

Effective Teaching...

by Harry and Rosemary Wong

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Hitting the Bulls Eye as a Beginning Teacher

Many teachers begin teaching without a clear lesson plan format and without an operational curriculum in hand. Even fewer receive curricula that are aligned with state standards. They have to figure out what to teach and how to teach it. Can you imagine Starbucks' telling its employees to figure out how to make coffee without telling them what bean to use or how to grind the bean? Or, American Airlines telling its pilots here's a plane full of passengers; now get them to Chicago!

The New Pathways to Teaching in New Jersey is a program for people seeking an alternative route to teaching. They have been in other professions and now wish to enter the classroom. One tool they give their teachers in training is a template to use as a lesson plan format.

Norm Dannen is presently in the New Pathways program and is currently teaching advanced English at Southern Regional High School in Manahawkin, New Jersey. His instructor in the New Pathways program is Tom Vona, who was a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Tom also observes Norm in his teaching setting, so Norm is in good hands.

Norm's situation is an exception to the rule. It is rather common for a new teacher to receive no details about specific content, sequence, instructional materials, or pedagogical methods. New teachers are recruited by the thousands, and often few, if any, support systems are put into place to allow their successful transition into the classroom.

Teachers show up on their first day and are told to go and teach. The new teacher may not even be walked to the classroom or be welcomed to the school by the staff.

This would never happen for new employees at any company or non-profit organization such as Home Depot, The Cheesecake Factory, or the American Red Cross. New hires would show up on the first day of work and expect to be trained on how things are done. Of course, what else?

Therefore, if you are a teacher looking for a job, it is important that you ask two questions at the interview:

- Is there an induction program?
- Is there a curriculum for my subject(s) or grade level?

Next, ask for a copy of the curriculum. Students come to school to learn and the curriculum describes what the students are to learn in a subject or at your grade level.

For instance, if you were to work for the Lafourche Parish Public Schools in Louisiana, you would get a binder for a subject at your grade level with

A list of the state standards
Lesson objectives that are aligned to the state standards
Suggested activities that teach to the lesson objectives
Sample tests that are aligned to the objectives to use for assessment

- **Start With the End in Mind**

The effective teacher starts with the end in mind, with standards or goals. Perhaps you have heard of this as the "backward" approach to curricular design as explained by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their book, *Understanding by Design*.

As we said last month, standards represent a valuable guide post for you. Standards do not tell you what to teach, how to teach, or how to assess. They simply give you a base point from which to start a lesson and serve as a goal when you assess the success of your efforts in teaching the lesson.

These types of standards are typically generalized and most often are found as state standards.

New Jersey has some language arts literacy standards, each of which has lettered strands and learning expectations for each grade level in grades K-8, as well as a combined cluster for grades 9-12. Here are four of the 9-12 standards.

STANDARD 3.1 (READING) — All students will understand and apply the knowledge of sounds, letters, and words in written English to become independent and fluent readers, and will read a variety of materials and texts with fluency and comprehension.

STANDARD 3.2 (WRITING) — All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in context and form for different audiences and purposes.

STANDARD 3.3 (LISTENING) — All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.

STANDARD 3.4 (VIEWING AND MEDIA LITERACY) — All students will access, view, evaluate, and respond to print, non-print, and electronic texts and resources.

Align Objectives to State Standards

Norm created a 15-day unit to have students interpret *The Great Gatsby* artistically, thematically, and historically. In so doing, students identified with the autobiographical nature of the novel and applied the moral themes of this American literary classic to their own development as young adults.

Students achieved these objectives through a close reading of the novel (in class and aloud, with Study Guide Questions), writing exercises (Compare and Contrast, character analysis), small group discussion (analysis of the value of the American Dream as viewed by Fitzgerald), and critical thinking skills, in accordance with New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards for Reading, Speaking, Writing, and Media.

Norm wrote specific objectives that 1) are aligned to the state standards, and 2) state what students will be able to do as a result of the lesson.

Lesson Objectives for *The Great Gatsby*

Draw parallels between their own lives and the life and work of F. Scott Fitzgerald in the context of the Jazz Age, the Lost Generation, Prohibition, and the Great Depression.

Describe one significant event each in the artistic, musical, social, literary, and historical context of the writing of *The Great Gatsby*.

Describe at least three autobiographical elements of Fitzgerald's own life that are reflected in *The Great Gatsby*.

Explain narrative Points of View and the importance of Nick Carraway to the telling of the story.

Describe Fitzgerald's view of the American Dream, as defined by character and plot development in *The Great Gatsby* and a related short story by Fitzgerald, "Winter Dreams."

Identify how an author can use elements of Symbolism and Color in the creation of fictional characters that have greater depth, meaning, and immediacy.

