



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. This month's issue provides ideas and insights that have the potential to improve lessons that fall short of our expectations.

The Missing Link



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

Some lessons result in successful student learning while others fail to accomplish what the teacher intended and can seem flat and incomplete. When I reflect on this fact, several thoughts come to mind especially around what we now know about best practice in teaching and learning.

- What teachers know and are able to do has changed dramatically over the past several decades. With an abundance of pedagogical research readily available and the advent of the Internet, today's teachers have access to so much more information than we had in the past.
- As a teacher, I wish I had known then what I know now. In past decades, there were very few, if any, peer-to-peer conversations about teaching and learning, and almost no staff development to improve our practice. We operated in isolation and were on our own to do our jobs as we saw fit.
- The criteria for being an accomplished teacher has changed over time with the articulation of student learning standards and the expectation that educators today analyze data and student work and use that analysis to inform their practice. In the past, knowledge of subject matter and an orderly classroom environment were the main criteria for being a good teacher.

When I thought about those past experiences, I recalled the adage "hindsight is 20/20 vision." I know I would have been a much better teacher had I had the insights, the professional dialogues, the staff development opportunities, and the latest research that is now available with today's universal access to the Internet.

Consistently successful classroom practitioners understand that the measure of successful lessons is clear evidence of student learning or progress toward mastering a concept or subject matter content. As lessons unfold, these teachers have their antenna up monitoring the learning that is going on with each student. The reality is that, despite our good intentions, some lessons are not all that successful. In this issue of *Just for the ASKing!*, I describe lessons that are in some way incomplete or have a "missing link." The intent is to provide ideas and insights that have the potential to improve those lessons that fall short of our expectations. Each of the scenarios below describes lessons that do not quite work because a vital ingredient has not been included.



Lesson #1: As the lesson began, the teacher reviewed an essential question that was on the front board. The question was: How do the forms of energy produced by nuclear reactions impact the quality of life in our society? To start the lesson, the teacher asked, “What is going on in the world with fusion?” to which a boy replied, “What’s fusion?” Shortly after, the teacher asked, “Where in the atom would you have a nuclear reaction?” When no one responded, the teacher answered her own question. As the teacher continued “talking,” some students had their heads down, some were generally inattentive, and others looked perplexed.

Missing Link: Despite the fact that the teacher had the best of intentions, this lesson would have elicited better results with short learning experiences that linked this new learning to past experiences. A review of vocabulary terms would have helped the students make mental links to the new topic as well. The practice of accessing student knowledge is essential when moving into new territory since it increases the possibility that students will be better able to handle the new content. In fact, the research says that accessing prior knowledge has more to do with student achievement than does innate ability as we currently measure it.



Lesson #2: The enthusiastic and energetic teacher seemed well prepared for the upcoming lesson. She had clear, student-friendly objectives on the white board and handouts were neatly stacked and ready for distribution. She presented her lesson in a logical and sequential manner; as she spoke, every individual diligently watched her presentation. Along with her explanation, she included visuals to support her lesson. After her lecture, she handed out a worksheet to let her students practice the lesson content.

Missing Link: The operative word in the description above is “watched.” During the 20-minute lesson, there was no opportunity for the students to react to the lesson content or to interact with one another. Mary Budd Rowe’s research tells us that it is critical to pause approximately every ten minutes to allow students to respond to a question or to share their thinking with a peer. This practice, known as the **10:2 Theory**, enables students not only to determine that they are following the lesson but also gives the teacher the chance to respond to questions or to clarify content. There is a big difference between students quietly watching a lesson and active, meaningful learning.




Lesson #3: As the teacher returned a writing assignment, she reminded the students of the criteria for completing the assignment. A review of teacher comments on the papers revealed that the letter grades ranged from A to D. Additionally, there were some one-word comments in the margins of the papers. A few students turned their papers over to see if there were any additional notations written by their teacher, but there were none.

