

The Four Foundations of Great Teaching

Quick Reference Guide

1 Content Planning

Effective planning is critical to successful classrooms. Excellent teachers keep in mind some fundamental principles:

- **Plan the goal first** Clarity as to what the goals are is the starting point
- **What matters is what students learn, not what teachers do** Student learning is the focus, not necessarily favorite activities, and not teacher activity

- ✓ Units and Daily Lessons are planned 'backwards', with the end in mind

A sure sign of an unclear learning target or objective is lack of clarity as to **what** is going to be assessed and **how**. If this is unclear, it's a safe bet that the focus has been on student activity and not on student learning. Consider these steps in planning:

- **Step 1:** Learning **targets** or objectives are **planned first**
- **Step 2:** Assessments designed with the objectives in mind are planned next
- **Step 3:** **Activities** designed to practice the learning target skill are **planned last**

- ✓ Learning targets are designed with student learning, not activity, in mind

Teaching and learning are about the development of understanding of the students. Teacher activity, and even content, are not the central point. Focusing on student learning sharpens the planning and assessment of learning, and prioritizes student learning and not mere activity.

- **Write quality learning targets/objectives** 'The causes of the French Revolution' is not a quality learning objective or target—it's a topic. 'Students will be able to explain the causes of the French Revolution' is far better, because it is focused on how students will demonstrate their learning.
- **Learning, not activity, is the focus** Activities, however enjoyable, are not the point of the classroom. Learning targets should be written around what students learn and not merely what they do
- **Quality learning targets are specific and assessable** Excellent targets/objectives make it clear to students what they are learning. The more specific the learning target, the clearer this will be.
- 'Describe' is better than 'observe' because it is easier to assess both by teachers and students. 'Identify' is better than 'work with' for the same reason. 'Summarize' not 'study', 'recall' not 'think about'

- ✓ Learning targets are shared with students

When students have a clear vision of what they are learning and why, their learning is deeper and more lasting. Sharing targets with students focuses their thinking **toward learning** and **away from the activity or grade**. Here are some things to think about when sharing learning targets:

- **Write them on the board** Have a designated place for daily learning targets
- **Include them on hand-outs or practice work**
- **Have students assist in formulating** Have students help in writing or re-writing targets and objectives. This gets them thinking about what makes up quality learning in this area.

- ✓ Put this to use now

- Plan unit and daily lessons learning **targets first**.
- Write clear, **student-learning-focused** learning targets for daily lessons.
- **Post and share** learning targets with students every day.

2 Assessment

Teachers need to frequently check for understanding to be sure that students are achieving the learning targets.

The purpose of this on-going assessment is to help the teacher focus students on learning, with the goal that students become more self-directive.

✓ Frequent and involuntary checking for understanding (formative assessment)

Checking for understanding should (nearly always) be **involuntary**—that is, teachers check **all students** and not just those eager to participate. It's not enough to simply ask "are there any questions?" Teachers need to check the understanding of all students.

Checking for understanding is done **frequently** and in a non-graded way, **during the lesson** or practice. This formative assessment provides feedback to teachers and students so that adjustments may be made if needed.

✓ Formative assessments are deliberately connected to the learning targets

Formative assessments are designed to assess how students are progressing toward the learning target. As mentioned above, once learning targets are established, assessment are designed to check student understanding. There are many ways to do this, some very simple, others more complex:

- **White Boards** Students use individual boards which can be easily scanned for understanding
- **Exit Pass/Admit Slip** These provide a quick check or review, and can be used for further discussion or to adjust instruction as needed
- **Sticky Notes** When used on the board for all to see, these can provide opportunity for class discussion
- **Graphic Organizers** Generally used to organize information and thinking, but also an excellent means of formative assessment
- **Seminar Discussions** Discussion is an excellent means of checking for understanding. This requires a time commitment.

✓ Feedback to students is descriptive and specific

Expressions such as 'excellent' or 'good job', although potentially gratifying, don't tell students what they are doing well and what they need to improve to reach the learning target.

Make sure that feedback to students is descriptive, **not merely a grade or a number**. In fact, formative feedback to students should avoid a grade, as students will tend to focus on that rather than the learning. If at all possible, save grades for the end.

Be sure feedback is **specific**. Students need to hear specifically where their work is excellent and where it needs to be better. **Connect feedback** to previously introduced (and practiced) **rubrics**. This will help students to know more exactly what they need to do to improve.

Build in time for students to **revise** their learning, to **track their progress**.

✓ Put this to use now

- Plan **daily and frequent formative assessments** that check student understanding of the learning targets.
- Be sure that formative assessment is **involuntary and all-inclusive**.
- Give frequent feedback to students that is **specific and descriptive**.
- Begin planning for students to **track their progress and set goals**.

