

Designing Strategies and Assessments Connected to an Outcome During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Michael Kasper

Here I sit, sun shining on my patio table, laptop and books resting calmly on a breezeless afternoon, halfway through the 2020 summer of the pandemic. My school district has typically returned to session during the second week of August, so the month of July has always been the time I map out long-term instruction for the coming school year. This year, however, is quite different. There are so many unknown variables related to the fall semester that I question the efficiency of planning. Yet, I know that if I do not start soon, I will be behind until May 2021; do you feel me? While I usually do not put pen to paper immediately after school ends, I do reflect on the year, what should be changed, new ideas, and broader philosophies which will guide the development of my systems. That did not happen this year. Now I am surely not going to guilt myself; after all, everyone is relearning how to do their job during the pandemic.

What I have developed is a broad chart to keep me focused during my planning; I do not want my brain wandering to what if questions, rather I want to stay focused on problems I may solve now. While our strategies will surely change, our mission this year will be steadfast: enabling our learners to grow through the discipline we instruct. I am certain all teachers agree that growth is not achieved through the band-aid approach: developing strategies and lessons which are momentary. Rather, growth happens when instruction is sequenced and scaffolded purposely, enabling learners to engage with the discipline through curiosity and interest.

Generating Outcomes

Throughout March and April, we heard from our leaders that staying home and wearing masks would flatten the curve, enabling health care facilities to handle sick patients. For the most part, that outcome was achieved. Likewise, our students will need robust outcomes to value learning, especially those which unfold over time. If you subscribe to the ideas from a Rigorous and Relevant curriculum, you know that students want to learn because the experiences are enriching, engaging, exciting, and effective (Cash, 2011, p. 29). Instruction spread out over a few weeks or months functions as a journey for our learners with the outcome serving as the north star for all on the trek.

Teachers are known for their ability to collect and create a myriad of strategies for the classroom. I am always eager to hear ideas from colleagues who start their explanation with “I have a really fun activity” or “the kids loved it when.” As we begin to decide which strategies will be useful during the pandemic, consider that in order to be effective, they must be connected to an outcome.

The Three Areas of Instruction

Analyze any unit and there will be three distinct parts: 1) Introduction to Unit; 2) Formative Instruction; 3) Summative Reflection and Assessment. As long as there is an outcome, educators may plan starting in any area. For pandemic planning, I found it most useful to start with Formative Instruction, followed by Introduction to Unit, and finishing with Summative Reflection and Assessment.

Formative Instruction

This area of the instructional continuum is by far the longest in duration and includes the most strategies. Therefore, it has the most opportunity for flexibility. Being able to make efficient changes is an essential concept when planning during the pandemic. Educators, our time is valuable; we do not want to cancel an idea that we spent quality time planning. Starting with Formative Instruction planning will yield the most strategies which are able to be implemented during the fall semester.

To start, analyze the definitives: what do you know will be available to students in the fall? For most, the answer is e-learning. However, we know from our spring experience that some students may do better with raw materials. It is fairly reasonable to say that paper, pencil, glue, colored pencils, and other supplies will be available. True, you may have to problem solve how your students get those materials, but last I heard we are still allowed in our cars and the mail still works. More great news: if you do happen to be in person with your students, both technology and raw material based learning will function in your classroom!

Designing exciting and engaging lessons is a must! This quote comes from a middle school student: "Teachers, teachers, teachers, when will they learn. I have the attention span of a raisin. I need to be kept busy with things that are fun. Teachers need to find out what interests kids and what stuff they like to do. So for a less whiny, annoyed, and temperamental class, make it fun." Students need lessons where the teacher acknowledges child development in the creation of the instruction (Doda and Knowles, 2008, p. 29). Make certain to engage students through different learning modalities during your journey. Finally, since we are having to reinvent most of our strategies, now more than ever is the occasion to design culturally relevant learning opportunities. The payoff will be that your students will stay active in your class and show a great deal of growth.

Now is also the time to develop those reflective questions. Google Meet, Zoom, and your phone will still be available this fall. After students engage in a learning experience, make certain you are prepared to engage them with purposeful questions designed to solidify their knowledge and expand their curiosity.

Finally, realize that while you are generating practical strategies for the whole class, you will still have to provide interventions. What can you design now so your interventions escalate to

eventual success? Not only should you design instructional interventions, but engagement interventions too. Knowing your path to follow will help you stay focused during the fall semester, problem solve now so you can be flexible later.

Introduction to Unit

This is the hook, the bait, the tantalizing smell which draws students into learning. The beginning of instruction is brief, but oh so important. A bad introduction has a lasting impact on later strategies and student motivation. Therefore, waiting to design the Introduction to Unit until 1-2 weeks before instruction begins would be the most efficient way to plan.

First, wait until you know how you will instruct your students. Will they be in person, will you see them everyday, will it be e-learning, will you see half the class, who is still in the class, are they wearing maskings, are they wearing face shields, can they bring materials to class, do you still have your classroom, what do you have to wear? For that very first strategy to be successful, wait to know your variables, then plan the most exciting and engaging strategy you can design; you will thank yourself in December.

Your very first strategies should be unique to your building. It is important to note that districts and buildings will have particular expectations for students and staff. Before copying another idea, make sure it will be effective in your environment. It may be wise to design in-house strategies for the start of the year (while more districts and buildings have unique policies and procedures) and implement shared ideas for later in the unit.

The start of year is also the opportunity to query students for how they would best learn during the pandemic. Would they prefer e-learning or hands-on materials? Do they like pre-made videos or do they need an appointment with you once a week for 10 minutes? Acknowledge the needs of your students to drive your instruction (Cash, 2011, p. 42). Effective instruction relies on student choice; gather as much information about your students early to more purposefully engage with them throughout the rest of the school year.

Summative Reflection and Assessment

For the final area, please remember that assessment is merely a moment in our journey, a time where students and teachers reflect on growth and plan for the next learning opportunity; assessment should never be punitive. We have a tremendous moment before us regarding assessment, now is the time for change!

Let's be honest, those old school assessments are not going to be nearly engaging enough for students to want to show us how they have grown. Therefore, after you have introduced the unit, share your outcome with students and ask them for ideas regarding the reflection and assessment. If they are involved with development of the assessment, including the rubric, they

are far more likely to participate. Moreover, there will be a plethora of choices for students to choose from, allowing them to decide what will best show their growth.

The time is now, the place is your school. Assessment can change forever this school year, and change for the better. If we need to be optimistic about something, this should be it!

Keep It Simple

For educators to be successful in their pandemic planning, it is important to consider doing less really well, instead of more really messy. Myself, I plan on having three long-term outcomes per semester. Sure, we will have smaller units, maybe even an unconnected strategy every now and then. However, generating three outcomes associated with a learning journey will keep my classroom, regardless of where it is, a place where education is valued. When the pandemic is over, we want our students to be able to come back to school not with resentment, but rather excitement and appreciation for the opportunities that exist for them now and in the future.

References

Cash, R.M. (2011) *Advancing Differentiation: Thinking and Learning for the 21st Century*. Minneapolis, MN, Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Doda, N., & Knowles, T. Listening to the Voices of Young Adolescents. *Middle School Journal*, January 2008, 26-33.