Missing Link: If students are to learn and improve their writing, they need more feedback on their work. The result of any lesson, activity, or assignment should be that students know where they stand in relation to the mastery of standard or concept under study. Students can only make progress when they receive growth-producing feedback which research has shown to have a significant impact on student learning. See the ***Just for the ASKing!*** issue titled “Growth-Producing Feedback” for more information on this practice.




Lesson #4: The lesson was a very lively, interactive learning experience for students. The outcomes were clear and the class period was divided into manageable chunks. By all indicators, the lesson was a success as the students were focused and productive. With ten minutes remaining in the period, the teacher complimented the students on their work and then told them they could talk among themselves for the remainder of the period.

Missing Link: Teacher enthusiasm is critical for lesson success as is having the students being immersed in the content. There were many positive ingredients to the lesson with one exception: Rather than have the students simply socialize during the final minutes in the period, it is important to capitalize on the opportunity to have students pull together their thoughts and think about what they have learned. Some teachers ask students to complete a journal entry while others have students submit a **Ticket to Leave** at the classroom door. Other teachers employ an oral summarizer in which students have 60 seconds to explain to a peer what they have learned. A unique option is to have students write a message in a texting or email format to a peer or family member sharing what they have learned for the day. Summarizing is a critical learning opportunity for students and one that should not be missed.




Lesson #5: When the teacher wrapped up the direct teaching part of the lesson, she distributed a handout to the class so they could practice what she had taught. The class was divided into groups of three to work together on the practice exercise.

Missing Link: When asked to explain in their own words what they were doing, most students were adept at putting into their own words their understanding of the lesson. When asked how the lesson content could be used in the real world, most of the students were silent. One student explained that he and his classmates had recently talked about this issue outside of class with no resolution. Another student noted that understanding the content was important so he could get into college. To make the lesson more complete, the teacher could either make a connection between the content and the world beyond the classroom, or ask the students how the content could be used by scientists, engineers, or researchers. Lessons taught with little or no relevance beyond the classroom are not nearly as effective as helping students understand how “this stuff” could be used outside the school.




Lesson #6: This multi-faceted lesson included many steps and details. The students were expected to work in pairs to complete an in-class assignment that was to take two class periods. The project involved a knowledge base of content, an understanding of new vocabulary, the application of technological skills, and the ability to use pieces of equipment located throughout the room. On top of all these requirements, the students were to work successfully as a pair. The assignment was linked to content standards and had a clear outcome students were expected to achieve. After the teacher had explained orally what the students were to do, she asked if there were any questions. When none surfaced, she gave the high sign to begin.

Missing Link: Student reactions to the teacher’s directions were varied. Some pairs immediately began talking and planning; others were quiet, mentally trying to determine what the first step should be. One girl put her head down while a boy tapped his pencil nervously and stared out the window with his back to his partner. Another pair was unsure about what they would do while another pair whispered that they had no idea how to begin. In addition to providing written directions for a multiple-day assignment, a necessary step in lesson planning is the completion of a **task analysis** which guides a teacher in carefully determining what skills and background knowledge are required to complete the work, determining which students are lacking in which pieces, and planning proactively how to intervene to help all students reach the standard being addressed. When students are incapable of completing an assigned task, they will find ways to avoid the work or they will disrupt the class by acting out. When teachers complete a task analysis, they can decide which students can work independently, which students need one-on-one attention, or which students might require a different assignment which still addresses the standard.



Lesson #7: At the beginning of class, the teacher returned a test the students had completed the previous day. She went over the correct answers to the test questions and then asked the students to put the tests in their folders before she began a new lesson.

Missing Link: Accomplished teachers have learned to use data to make instructional decisions. These teachers understand and believe that learning, not grading, is the fundamental responsibility of all teachers. Circumspect educators have come to realize that some students need more than one chance to show what they have learned, and, as a result, they give their students the opportunity to correct their errors and resubmit their assessment for further consideration by their teacher. In other situations, teachers complete an error analysis of the test data and provide feedback to the students before they revise their tests. In the world beyond the classroom, workers are not allowed to make mistakes and press on. They are required to analyze their work to ensure that they do not make the same mistakes in the future. If learning is the goal, students should have the same opportunity.




