

Effective Lesson Planning for Effective Skills Instruction

by

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Ed was in the fourth week of his 5th grade student teaching experience when I observed him teaching a lesson about comprehension skills. Things did not go very well for him. He seemed not to have a clear direction of what he was doing, he appeared to be at a loss as to what to say, students were loud and unruly, and most important, very little learning occurred. Later, when I asked to see his lesson plan, he showed me a weekly teacher's planning book where he had written, *Unit 4, pages 34-37*. The majority of Ed's problems here were not related to his classroom management skills; rather, to his lack of planning and lack of knowledge about the elements of effective skills instruction. This article (a) describes the importance of thoughtful lesson planning, (b) presents a simple lesson plan format, and (c) identifies the elements of effective skills instruction.

Importance of Planning

There are three reasons why lesson planning is important. First, thoughtful planning creates more purposeful instruction. Lesson planning is what links the curriculum to the particulars of instruction (Clark & Dunn, 1991). Thoughtful planning also helps teachers understand the content of the lesson (Clark & Dunn, 1991), creates a logical sequence of instructional events (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992), and links activities to instructional objectives (Parker & Jarolimek, 1997).

Second, thoughtful planning enhances learning. Well-designed lessons increase time on-task (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992; Stringfield & Teddlie, 1991), and help students perceive the structure of new information so it can more easily be assimilated (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992; Walberg, 1991). Lesson design also affects classroom management by reducing chaos, guiding the flow of events, and keeping students interested and engaged (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992). Brophy (1986) says students achieve more in an environment where activities run smoothly.

Finally, thoughtful planning enhances teachers' effectiveness. It enables teachers to incorporate new instructional strategies and utilize more complex learning activities (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992), and helps teachers to feel more confident and less uncertain during instruction (Clark & Dunn, 1991; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Freiberg & Driscoll, 1992).

Lesson Plans

The initial lesson planning steps often seem cumbersome to preservice teachers; however, through practice and repetition this process eventually becomes internalized. That is why the lesson plans experienced teachers use often look much different from those of beginning teachers (Clark & Dunn, 1991). This is not because lesson planning becomes less important; rather, experienced teachers have internalized the lesson planning process and are able to think more globally instead of step-by-step.

A Simple Lesson Plan Format

Lesson plans should be complete, descriptive, and sequential with all questions and activities clearly explained. The rule of thumb is that a substitute teacher should be able to pick up the lesson plan and know exactly what to do.

In education, complexity is often mistaken for rigor and effectiveness. Lesson planning need not be an overly complicated endeavor. The lesson plan format on the next page (Figure 1) is a simplification of the traditional Madeline Hunter lesson plan format (Hunter, 1984). Hunter suggested that all lessons contain the following elements: (a) anticipatory set, (b) objective and purpose, (c) input, (d) modeling, (e) check for understanding, (f) guided practice, (g) independent practice, and (h) closure. However, these eight separate elements are not applicable to every teaching situation and they also make this form cumbersome and unwieldy.

Lesson Plan Parts

Below is a description of the parts of a simplified lesson plan format:

1. Objective. Lesson planning should always start with a specific objective. This is a definition of what you want students to know or be able to do as a result of your instruction. The planning process begins here. There is generally one objective for each lesson and it should be stated in simple terms. Behavioral objectives, as was the style for many years, need not be used. Behaviorally stated objectives have their roots in behavioral psychology and are not consistent with a cognitive approach to learning (Tobin & Fraser, 1991; Griese, 1981). Also, a strict reliance on behavioral objectives implies that learning is a finite endeavor when in fact it is a dynamic interaction between known and new information and occurs over time. Finally, behavioral objectives are not pragmatic as they complicate

Figure 1.

Lesson plan format.

Grade: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Subject: _____

Purpose statement -

I. Objective: The students will learn how to...

II. Introduction:

III. Input and Activities:

IV. Closure - Review

Materials Needed:

* Use the back side for post-instructional planning and reflection.

the lesson planning process and do not replicate the thinking process of experienced teachers.

Objectives should sound a good deal like students telling their parents what they learned at school that day. For example, a student is more apt to say, "*I learned about capital letters and cities,*" rather than, "*I demonstrated my knowledge of capital letters and cities by successfully completing eight out of ten questions correct on the post lesson quiz.*"

Similarly, describing an activity is not the same as stating an objective. For example, the following is not an objective: *The students will create a chart listing the types of words that begin with capital letters.* While this is an interesting activity, it simply describes what students will be doing while providing very little indication of what information is needed or why students are doing this activity. Instead, an appropriate objective would be: *Students will learn about capitalizing the names of cities.* The capital letters chart would then be an activity used to support this objective and would be employed only after sufficient instruction has been given.

2. Introduction. This is a quick way to introduce students to the concept or ideas found in the lesson. An introduction should link the new material to known concepts, arouse curiosity, and create interest. These are relatively brief (1 to 3 minutes), and are usually written last, after there is a better sense of what the lesson will entail.

3. Input. Learning involves the construction of knowledge as new information is given meaning in terms of prior knowledge (Tobin & Fraser, 1991). All learning requires some sort of information. In this part of the lesson plan, the teacher organizes and lists exactly what is to be taught (see Figure 2). Questions for students should be recorded here. If a skill is being taught, the steps should be written out in sequence. All information in the input must directly support the lesson objective.