3 Instruction

Effective teachers make sure that classroom activities engage all students. There are some students in every class who would love to answer every question and do every demonstration, and others who would be content to let them.

Instead, teachers should set up all individual and group activities in such a way that all students must participate.

✓ All students are consistently involved in class activities

Effective lessons are designed so that all students are engaged in learning all the time. In any whole-class learning, it's important to avoid 'batting practice', or a situation where one student works and others merely observe. Some ways to do this are:

- **Rather than just 'follow along' or watch others at work** Students fill in study guide or graphic organizer, or correct their own work
- **During presentations or speeches** Students use a grading sheet or rubric to assess student presentations
- **During teacher presentations** Stop occasionally and have students write three questions they have, briefly summarize the main point, or have them tell how they did the process differently
- **Stop and have students engage in 'mini-discussions' with a partner on a specific question.** Have one partner report to the class.

✓ Models of strong and weak work are used to make the elements of quality clear

Use frequent models of strong and weak work. This helps students to come to hold a similar understanding of quality that the teacher has.

- Working individually or in small groups have **students apply rubrics** to sample work. Have them group sample work into stronger and weaker categories. Then hold a class discussion to assign a specific rubric score or placement.
- Use **anonymous examples** of previous student work, or create them as needed.
- Have **students assist in creating rubrics**, as appropriate. This builds deeper understanding in students and focuses them on the **learning rather than the activity**.

✓ Students are required to do most of the work during the lesson

In effective classrooms, students are required to do most of the talking and, hopefully, significant thinking. Classrooms where teachers talk more than students are rarely excellent classrooms.

- **Monitor the ratio** of student talk to teacher talk Students should talk more than teachers
- Make sure that **students are doing the thinking**, supplying the answers, making the connections, etc.
- Use **wait time** (at least three seconds) frequently
- Utilize **think-pair-share**
- Ask **follow-up** questions
- Ask for students to **summarize**
- Cue student responses—**scaffold** as needed to get students to do the work

Tip: Never work harder than your students!

✓ Put this to use now

- Make sure **all students** are consistently involved in all class activities.
- Plan activities that **require full involvement** and don't allow eager students to dominate or passive students to hide.
- Begin collecting (or making) **models of strong and weak work**, and have students use rubrics to assess them.
- Make sure **students talk** (on task, on topic, as directed) **more** than you do in class.

4 Classroom Culture

Creating a classroom culture that is joyful, where God is loved above all, and where learning is valued and virtue is nurtured, is the chief foundation for all that is done in the classroom. This is as much about **who the teacher is** as what the teacher does.

Excellent teachers create a culture of **both** high expectations (academic and behavioral) and high support. They create classrooms where the teachers do all they can to help students learn at a high level of excellence.

<p>✓ Interactions with students are mutually respectful, and communicate support and predictability</p>	<p>The teacher’s interactions with students should always be professional and respectful, characterized by kindness and warmth. Students think better in classrooms that are consistently emotionally secure.</p> <p>The teacher must be the undisputed authority in the room, but warm and courteous relations are the norm in effective classrooms.</p>
<p>✓ Expectations, routines, and transitions are carefully planned and communicated to students</p>	<p>Carefully think out in advance, and communicate clearly to students, the expectations for routines and movements in the classroom.</p> <p>Take time to practice routines and transitions early in the year, especially with younger students. Time taken early will lead to more learning as the year goes on.</p> <p>Consider the room arrangement when planning. Different groups of students need, or can tolerate, different arrangements.</p> <p>Some characteristics of effective classrooms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students ready when lesson starts • Quick transitions • Routines completed independently without distracting other students • Succinct, consistent instructions <p>Some characteristics of less effective classrooms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students dependent on teacher for repeated routines • Teacher often reminds • Teaching without attention • ‘What do I do now?’ is heard frequently in the classroom from students
<p>✓ Rules are enforced in a way that communicates that the teacher desires the student to be successful</p>	<p>Teachers who stay calm and refuse to take disobedience personally are better able to communicate graciously and firmly to students. This communicates to students that the necessary discipline or consequence is for their good, and not just to make the teacher feel better.</p> <p>When conflicts happen, excellent teachers will seek to get to the heart issues and not only require outward compliance.</p>
<p>✓ Put this to use now</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear in your own mind what expectations, routines, and movements are needed for each lesson and communicate these to students. • Never begin teaching without the full attention of all students. • Establish (and practice, if needed) an entry routine, communicate clear transitions between activities, and require 100% compliance with all instructions. • Plan to observe other teachers and take note of how they communicate with and manage their classes. • Don’t take things personally!