

Teaching & Learning Intentions: Lesson or Unit Design

A principal in a Minnesota high school encourages her faculty—every time she has the opportunity—with the statement, “Instruction works. Try it.” She can’t remember what she was reading when she found that statement, but she says, “I know it was a research study on improving student achievement and if I could find it again, I’d reprint the whole thing and paper the school with it.”

Research, however, tells us that instruction that is intentional, incremental and supported with student-centered learning tools is just one part of improving student achievement. Another important aspect is setting clear classroom-level goals as targets for student learning. And aligning assessment activities and evaluation criteria to those learning goals is another. (Kannapel, J.J. and Clements, S.K. (2005) *Inside the Black Box of High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools: A report from the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence*, Lexington, KY.) These sound as if they might be separate—perhaps related—things a teacher could do or decide independently of each other. Or maybe decide and do at least sequentially. But that’s just not true in the real world of classroom practice. Teachers make thousands of decisions each day, all related to one another and based on multiple criteria—a minute by minute balancing act. The same is true for designing lessons or units. It’s another balancing act—but more like keeping multiple plates spinning while balancing them on sticks.

So how many plates is a teacher spinning when she designs a lesson or a unit? Of course, one plate is state standards because classroom learning goals (another plate) are derived from them. And she must pair the learning goals with district or school curriculum mandates; however, if her district or school gives her no guidance in curriculum she’s going to have to beg, borrow or imagine content (another plate) for herself. While she’s thinking about curriculum or content—the “what” or the vehicle she’ll use as context for classroom teaching and learning—she also has to determine how to break down each learning goal into incremental steps (scaffolding which is another plate) so that students can slowly build the knowledge and skills they need to meet the classroom level goals. Those are already a lot of spinning plates. And when she’s gotten far enough into the processes of designing a lesson or unit to be considering those incremental steps which will include selecting or developing learning tools and instructional strategies for the scaffolding, it’s a good time for her to look over her shoulder and reconsider if those learning goals she developed from the standards back there at the beginning of her planning really still work with this lesson or unit. Or, is there some other vehicle or context that would work better now that she’s clearer about what she wants students to know and be able to do? She should really be thinking about assessment activities (another plate) too because she can embed some assessment activities to measure those learning goals right into the incremental learning tools which will allow her to make sure her students are getting it while she’s teaching it. And if she really wants to add another plate, she could think about whether all the embedded assessment activities she just happens to find in the learning tools are enough and add up to something or if she needs to plant more assessment activities along way or even add some final, summative assessment activity. The final plate is, of course, evaluation criteria which must also be aligned with the learning goals.

Perhaps at this point the spinning plate/balancing act is really more like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have to keep moving the pieces around until they all fit together in one unified whole. And just when you think you’ve got some pieces that fit together in a certain way, you find out that one isn’t right and doesn’t work and you have to discard that piece and go look for the one that fits. So these are the pieces you have to be able to fit together in a lesson or unit:

- ✓ learning goals based on the benchmark requirements of content standards

- ✓ curriculum/content or the “what” with which students will do the work
- ✓ incremental steps (learning tools) students to use to build knowledge and skills and demonstrate their progress toward the learning goals
- ✓ intentional teaching (instructional strategies) to support students in using the learning tools and accomplishing the goals
- ✓ formative assessment activities embedded into the teaching/learning tools so student progress is observable throughout the learning process
- ✓ summative assessment activity of learning if necessary

Cognitive psychologists report that the most concepts or chunks of information an average adult can work with at one time is seven. The minimum number is five and the maximum is nine. [David Sousa, (2006) *How the Brain Learns*, Corwin Press] A quick count of our jigsaw pieces is six—if you leave out summative assessment until the very end of the process, it’s only five. So the average adult should be able to work with this number of concepts and manage the process of designing a lesson or unit. That’s not saying it’s easy—only possible.

Using one of the arts Learning Processes—create, perform or respond—to develop a lesson or unit really does help a teacher to fit it all those pieces together—not as sequentially as some teachers would like but methodically and organically. A Learning Process provides a way to structure and organize the pieces—to manage them as the lesson or unit is slowly and carefully constructed.

