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The Advantage of a Well-Planned, Activity-Based Lesson

The first three **stories** in this chapter are about how a well-planned, activity-based lesson engages students, thereby precluding the management problems that frustration and boredom can generate. In the fourth story, the teacher explains how he planned not only the activities but the very transition between them. A fifth story demonstrates how confusing directions and the careless distribution of materials can derail even a promising lesson.

Ryan's Story

In preparation for my biology class on competition within an animal population, I placed paper strips of various colors on the walls of the hall outside the classroom. Some were quite visible, such as a blue strip against a white wall, whereas others were more difficult to find, such as a red strip on a fire extinguisher. All of these strips represented

food that the students, as members of an animal population, would need in order to survive.

Prior to the search, I gave the students a 10-minute lecture on hunting techniques used in the wild. Then I told them to bring back as many strips as they could find in the 8 minutes I would give them. Without necessarily realizing it, they used some of the techniques mentioned in the lecture. And as the students experienced the struggles animals face in their search for food, they realized that the competition for resources was intense.

Now and then I still see a strip of paper in the hall, one that we missed during the cleanup. It reminds me that a well-planned and well-executed lesson, aside from enhancing the students' understanding, is fun besides.

Ryan's lesson generated enthusiasm because the activity was novel for his students. In addition, he made the connection explicit between the activity and the concept of competition so the activity could make sense to them. Undoubtedly, his students also appreciated his effort to prepare such a novel activity. *Students appreciate a novel activity as long as its meaning has been made explicit.* How could you add novelty to one of your own activities?

Jill's Story

For their study of animal nutrition, the students in my 10th-grade biology class were observing live hydra with their microscopes. Each pair had a hydra. While observing it, they each had to draw what they saw and label specific parts. Once they had done that, I gave each pair a daphnia for the hydra to ingest.

One pair of students was truly amazed and enthusiastic. Their hydra was ingesting its daphnia. They seemed almost proud of their hydra, especially when other students wanted to see it. They were far from the top students in the class. Actually, they were average to below average.

When it was time for the class to end, both students were so caught up in the lesson that they asked to stay. They had such an honest interest, I was really surprised.

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4 Lesson Execution Problems

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I remember this event because it reaffirmed my belief that novel, hands-on experiences can reach students who might otherwise not respond to a lesson. It was also special for me because the informal atmosphere of the activity gave me a chance to interact with the students on a more personal level.

The excitement her lesson generated, especially among her low achievers, surprised Jill. However, in addition to having prepared a novel activity, she had assigned the class to work in pairs. *Having students work in pairs (with teacher support) is particularly useful for low achievers, who can then teach each other without the fear of making a mistake publicly.*

Henry's Story

I prepared a lesson for my ninth graders on how to identify the relative age of rock layers. I started the lesson with a **do-now**, where the students were to define some terms in their text that they would need for the lesson. I gave them 3 minutes, and while they were defining the terms, I projected a few diagrams on the screen.

When they finished the do-now, I asked several students to identify the structures in the diagrams that would be crucial to their understanding the rest of the lesson. Then I took about 10 minutes to review the homework because the day's activity would be based on that information as well.

Next I distributed a worksheet with a geologic cross section that was much more complex than the homework they had just completed. The students were to work in groups of three to answer the seven questions on the worksheet while I circulated among them to make sure they were on task and on track. I used about 13 of the 15 minutes I'd allotted for this worksheet activity.

Then, for us to see how well they understood the activity, I placed a transparency of the worksheet on the overhead projector and asked several "what if" and "why" questions related to the cross section. These questions took about 7 minutes. Finally, I closed the lesson with a summary, some comments about the next day's topic, and the homework assignment.

My management strategy was to keep the students busy. I allowed a few minutes for the transition from one instructional segment to the next but otherwise maximized the instructional time available in a 40-minute period.

Henry crafted his lesson with a clear objective and the 40-minute time frame in mind. Through a series of instructional segments, he got his students settled, reviewed the homework, and focused them on the day's objective. Then he had them build and share their understandings in small groups, assess their understandings in response to thought-provoking questions, and finally attend to the lesson's closure. The advantages of such a segmented lesson are that teachers can (a) identify errors in their timing estimates and make adjustments during subsequent segments, (b) renew student interest and integrate latecomers with each new segment, and (c) gauge the usefulness of an activity for student learning and then, if necessary, modify the rest of the lesson.

Perhaps Henry's most important segment was his do-now. The do-now is a daily **routine** consisting of an activity each student is expected to work on independently for the first few minutes upon entering the classroom. The purpose of the do-now is to get, without supervision and even before the bell rings, every student ready to work. Accordingly, *the do-now must be an activity that requires students to sit down and take out their notebook, perhaps their textbook, and a pencil or pen.* The teacher takes attendance and otherwise prepares to launch the lesson during the do-now.

