

[Teacher as Decision Maker]

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With the school year just beginning, teachers know that most of their time will be spent making splitsecond decisions—on everything from content choices to bathroom breaks! We in the education field know that making decisions is the bulk of a teacher’s job. We also know that making the right decisions can lead to success or failure for our students. But which decisions have the greatest impact? Isn’t there some way to prioritize?

Yes, there is. If we agree that the key role of the teacher is to design and deliver effective and efficient lessons for all students, then a teacher must decide the best way to build effective and efficient lessons for all students. This is dependent on the teacher’s ability to determine best practices regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the climate and culture of the classroom.

Decisions to make.

Curriculum: *What will my students learn?*

Curriculum begins with understanding the set of content and skills a student needs to master in order to be successful. In terms of the Common Core, this is the content and skills students must master to be college and career ready. Thus, curriculum includes the standards and the learning objectives constructed from those standards. However, curriculum is more than the standards. It also includes the materials and resources students will interact with to master that content and those skills.

In order to answer the question “What will my students learn?” teachers must decide which standard or standards to focus on, which learning objectives students will master and in what order, what materials and resources students need to use and interact with, and how this learning connects to previous and subsequent learning.

Instruction: *How will my students learn it?*

Instruction begins with understanding that different methodologies can be employed to deliver information to students. Because there is such a variety in the content and skills students need to learn, delivery can fall anywhere on the continuum from structured to open-ended. While the decision regarding the delivery method is the teacher’s to make, it cannot be made without a clear understanding of the learner.

In order to answer the question “How will my students learn it?” teachers must decide which delivery method best addresses the content or skill of the standard or learning

objective, the needs of the students, the various learning styles in the classroom, and the sequence in which the learning falls (in the lesson, unit, or course).

Assessment: *How will my students show that they have learned it?*

Assessment begins with understanding that mastery of a specific content or skill must be concrete to both the teacher and the student. A teacher will have a difficult (if not impossible) task if they are trying to teach something that does not have a clear and defined end. A student will struggle (if not give up) when the end is unclear or when they are unaware of what they have to do to show that they have learned. However, assessment is more than just the end or end product. It also includes knowing what each step along the way looks like and how supportive each step is to the mastery of the broader content or skill.

In order to answer the question “How will my students show that they have learned it?” teachers must decide what mastery of that content or skill looks like, the different ways students can independently produce this mastery, which way best expresses mastery of this standard or learning objective at a discrete level, and which way best expresses mastery of the standard or learning objective at the application and integration level.

Climate: *How will my students take an active role in their learning?*

Building a positive classroom climate and culture is crucial if students are to take ownership of their own learning. This positive climate determines how students receive feedback from the teacher and each other, how students work together to enhance each other’s learning, and how students support each other to take risks with their learning.

In order to answer the question “How will my students take an active role in their learning?” teachers must decide how to directly teach collaboration and cooperation, how to offer authentic opportunities for students to work together, how to model that making mistakes is an integral part of learning something new, and how to deliver feedback that is respectful and supportive and promotes the student’s self-worth while moving the student towards accuracy and understanding.

Now, not one of these decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, and climate can be made in isolation. Each decision will impact other decisions. It is the teacher’s job to decide how these four areas work together to ensure that there is the highest likelihood of a student learning. Thus, the teacher’s greatest power is in their decision making. Designing and delivering a course, a unit, and a lesson that is effective and efficient is paramount.