

Friday Focus: “Well Structured Lessons:

or

Form May Follow Function, but *Not Too Far Behind*

(Standard I, Indicator I-A-4)

Proficient: Develops well-structured lessons with challenging, measurable objectives and appropriate student engagement strategies, pacing, sequence, activities, materials, resources, technologies, and grouping.

Exemplary: Develops well-structured and *highly engaging* lessons with challenging, measurable objectives and appropriate student engagement strategies, pacing, sequence, activities, materials, resources, technologies, and grouping *to attend to every student’s needs. Is able to model this element.*

Well. Structured. Lessons. Each of these terms contains room for so many different interpretations. “Structure” is one of those words for which I feel compelled to ask for clarification when someone mentions it, as in “I’d prefer a teacher who is structured.” I know what *I* mean when I think of structure (and even then my definition is a little amorphous) but what do *you* mean? When I do ask parents, (a “well structured teacher” is the number one request in our parent questionnaires for placement) I get responses that sound more like they mean slightly rigid, consistent, communicative, “in-control,” detail-oriented, or closely progress monitoring. In trying to add up these descriptors and trying to find some kind of semantic commonality, it seems like these parents want their child’s teacher to be purposeful in everything they do, thoughtful about planning, and effective in communicating to students and parents the reasoning behind their decision-making. They might say “on top of things” but then we are back again to vague terms.

An interesting viewpoint I’ve gleaned from parents over the years is the idea that “creative” and “structured” are somehow at opposite ends of the spectrum in their minds. So, unless they are convinced that their child is such an effective learner that a little bit of “unstructured-ness” is an okay “price” to pay for creativity, they are nervous about it. As if being creative is a euphemism for thoughtless planning, inconsistency in expectations, disregard for details, and very little progress monitoring.

I’m very glad the DESE included the notion of “highly engaging” in their description of exemplarily structured lessons, because it has led to my reflection on this dialectic. To me, there can be *compliance* with structure, but very little student *engagement* without both structure *and* creativity. (And we know that compliance sometimes looks like engagement, but it is nowhere near the same thing.) Structure and engagement are inextricably linked in the most exemplary

lessons. Rather than mutually exclusive phenomena, they are important together in students' learning experience.

In my opinion, a well structured lesson has a shape all its own, a shape which is purposefully created by the teacher to fit or adjust to the important components of the lesson. The components of the lesson may be generalized and fit a format that is research based – as in the Skillful Teacher “frame” or Charlotte Danielson’s recommended lesson plan format¹ - or it may follow the necessary events related to the appropriate pedagogy.² For example, the Skillful Teacher³ emphasizes the lesson as requiring the following components:

1. Framing the Learning (Making explicit the learning objectives, itinerary, big idea/essential question, reason it’s worthwhile, reason for the activity, criteria for success)
2. Getting Ready for Learning (Activate current knowledge, preassess, anticipate confusions and misconceptions)
3. Presenting Information (through well chosen explanatory devices, thoughtful language devoid of ambiguity or vagueness)
4. Creating Mental Engagement (through explicitness and cognitive connections)
5. Purposeful opportunities for cognitive empathy (or “getting inside students’ heads”)
6. Consolidating and anchoring the learning

Each of these components are present in a well structured lesson. But – can that alone make for “highly engaging?” I actually think so. And I think the answer primarily lies in the first component – framing the learning – specifically where the teacher convinces the students that the learning and the activities are worthwhile. All the other components are necessary for students to be successful in their learning and are therefore also important components of engagement, not because the presence of these components guarantees engagement, but because the lack of them can almost *guarantee zero* engagement. How many of us have tuned out of a workshop when it was clear the presenter hadn’t done his or her homework, wasn’t prepared, was only going to talk at us or halfheartedly lead a “discussion?” No interesting video, no sincere attempt to find relevance to the audience, powering on through a presentation when body language and absorption in personal email screams boredom? As grown up professional educators, we know what it’s like to be not at all engaged in the learning and – let’s face it – at this point we are unwilling to even pretend compliance.

¹ In other words, “Function follows form”

² Or “Form follows function”

³ Saphier, Haley-Speca and Gower: (2008) The skillful teacher: Building your teaching skills, 6th Ed.

I do not often observe lessons here that I've described above, but I think it's worth mentioning because it helps us all to reflect on the quality of our work. How do we give shape and structure to our lesson plans? Do you follow a proscribed format like the one outlined above? Or does the subject matter pedagogy provide the structure? The constructivist pedagogy is (in my opinion) the best way to go with the content-laden subjects of science and social studies most of the time. Pose a provocative problem, question, or phenomenon, then support students (not too much!) with information (or the means to information) that will lead them to the AHA moment. Some lesson plan formats are so formulaic – like the ones that routinely have the teacher starting off a unit with “review vocabulary through questioning.” If there's a word that I don't know and I don't really have a need to know, I couldn't care less about it.⁴ Let the other students raise their hands, oohing and aahing, showing off their vocabulary. Even if I should learn the vocabulary word so I can read it in my textbook, that still isn't meaningful for me. Unless I have selected my own topic out of interest, textbook activity is contrived, not real. But pose an interesting problem, present an interesting phenomena (and *make* it interesting by being visibly interested in it yourself), let me work on it a bit – in a group or not – and hand me the vocabulary when I have a need for it.

“See what's happening there? See those little drops of water on the top of the jar? There's a word for that ... it's called *condensation*.”

Or...

(Rather than reviewing through Quadrant A or Recall questioning) write two questions on the board related to the essential idea, and ask students to argue persuasively which of them is the more difficult question to answer and why (especially appropriate for math).⁵ Give plenty of time to think-pair-share, and that creates engagement. Let students represent their conclusions by moving to a specific corner of the room and you have movement, at-a-glance assessment, AND engagement.

Another way of developing well-structured lessons would include building in question and answering opportunities according to Blooms Revised taxonomy. I have observed lessons that were built entirely around this taxonomy and, while not easy to plan, led to out of this world results. But no one says you can't use that lesson again next year! And if you share it with your colleagues, what a helpful way to “model this element!”

As a young teacher, I often got into the trap of having my students engage in a string of activities that I felt were worthwhile. I was often excited about these activities, and the students seemed to enjoy them, but in retrospect my students were so good-natured they would have complied with anything. But I never put a shape or structure to the lesson. At the time, I was just happy if the pacing worked out so that they weren't scrambling at the end, or (even worse!)

⁴ Okay, that's not true. I do love words. But it's probably true for many of our students.

⁵ Idea is from JustAsk website: <http://justaskpublications.com/just-ask-resource-center/mentoring-resources/>

finished too quickly with nothing left to do. Carving out time for a strong finish (what the Skillful Teacher people call a “summarizer”) never even occurred to me. When I learned years later that students will remember best what happens in the first five minutes and the last five minutes of the lesson, it made sense, (and my list of things to apologize for to my first class grew even longer.)

Finally – the last differential - *To attend to every student’s needs*: The opportunity must exist⁶ for each and every student to reach his or her own AHA moment. It’s not fair to students if we create an environment where, due to shyness, or slower auditory processing, or distractibility, or whatever, they are denied the opportunity to have their own AHA moment because other students are quicker to raise their hands. It is in the creation of those opportunities, I believe, that the difference between proficient and exemplary lesson planning can be found.

⁶ In other words, we must create it.