Lesson #8: In this social studies lesson, the students were all carefully watching their teacher exhibit an in-depth knowledge of content coupled with supporting visuals and demonstrations. They were attentive to what she was doing and listening to her words. Periodically, she paused and asked, “Is everybody with me?” Later she posed, “Does this make sense?” At another point, she asked, “Are we all ready to move on?” Finally, she asked, “Are there any questions?” In each of these instances, there were no student responses, simply head nods.

Missing Link: When teachers check to see if students are following their lesson or if the students understand the information that is being presented, it is important for them to ask specific questions to determine where the students stand in relation to the lesson objective. Vague questions will not get the job done. Instead more specific questions are needed to provide data for teachers to know where the class and individuals are in the learning sequence. Examples of questions that help teachers check for understanding include the following:

- What do you think will happen next?
- How does my explanation match what you thought you knew?
- After a student answers, ask how he came to that conclusion.
- How does this compare with what we have learned before?
- What might happen if...?
- Can you think of another way we might do this?
- What do we know so far about...?

Unfortunately, many questions teachers ask to check for student understanding are fact-based and do not measure understanding at all. When teachers prepare their “checks” as they plan lessons, using higher levels of **Bloom’s Taxonomy** to form questions will require deeper thinking. For more information, see the ***Making the Common Core Come Alive!*** issue titled “The Art of Questioning: The Teacher’s Role.”



Lesson #9: After spending the majority of the class period teaching a new math concept, the teacher answered a few student questions, let the students practice for a few minutes, and then assigned the students 30 problems to complete for homework.

Missing Link: Judicious teachers take the time to understand the purpose of homework, how much to assign, and how to use the data from homework to make instructional decisions. Students should never be assigned homework that they cannot complete independently. The step that some teachers fail to take is to determine, as best as possible, if the students understood the lesson connected with the homework assignment. Using white boards or signal cards during lessons help teachers determine who is following the explanation and who may need some individual attention before tackling homework. It is important to remember that practice makes permanent

and that practicing something incorrectly makes it ten times harder to undo and relearn. Additionally, teachers can get into the habit of assigning homework without considering the amount. Selecting a lesser number of problems might provide students with the practice they need to solidify learning. Ten problems or fewer may just do the trick.



Lesson #10: The students entered the classroom quietly and took their seats. The chatter, laughter, and energy level that is the norm in most classrooms was conspicuously missing. The teacher was seated at her desk working on her computer. It was apparent that the teacher was a no-nonsense individual. There were two posters that focused on behavior expectations as well as penalties for violations. The students were almost robotic as they completed the routines required by the teacher. When the teacher spoke, she did so with a commanding voice. The students were attentive to her lesson and took notes throughout her lecture. No student spoke during the lesson.

Missing Link: What is absent in this scenario is the absolutely essential ingredient in learning environments: teacher relationship building with students. Many teachers fully understand the importance of connecting with students in a variety of ways. Most are at their doors greeting students as they arrive, making positive personal comments that may have nothing to do with the subject matter, and paying students compliments in a variety of ways. They have found that they do not have to rely on a litany of rules because their students trust them; their participation in the lesson is encouraged and they are further motivated by the positive feedback from their instructor. The classroom is clearly a safe, non-threatening environment where mistakes are welcome, where a variety of ideas and opinions are the norm, and where students fully believe that their teacher cares about them as a person. When students are uptight and stressed, the likelihood of learning diminishes.



Learning occurs when lessons are well thought out and include specific components. All of us, regardless of how long we have taught or how much experience we have, can improve student learning when we take these steps. As professionals, we need to always reflect on and analyze our lessons to be sure that these time-tested components are present in our lesson design and implementation so that our efforts result in high levels of learning.



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