4. Activity. This involves the manipulation of the input. Older students may be able to use more abstract activities here, although this is generally not the preferred method. Younger students need to physically manipulate or interact with the input in some fashion. Examples of possible activities include: creative writing, drawing, simulation, discussion, problem solving, drama, graphing, worksheets, games, experiments, homework assignments, or thinking skills.

5. Closure/Review. This element varies depending on the type of lesson. It is generally a short review of the main ideas covered in a lesson and sometimes a preview of the next day's lesson. Examples include group processing, journal entries, I-learned statements, or orally sharing one or two interesting ideas with a neighbor.

However, many effective skills lessons do not contain this element.

Elements of Effective Skills Instruction

Whether teaching a skill in music, athletics, math, science, or literacy, effective skills instruction incorporates five elements: (a) identification of the procedural components, (b) direct instruction and modeling, (c) guided practice, (d) independent practice, and (e) integration of the skill into other parts of the curriculum (Collins, Brown, & Neuman, 1989; Hobbs & Schlichter, 1990; Johnson, 1998; Pressley, Harris, & Marks, 1992). Each of these are described below.

1. Identification of the Procedural Components. Here students are introduced to the skill and the specific steps are described.

2. Direct Instruction and Modeling. In this component the teacher gives explicit instruction as to how the skill might be used and models the skill by thinking out loud while going through each step. This element provides students with an overview and should be kept relatively brief. Remember that students are more apt to learn by doing than by watching.

3. Guided Practice. After the skill has been modeled, the teacher uses guided large group practice with a gradual release of responsibility (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). The goal is to provide the support necessary for students to use the skill independently. Here the teacher takes the whole class through each step of the skill several times so students will be able to practice the skill independently.

4. Independent Practice. At this step, students should be able to easily do what was practiced in large group. Homework should be a practice of skills covered in class with a 95-100% success ratio (Brophy, 1986). Also, it is assumed that mastery occurs with plenty of practice over time.

5. Integration into the Curriculum. Here the teacher uses the skill in different subject areas so that it is practiced and becomes part of students' cognitive repertoire.

Lesson Plans and Skills Instruction

Where do each of these elements fit in the lesson plan format described in Figure 1? The Objective and Introduction remain the same. Included under the Input section are (a) identification of the procedural components, (b) direct instruction and modeling, and (c) guided practice. Included under the Activity section is independent practice. Review and integration into the curriculum happens over time. Two skills lesson plans are provided here. Figure 2 shows a lesson plan used to teach nouns.

Figure 2.

Sample skills lesson plan – nouns.

Grade: 3

Subject: Reading

I. OBJECTIVE: Students will learn about nouns.

II. INTRODUCTION: “Today we’re going to look at special kinds of words. They are thing- words or nouns.”

III. INPUT:

1. A noun or thing-word is something that you can see or feel.
2. It is a thing.
3. These are thing words: bike, car, horse, tree, ball.
 - A. You can see all of these.
 - B. You could also touch each of these.
 - C. They are nouns or thing-words.
4. These are other kinds of words.
 - A. They are not nouns because we can’t see them.
 - B. At, over, slip, happy, in, through, and.
5. **Guided Practice:** Raise your thumb when you hear a noun or thing-word: nail, at, this, pen, over, then, bike, in, happy, running, bike, plant, sky, saw, dog.

IV. ACTIVITY:

1. If you were to take a walk to a favorite place, what are some things you might see?
2. Use your journal to tell us in words and pictures. We will see if we can guess where your favorite place might be.

Figure 3 shows a lesson plan used to teach comprehension skills. Note the elements of effective skills instruction and how each is placed within the lesson plan. Also, these two lesson plans are examples of where closure and review are not necessary.

Final Thoughts

Thoughtful planning will create better lessons and enhance learning and teacher effectiveness. Attention to lesson plan design is a very low-cost, no-tech way to begin improving instruction in our schools. The lesson plan format described in this article is a very direct and pragmatic way to help prepare preservice teachers design learning experiences and also a way to help inservice teachers refine their teaching practice.

Figure 3.

**Sample skills lesson plan
– comprehension.**

Grade: 6

Subject: Reading

I. OBJECTIVE: Students will be able to use ‘Read and Pause’ to understand expository text.

II. INTRODUCTION: “Sometimes when I read I have trouble understanding and remembering what I’ve read. Today, we’ll learn a skill to help us understand and remember what we read.”

III. INPUT:

1. Reading information stuff is different than reading stories.
 - A. Information stuff = texts, chapters, newspapers, articles.
 - B. Called expository text.
2. The goal is to get information from reading them.
3. We can not read them the same way we read stories.
 - A. We need special skills or strategies.
 - B. Called comprehension skills.
4. One comprehension skill is ‘Read and Pause’.
 - A. It is done as you read.
5. These are the steps:
 - A. Step 1- read a paragraph.
 - B. Step 2 - pause and check for understanding.
 - C. Step 3 - re-read or continue reading.
6. Watch me as I show you how.
 - A. Think out loud and model this with a short paragraph from the science text.
7. **Guided Practice:** Let us try one together.
 - A. Students reading next paragraph silently.
 - B. Have them pause and read it again.
 - C. Thumbs up if you understood it better? About the same?

IV. ACTIVITY:

1. Finish read the chapter in the text using this skill.
2. When you are finished, record five interesting or important ideas in your learning log.

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