To begin, the teacher needs some idea of curriculum—however vague and lacking in details as it might be—to join to the content standard and create classroom level learning goals. The Perpich Center uses an adaptation of Rick Stiggins alignment work (See **Content Standards & Classroom Level Learning Goals**). As the teacher adds detail to the curriculum/content using one of the Learning Processes—oh, and the first step is that she must select the appropriate Learning Process. To do that, she must ask herself, “What is at the heart of the learning? What is the most important activity my students will be doing? Creating art? Performing art? Responding to art? Doing all three based on the study of an Anchor Work? Or perhaps inquiring? The learning goals may become clearer or shift completely to another benchmark requirement as she determines the most appropriate Learning Process and begins to add detail to her choice of curriculum/content. And during this initial planning, she must not clamp down too hard on the learning goals. Keeping them fluid—revising and refining them as she fits together the other pieces of her lesson or unit will make it less stressful. Not to worry, the content standards give her parameters for maintaining significant learning goals.

Once she can say with some certainty (and the operative word is “some”) what the classroom learning goals are and what the curriculum/content is shaping up to be based on her decision about which Learning Process she’s going to use to build this whole lesson or unit around, she can truly begin to ask herself (if she didn’t have this in mind earlier—because some teachers actually start with this which in some cases makes it easier but not always) what is going to be the final product(s) or performance(s)? And an important question she must ask immediately is whether or not this is a final, summative assessment activity or just a celebration of all her students have accomplished in terms of learning. Either way is fine. It’s just that if there is a final assessment activity, and what the student does is something she’ll evaluate in terms of the classroom learning goal(s) then that’s what she’ll break down to create the incremental learning tools. On the other hand, for example, if it’s putting the accomplishments of individual high or middle school students together and inviting elementary students or perhaps friends and families to come and enjoy but she’s not going to evaluate it other than to say, “Well, wasn’t that

fun and didn't we do a good job of entertaining and enlightening our audience?" then she must determine exactly what are the individual student products or performances during the course of the learning—the formative assessments—that she will collect and evaluate. Let's take a look at examples of each of those two situations.

If students in an interdisciplinary unit have all created items to go in a museum that depict life in Ancient Egypt—some have made visual art pieces in the style and traditions of the Ancient Egyptians, others have created replicas or examples of Ancient Egyptian architecture while still others have built recreations of inventions and scientific advancements made by the Ancient Egyptians, then the actual museum is a celebration of the student work and not an assessment activity that will be evaluated. The assessment activities will be the individual pieces of visual art, the replicas of architecture and the recreated inventions. These are the products that will be evaluated to determine quality of learning. These are also the products that will be broken down into incremental learning steps and supported by instruction to make sure each student has every possible opportunity to be successful in developing the products and meeting the learning goals at some level of quality.

If however, students mount a theater production and the final performance of each actor, the student director and the lighting crew is a summative assessment activity that will be evaluated based on the learning goals for each of those activities, then those are the performances that will be broken down into incremental learning steps and supported by instruction to make sure each student in each role has every possible opportunity to be successful in meeting the learning goals.

As the teacher uses a Learning Process to develop the details of her lesson or unit and breaks the learning goal(s) into incremental steps, the Learning Process will force her to think about each step in creating that final product or performance from her student's point of view. The steps are built around what the students do—so their engagement is active and full of meaning making and reflection. And as the teacher builds those incremental learning steps for her students, she will ask herself what she needs to do—what instructional strategy she will use to support her students in completing each step toward the final product or performance which demonstrates the learning goal(s).

The teacher is planning a student-centered lesson or unit and the intentional instructional strategies that support student success. She may need to check back to see if her classroom learning goal(s) still fits with what the students will know and do when they complete the work. That may require some adjustment in the learning goal(s) or in exactly how she's framed the students' work. She'll need to think about which of the incremental learning tools can be used as embedded, formative assessment activities so she can check student learning progress along the way to make sure they're getting it while she's teaching it. And if she just keeps working with the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, they will all come together into a complete, unified lesson or unit because she has the tools to accomplish the task: 1.) The content standards to set learning goals for her students and teaching intentions for herself, and 2.) The Learning Processes to organize her lesson or unit design. If she combines the two and uses them together as planning tools, she can't get too far off course.