Write a Fitzgerald-style narrative, creating their own characters and applying literary elements and events from their own lives.

Objectives are important in the teaching of a lesson.

- Objectives are classroom learning targets. The students know what they are aiming for, thus, they know what they are responsible for learning.
- Objectives remove the mystery to students. If they do not know where they are going, they won't be able to get there. So they moan, but rightly so, "Boring!"
- Objectives give students a focus and enable them to check for their own understanding. They are more likely to know if they know something or not.
- Students are more likely to buy into the lesson and are more likely to participate in activities if they understand why they are doing it.

Thus, communicate your objectives with (not to) your students.

Teachers who set and share objectives for learning can realize an average percentage gain of 22 on standardized tests. The quality of the lesson objectives accounts for much of what we see or do not see in the classroom. (Wise and Okey, 1983 as found in *The First Days of School*, p. 214)

The Lesson Activities

Standards and objectives actually improve your creativity.

Use objectives as the bulls eye on a target. As you start a lesson, write the objective on the board prior to and leave it there during the entire lesson as the goal. It also helps that the teacher can point to it as the lesson progresses and the students know upfront where they're headed.

With the lesson objectives set, the effective teacher can creatively design activities that are aligned to the objectives. This is the creative heart of any lesson, the lesson activities.

All activities selected must be directly focused on achieving the objective and must contribute to students being able to achieve the stated objective and hit the bulls eye during your assessment of mastery of the goal.

The creativity comes when you reflect on how you will implement the standards and objectives. It's no different from going to a hair dresser. There are standards of how a hair salon is operated. How your hair is transformed is all up to the creativity of the hair stylist, provided nothing is used or done that will violate a standard and harm the customer.

This is the same in the classroom. Implementation of the objectives is all up to the teacher.

In the best case scenario, the best lessons are the creative efforts of the members of a collegial grade level or a content department with everyone contributing and evaluating the best ways to enhance student learning.

Each day's lesson typically begins with a correlated bell work assignment, a motivator, or something that will focus the students on the day's lesson. Thus, start with a motivator or an attention grabber to engage the students. In educational terms, this is called an "Anticipatory Set," that is something used to get the students set to anticipate the lesson.

Norm says, "To focus attention on the lesson, I display an interdisciplinary transparency highlighting an historical element of the 1920s that is relevant to the story line of *The Great Gatsby* at the beginning of each class period."

The Students Come to School to Work

The purpose of schooling is for the students to learn and achieve. For students to learn, they must do the work. If you go home at the end of the day exhausted, it may be you are doing all the work and not the students. Schools are built for the students, not the teachers. See how Steve Geiman came to this [realization](#).

When people go to work, “work” means to get the work done. Students are no different. When they come to school, they all know they are to get the work done, and the better they do the work, the better the grade they earn.

But, it can be difficult if not impossible for a student to get the work done when the assignment does not spell out what the student is to do. There are no standards, no objectives, and no activities done for a specified reason. It’s like shooting arrows blindfolded hoping that one will hit the target.

Poor assignments like

Read chapter 7. Open your book to page 143. Do this worksheet. Watch this video. Break into groups. Write a paper on the Byzantine period

add to the confusion and misdirection experienced by students.

Because the students see no reason for the assignments, many students will blurt out and ask, “Why? why? and why do we have to do this?”

It basically comes down to what you teach and how you teach it! You teach for learning, not for coverage. The student’s incentive is to get better learning; the teacher’s incentive is to get better results.

This can be done as follows:

- Your lesson is aligned to a state or district standard.
- Your lesson has an objective to focus the lesson.
- Your lesson shows what you do to teach the objective.
- You have a test that is used to assess for learning.

Therefore, the greater the structure of a lesson and the more precise the objectives on what is to be accomplished, the higher the student learning rate.

Setting the Stage for Learning

This month’s column focused on how a teacher, Norm Dannen, uses objectives to communicate to his students what they are to learn. In a future column, we will share with you how Norm Dannen assesses and tests his students on that learning.

Unless you know where you are going, you will never be able to test if you have arrived at the designated point and hit the bulls eye.

As you wind up this school year reflect on your past lessons and identify those that were successful for your students. For those successful lessons, more than likely you had very specific learning outcomes in mind and targeted activities that moved your students toward accomplishment of the goals.

While the summer is meant for you to relax, refresh, and recharge, we encourage you to use it as a time to reinvent your lessons and identify and align them with state standards and create targeted lesson activities aimed at achieving the goal.

Your students next school year will reap the rewards of your time spent as they achieve more. Your competency as a teacher will grow as your students continue to gain in testing. Teaching is so much easier when you know where you are going and how you’re going to get there.

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