In addition to the do-now, Henry regularly uses other instructional segments, such as group work followed by an assessment activity, to structure his lessons. The regularity of this framework reduces Henry's need to repeat everyday directions and keeps the students aware of his expectations as each lesson unfolds.

How do you structure your lessons? A regularity in structure in no way diminishes your opportunity to keep the content of each lesson fresh. The only caveat? *Make the connection between instructional segments explicit to your students.*

Ira's Story

During one of my first double-period classes in the high school, I prepared about 80 minutes of lecture, interspersed with questions and small-group writing projects. I spent hours preparing my talk on fiction in film and included pictures, anecdotes, and artifacts from my memorabilia collection. I was able to keep most of the students engrossed by mixing entertainment with some important facts.

The two 80-minute lectures, almost back-to-back, left me emotionally and physically drained, however, so much so that when I got home, I needed a 3-hour nap. As much as the students enjoyed the lecture, I knew it would be impossible for me to perform like that regularly. So I vowed to plan more activities for the students to do, especially during our double-period classes.

I planned a test for the first part of the next double period and an informal group activity for the second part. I posted the directions for the activity on the board and, before the test, explained them briefly. I anticipated a problem, however. How could I, during our customary break after 40 minutes, prevent the sharing of test answers with those who had yet to finish the test? So I stated that students could not take their break until they had finished and handed in their test.

The transition between the test and the activity went smoothly, and, relieved to be doing something relaxing after the test, most students doing the activity were considerate of those still working on the test.

Ira not only balanced the activities for his double period by providing a relaxing one to follow an intense one, but, just as important, he planned for the transition between them as well. How could you balance your activities and plan for the transition between them?

Jason's Story

We got through the do-now quickly and began going over the directions for groups to dramatize some scenes from *Hamlet*. The noise became thunderous. So I asked, "Eric, would you like to take the rest of this period to talk to Kelly? Why don't we forget about this

activity, and all of you can talk to your friends for the rest of the period while I make a test for this class to take tomorrow? Does that sound good?" Their response to this proposal was a chorus of disapproval. I continued with the directions, but occasionally I still had to remind them that I could schedule a test for tomorrow.

During the activity, I needed to call their attention to some specific details, and it was difficult to get everyone quiet. I called a student by name and asked him to be quiet. As soon as I looked elsewhere, he began talking again. I responded, "Joe, do you want to be responsible for the whole class taking a test tomorrow? Okay then, be quiet for a minute while I explain this." As soon as I turned my back, he was talking again. As I leaned over the desk, I yelled, "Joe, don't you understand English? I don't like getting in a student's face, but you won't shut up!" He stopped talking for almost a minute.

After reflecting on this lesson, I came to some conclusions. First, I should have been better prepared and more organized for the lesson. Then I wouldn't have had to interrupt the activity to get their attention. They needed many materials for the activity, and I should have had everything ready for each group. Also, the directions were complicated, and I did not have them printed on their handouts or telegraphed on the screen.

Second, I don't think it was a good idea for me to use the threat of a test as a punishment, just as homework should not be used as a punishment. And I know it was wrong to use sarcasm. Instead, I could have moved some of the students in Joe's group, the group that seemed to ignite the rest of the class.

I thought I was prepared for this lesson, but I learned that it takes a lot of preparation and organization to be ready for an activity-based lesson.

Jason planned a promising, activity-based lesson, but unlike Ira, he failed to prepare adequately for its execution. Noise became a problem for Jason as soon as he began to explain the directions, a clue that his students were getting confused from the very beginning. At that point, he needed to *address the situation, not the shortcomings of the student(s)*. For example, he could have said to the class, "This noise is unacceptable. How can we keep it down?"

Jason's story demonstrates that *preparation and organization are crucial to the execution of an activity-based lesson*. **Novice teachers**, however, do not yet have the repertoire of activities, let alone the foresight, to anticipate their logistical hurdles. Consequently, they face a plethora of **classroom management** problems. The following chapters present accounts of how a novice teacher dealt successfully with a classroom management problem.

Note: Contemporary Conception of a Good Lesson

According to the transmission view of pedagogy, students learn by acquiring information as the teacher or text transmits it. Contemporary theorists, however, view learning as socially constructed. That is, students construct their own understandings as they relate new information to their prior knowledge and then modify or validate their understandings as they exchange ideas with others. Accordingly, to a social constructivist, a good lesson would feature pairs or small groups of students engaged in reflective discussion to reach common understandings.

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