

"The potential problem with activity-oriented lesson planning is that the activity becomes the end in itself, as opposed to a means to something greater," explains McTighe. "Activity-oriented lessons can be fun, but they're cotton candy. They don't have any deep nourishment."

The solution? Plan activities last. After establishing a clear lesson or unit goal, 4th grade teacher Annie Huynh at Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School in Philadelphia first plans her assessments (or how students will demonstrate knowledge toward that goal), and then plans the activities that will prepare students for those assessments. For Hearn's preservice teachers, this can be a big shift. "In the past, the activity might've been planned first, and it would be happenstance whether you got to the target or not."

Activities should be a series of steps, says Susquehanna University education professor Anne Reeves, that lead students on a pathway of being introduced to an objective, then practicing it, and finally, being able to perform the objective and explain what they are doing.

To sort the fluff from the real stuff, Wiggins says students should always be able to answer three questions about an activity: What are they doing? Why are they doing it? What's it helping them learn?

Resist Information Overload

Wood and colleagues underscore the need to be clear about where you're going before you start going there. "We as educators have a tendency to dive into planning instructional actions (things like how to group the students, the activity logistics, or materials we might need)." The wealth of free online lesson planning resources can become tempting distractions as teachers sit down to design learning. Before getting pulled in a million digital directions, Wood and colleagues suggest deeply studying your content and what you want students to get out of it. This hones a teacher's skill at thoughtfully and strategically navigating the vast landscape of teaching resources, they say.

Another technology—digital planning software, with standards preloaded—can make it too easy to associate a lesson or unit with too many objectives. If you have 40 objectives for a two-week unit, you're probably not addressing all of them, and you're losing clarity of focus, says McTighe. When planning on digital or even pen-and-paper platforms, only identify the new standards that you are going to teach and explicitly assess, as opposed to every bit of knowledge that could be useful to your students during a unit.

Plan Out Loud

"You can't be 100 percent sure your plan is going to work, but there are key ways to lower the risk for failure," Wiggins acknowledges. One way is to anticipate where students could get confused. Wiggins recommends getting out of your own head and thinking. What is the lesson asking the students to do and are they prepared to do it? Where will they need more instruction or perhaps guidance in the form of a handout? "Anticipate the rough spots. It's like planning a wedding or any complicated event," Wiggins adds.

"Sometimes an activity or problem or approach looks familiar and we think we know how it will play out in the classroom," Wood and colleagues note. They
recommend always working completely through a task before using it with students as a way to not only check that it aligns with learning goals, but to also forecast sticking points.

“We might think that it’s not possible to know what students will do before we ask them to do it. But, we do have some idea based on our experience with the grade level, or if students have been in a colleague’s class in a previous year,” says LearnZillion literacy expert Lisa Bernstein. Predict student responses—both correct and incorrect—and keep those in mind as students are working.

While anticipating student responses, Bernstein also recommends preparing questions in advance. “This is a helpful step to guard against thinking the lesson was a success because all the students can ‘do’ something correctly,” she explains. She and her colleagues recommend checking for understanding with “why” and “what if” higher-order questions.

Thompson explains, “For example, with students learning to add fractions, you might ask a simple question like, ‘Why do we need to rewrite the fractions with common denominators?’ Many students will say something like, ‘Because otherwise we would get the wrong answer’ when we want to hear them say ‘Because we need to make same-size pieces so that we know what the pieces are called when they are combined.’

“As a teacher, you have to learn to make quick adjustments based on feedback from students,” says Wiggins. “To learn to do that, you have to be crystal clear about what you should be seeing from students,” he explains. Working through your plans, especially with colleagues, will help crystallize a picture of student performance and prepare you for in-the-moment refinements.

**Ditch the Daily Focus**

The problems of disconnected, coverage-oriented planning may be exacerbated by its most typical incarnation: the daily lesson plan. Although the Internet abounds with search-and-share lesson plans, some educators suggest shifting away from deifying this daily document. In Wiggins and McTighe’s Understanding by Design method, for example, the unit is the smallest level of curriculum planning. McTighe says that’s because, too often, teachers plan individual lessons that focus on discrete objectives that don’t cohere or meet the unit’s end goal. Planning backwards, on the other hand, keeps the focus on the longer-term outcomes that should guide individual lessons.

