

Ten Elements of Effective Instruction

Excerpt from Larry Ferlazzo Blog

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What we want, what we need is a clear set of teaching moves we can use to make teaching consistently effective despite the inherent complexity of the classroom. Every year it seems we are asked to do more, though never, of course, given more time in which to accomplish the goals. One year I kept track of every minute taken from my instructional time--whether for interruptions from the counseling office, extended lunch activities, mandatory state testing, or anything else: it added up to, cumulatively, 29 hours. As our classes grow larger and more diverse, the core of our work--teaching students to read, write, speak, and think--grows more complex. Atul Gawande, writing about a similar though inevitably more accelerated trend in medicine in his book *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*, identifies three kinds of problems related to work: simple, complicated, and complex (49).

Simple problems, explains Gawande, have established steps, such as using a recipe to bake a cake, one can follow. Complicated problems, such as sending a rocket to the moon, can be broken into a series of simple problems. Complicated problems, such as building that rocket, require greater expertise; however, since this problem has already been solved, success can be achieved with some reliability. Complex problems, such as teaching a class of 35 adolescents, however, have no inevitable, replicable solution given their inherent--dare I say it?--complexity. As a parent of three children (two boys and a girl), I can attest to the lack of any available recipe that delivers a predictable result. After teaching adolescents for more than 25 years, I know only one thing for sure: they are complex.

As Gawande notes in his book about the practice of medicine (surgery in particular), "a doctor must be prepared for unpredictable turns . . . [because] medicine contains the entire range of problems--the simple, the complicated, and the complex" (51). Teaching is not so different.

Gawande set out to create what he called the "safe surgery checklist," a brief list of actions a doctor could complete before, during, and after any operation, under any conditions, to ensure a safe and successful procedure.

After analyzing many studies on effective literacy and English language arts instruction, I arrived at the following 10 elements of effective instruction. These elements appear on my lesson plan template so that I can consult them when planning. I find, as Gawande did when he demanded of himself that he use his own safe-surgery checklist, that I am more consistently effective and have become, over time, more conscious of what I do that makes a difference.

The Ten Elements of Effective Instruction

1. Provide the necessary conditions for optimum learning and engagement: a safe and supportive environment in which students can do what you want them to so that they learn within a meaningful, authentic context.
2. Establish and communicate clear, specific learning objectives aligned with established state and national academic and career standards.
3. Make explicit connections between present and past lessons, students' lives, other texts or subjects, the real world, and the Big Ideas around which lessons are organized.
4. Prepare students by teaching relevant background knowledge, skills, and academic language and literacies.

5. Integrate assessment throughout the instructional process, using the data to establish initial understanding, measure progress, provide feedback, refine instruction, and prepare students for future performances; this includes students reflecting on and assessing their own performance and progress.
6. Teach students strategies for learning, remembering, and doing.
7. Demystify literacy practices and performances by modeling, providing examples, and giving clear directions as students graduate from dependence on you to responsibility for their own learning.
8. Use different instructional methods, modes, and media in clear, coherent ways.
9. Ask students to generate a range of ideas, interpretations, solutions, questions, and connections.
10. Provide meaningful opportunities to practice, perfect, and perform all lessons in class and at home.

Let me briefly address one immediate concern that any such list of elements raises: control, or the exercise of professional knowledge. As Gawande observes, "We don't like checklists. They can be painstaking. They're not much fun. . . . It somehow feels beneath us to use a checklist, an embarrassment. It runs counter to deeply held beliefs about how the truly great among us--those we aspire to be--handle situations. . . . The truly great are daring. They improvise. They do not have protocols and checklists" (173). Gawande then suggests that "maybe our idea of heroism needs updating" (173).

So, too, perhaps with teaching: What helps our students learn best is what must guide us. What causes them to learn the skills and knowledge they need to live rich lives is what must guide us. Thus, the elements listed above offer a guide, not a mechanistic, lockstep solution to the problem of how to teach any student at any level. They provide what I find to be a succinct, useful, and effective set of solutions to the problem of how to teach 35 students to read, write, speak, and think. Which order you use, the way you implement these elements--those are your calls to make; I am suggesting, however, that at some level, each of these elements applies to every lesson, every day, regardless of what you are teaching.