

9 Ways to Plan Transformational Lessons: Planning the Best Curriculum Unit Ever

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When instructors engage learners, develop ability and understanding, and amplify students' identities, we call them "transformational teachers" -- professionals who provide learners with disciplinary View-Masters so that kids can see the world in stereoscope.

But how do they prepare? Do they just show up for class and spontaneously uncork the awesome?

Obviously not.

Behind the scenes, transformational teachers labor over curriculum plans that look simple and even elegant to classroom observers. This post explains how they do that, specifically looking at nine transformational practices in planning.

How to Plan Transformational Lessons

1. Know the Standards, Curriculum, Core Concepts, and Strategies

For decades, many educators let a textbook's table of contents determine the scope and sequence of a course. Today, transformational teachers know their anchor standards by heart and recognize the difference between teaching strategies and learning strategies:

- **Teaching strategies** are approaches that teachers use to improve student learning. Example: whole-class discussion or presentation.
- **Learning strategies** are initiated and controlled by students to solve problems and increase their understanding. Example: using freewriting, brainstorming, and outlining to organize ideas.

Balancing teaching strategies with learning strategies keeps instructors and students actively engaged and focused on the same purpose.

2. Shift From Solo to Collaborative Lesson Design

As teachers gain fluency in using [Padlet](#), [Google Hangouts](#), [Evernote](#), [Skype](#), [Dropbox](#), [Hackpad](#), [Google Drive](#), and [Chatzy](#), collaborative planning is becoming second nature.

Additionally, more sharing of relevant curriculum is occurring via terrific open education resources (OER) like [EngageNY](#), [OER Commons](#), [CK-12](#), and even [iTunesU](#).

3. Create the Assessment Before Developing Content

Due in part to the influence of [Understanding by Design](#) (UbD) by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, transformational instructors no longer "teach then test." Instead, they "[design the test, then teach](#)." By building formative assessment and performance task checkpoints into their plans, instructors know when and why students don't understand a skill or concept.

4. Write Objectives for Students (Not an Administrator) to Read

A while back, teachers submitted lesson plans for their principals to check. In many cases, the administrator remained the primary audience for written objectives. Today, objectives are posted and made understandable to students. To ensure clarity, transformational teachers follow the Goldilocks rule. Objectives can't be too general ("students will learn about the Civil War") or too narrow, because narrow objectives "put you in danger of listing activities or assignments," writes Robyn R. Jackson in [Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching](#).

Here's another objective hack: to add relevance to the curriculum, simply add the stem "so that . . ." at the end of each posted objective as a way of describing how the skill and content will benefit students. Example: "Students will be able to evaluate the credibility of sources *so that* they can protect our democracy from the influence of those spreading misinformation."

5. Create Presentations That Do More Showing and Less Telling

On the rare occasion that transformational teachers lecture, they are sure to use visuals, created with tools like [Canva](#) and [Pic Monkey](#). Using pictures can "banish boredom," asserts Dan Roam, author of [Show and Tell](#). To keep pace with the 30 percent of students who access online videos for homework assistance, teachers' materials have become more interactive and optimized for mobile device consumption.

6. Don't Forget the Introverts

"Introverts like to work autonomously," says Susan Cain, author of [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking](#), "but the trend in education over the past 20 years has been focused on group learning." Cain notes that popular teaching strategies like [cold calling](#) don't allow introverts time to process what they want to say. Adding a *think-pair-share* activity or increasing [wait time to seven seconds](#) after asking a question plays to the strengths of introverts.

7. Provide More Opportunities for Students to Choose How They Accomplish Tasks

[danah boyd's research](#) determined that teenagers' lives are over-programmed: "[C]ontemporary teens often have little freedom to connect with others on their own terms. . ." A boost to student motivation can occur, says Kevin Perks in [Crafting Effective Choices to Motivate Students](#), if we let learners determine -- when possible -- whom they work with, content, due dates, where to work, and how they will complete tasks.

8. Plan Ahead

Transformational teachers plan at least a month ahead, building in flextime to absorb inevitable weather- or activity-related interruptions in the school schedule. Through careful design, each time a learner encounters skills and concepts, they are more challenging. The [spiral curriculum approach](#) increases understanding and retention.

9. Integrate Productive Struggle Into the Curriculum

Lubricating the learning process with frictionless turn-in-the-worksheet compliance denies students opportunities for productive struggle -- a condition important for learning and retention, according to an article by Richard Schmidt and Robert Bjork in *Psychological Science*. When students struggle, relax. Don't lower the expectations of your next lesson plan. Instead, [scaffold instruction](#) (PDF) and check to see that you are challenging students appropriately with [Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix](#).

Quality curriculum planning -- publically unacknowledged, unglamorous, and taxing -- is ultimately the golden road to *Areté* (Homer's word for *exemplary effectiveness*). Undoubtedly the tenets of effective planning will soon change, because transformational teachers never stop learning.