“When I was in the classroom, I was making very few daily lesson plans,” recalls author and instructional coach Mike Fisher. Instead, Fisher made sure he had a really strong curriculum map that included anchor points to guide weekly instructional goals. Fisher now works with districts to help teachers in grade-level, disciplinary, or even vertical teams identify important learning goals and map a route for all students to achieve them.

Fisher asks, If your map reflects good conversations with colleagues and is a living document that you are constantly improving, why would you need to lesson plan on top of that? Teachers collaborate to design common formative assessments that give them ongoing feedback toward performance anchors. Instead of a daily plan, you might say by Thursday, we expect students to be at this point in the unit, offers Fisher. Proficiency and mastery matter on an anchor-to-anchor basis, but not on a day-to-day basis, he clarifies. “I’m not saying ‘stop planning.’ I’m saying, ‘stop planning for the isolated moment.’”

Moving away from the potential myopia of daily plans requires schools to shift from isolated teacher planning to collaborative, integrative teams. It also shifts principals to question the merit in requiring teachers to submit daily plans. Instead, look for a coherent unit plan with rich, well-aligned assessment tasks built into it.

“Demanding daily lesson plans has the potential to reinforce the ‘twin sins’ of coverage-oriented and activity-oriented lessons,” says McTighe. In other words, don’t fixate on covering discrete objectives day-to-day without clarity about the long-term ends, and without flexibility to adjust one’s teaching when the results call for it.”

“Don’t micromanage day-to-day teaching,” McTighe concludes. “Manage results on things that matter.”

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The Three No’s Students Want to Hear

BY ROSE REISSMAN

Nurturing 21st century skills, such as flexibility and problem solving, can be challenging in a classroom setting that rewards a single answer or limits students’ self-expression. But by deliberately responding “no” to three questions, teachers can elicit a resounding “yes” to increased student engagement and critical thinking.

1. “There is NO single correct answer to this question.” I want at least four different answers that offer different approaches.

How often do teachers move on after hearing the first correct answer? How often do students, who might have another correct answer in mind, drop out once the first answer has been accepted? It can be difficult to build an interactive, student-run discussion around a topic once one student voices a single correct answer. When learning depends on discussions that involve a variety of viewpoints and respectful give and take, accepting one answer limits students’ depth of understanding. To reinforce a shift in your classroom, reiterate often that the first “acceptable” response is not the only response, and then follow up by eliciting multiple student responses and peer reactions. Do not immediately move on to the next question.

2. “There is NO template or desired format for this project.” I want to see multiple approaches to meeting the goals/curriculum objectives. I want these to reflect different individuals with unique talents, ways of thinking, and problem-solving skills. I do not want a slew of assignments that look like they were cut from the same stencil.

Many students draw from or even replicate the projects of their older siblings who have been in the same class. When strict project guidelines are set for word count, layout, style, and structure, students who want top grades tend to follow through with little deviation. To truly prepare students for an inquiry-driven workplace, consider teaching multiple ways to present evidence of learning. When students turn in a successful project that reflects the rubric, require that they present the next project in a different way, and so on.

3. “There is NO spoken answer required.” I hope many of you want to speak and respond to one another, but feel free to think about the answer in your head. By just thinking about it and then listening to others in class, you are also participating—you are reflecting, inquiring, and arguing. You may write down ideas or take notes. You are the reflective audience for class talk.

Not every student is a natural vocal speaker, and many fear being called on. Still, individuals who are reflective thinkers and analyzers contribute immeasurably. By broadcasting out loud that these students will not be required to speak, the teacher assures them that they can be “heard” through a written report, online presentation, or other assignment. Consider allowing your quieter students to choose a classmate to present their works out loud. Similar to how actors perform the works of playwrights, these designated “speakers” can practice a theater technique called “Plays in Progress,” in which valid and authentic feedback is elicited from the audience in a workshop setting.

Using the word “no” to answer these three questions appeals to a broad range of students. Unlike other techniques that can take weeks or months to produce an outcome, these strategies help every student in your classroom respond “yes” to learning engagement. The second “correct” response, the second excellent but different project, and the first designated “speaker” can inspire immediate results. Three no’s do equal a single resounding student yes!

To truly prepare students for an inquiry-driven workplace, consider teaching multiple ways to present evidence of learning.

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