

5 Big Lesson Planning Mistakes

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A lot can go wrong with lesson planning. Between the lack of (uninterrupted) planning time, unclear standards, and the hodge podge of resources most of us have available, it's tough to plan lessons that keep kids engaged AND give them the learning experiences that lead to success. But with some simple shifts in thinking and habits, we can supercharge our planning process and get a jump on some of the potential roadblocks.

Mistake #1: Focusing on activities rather than learning goals.

How many times have you been in a planning meeting that went something like this:

Teacher #1: “Looks like we’re teaching fractions next week.”

Teacher #2: “Oh, I’ve got such a fun activity for fractions!”

And then the discussion takes off on the details of the fun activity and what materials you’ll need to gather and what went well last year and who has a peanut allergy so you better not buy cookies with peanuts, and so on. It’s so easy (and more fun) to jump into the creative part of lesson planning.

But here’s the problem. By jumping right into the activities, we often lose sight of the focus of instruction.

If you’re going to plan an awesome lesson, you have to FIRST zoom in on and understand that standard or learning goal. ***What do you want kids to understand by the end of the lesson? What learning experiences will they need to get there?***

Once this is clarified, then by all means, plan a fun and engaging activity! But make sure the activity serves it’s purpose.



Mistake #2: Planning the assessment after the teaching.

Personally, I think this is toughest on elementary teachers. When you have to plan for 5 different subjects every single day, it’s REALLY hard to plan ahead and think past a week or so! (Or at least it is for me.)

I can think of many planning meetings where someone on the team would say, “Oh, we’re finishing up ___ next week. What do you guys want to use for an assessment?”

In an ideal world, my team would have selected (or created) the assessment BEFORE planning a single lesson. Doing this accomplishes two important goals:

- * Planning the assessment BEFORE planning the lessons forces you to clarify your learning goals and outcomes.

- * Planning the assessment BEFORE planning the lessons allows you to plan more targeted instruction.

Just to clarify, this is not a “teach to the test” recommendation. I’m not saying pick a test and then prepare students to ace that test. Rather, the goal is to plan a meaningful, fair, and rigorous assessment that requires students to apply their new learning in ways that demonstrate an understanding of the specific focus standards. Once the teacher has a clear vision of where the kids are headed, it’s much easier to plan engaging learning experiences that target the learning goals.

Mistake #3: Just planning the “meat” of a lesson.

The school day is often busy, rushed, and full of interruptions. How many times have you had your students working on a math activity (or science or reading) and noticed that time has gotten away from you? “Clean up! It’s time for writing!” (or science or reading or math...)

Those rushed transitions happen all the time and they happen at the expense of our students’ learning. One of the things that contributes to this happening (aside from my poor time management!) is when teams plan only the “meat” of the lesson and not the opening or closing. When you go into a lesson knowing that you’ve got 40 minutes to complete the fractions activity you planned, it’s easy to use every single one of those minutes on the activity. But if you’ve got in your mind the ten minute opening, 20 minutes for the activity, and the ten minute closing, you’re more likely to fit it all in.

The opening of any lesson should include a link to students’ prior learning and something to peak their interest. If you’re really good, you might even include some kind of informal preassessment! By activating that prior knowledge and planting a question for inquiry in their minds, you are increasing student engagement and increasing the effectiveness of the lesson.

The same goes for the closing. The big difference I saw when I started putting a bigger emphasis on the closing of a lesson can be seen in my students’ answers to a simple question: *What did we do yesterday?*

BEFORE Effective Closing: “What did we do in science yesterday?”

“We melted chocolate!” “We blew up balloons!” “We played with ice cubes!”

AFTER Effective Closing: “What did we do in science yesterday?”

“We investigated states of matter!” “We turned solids into liquids!” “We saw how gases take up space!”

The closing of the lesson allows students to take the learning experience (activity) and apply it to the concepts being studied. You might do this with a quick-write, a visual representation, a journal entry, or even a discussion. But don't skip it!

Don't have time you say? In my experience, the opening and closing of the lesson are equally as important as the activity. I've seen huge gains in student learning just from decreasing the activity time and increasing the opening and closing time.

To make this a reality, start jotting down opening and closing ideas into your lesson plans or even planning them out with your team. Having them in your mind before you begin teaching makes all the difference.

Mistake #4: Focusing on what the teacher will do rather than on what the kids will do.

This mistake is the difference between being just an “okay teacher” and being a truly amazing teacher. And really, it's a simple shift in thinking. Often when planning, we focus on what WE, as teachers, will be doing. *What will I say? What questions will I ask? What demonstration or modeling will I do?* And sometimes even in teaching, we focus on ourselves. Are we delivering the lesson the way we intended?

If you want to see a quick and noticeable increase in student learning, simply move your attention from what you are doing, to what the kids are doing.

In the midst of a lesson, this means that your attention is on your students and *their understanding*. Listen to their comments and questions. What does this tell you about their understanding? What misconceptions can you identify? Listen and adjust teaching accordingly.

In lesson planning, this means you focus your attention on what the kids will actually be doing.

So many lesson plans read like a step-by-step for the teacher:

The Teacher Will: Read aloud “The Rag Coat.” Model making connections. Explain the purpose of connections.

Try shifting your focus to what the students will be doing and really making it about their experience. For example:

The Student Will: Listen to “The Rag Coat.” Observe teacher make connections. Turn to partner and share connections. Predict the importance of making connections.

This simple shift helps the teacher become more aware of what her students are DOING and to plan better learning experiences. When I've done this in the past, there are lessons that turned out to be 30 minutes of students *listening to the teacher*. That's a problem! By focusing on the students experience, you can easily fix up lessons like those and add more hands-on and engaging experiences.

Mistake #5: Forgetting the big idea.

Consider a normal school day for most children. They move through activity after activity, some interesting and some boring, some challenging and some easy, some active and others passive. In one day, a student might learn about finding the main idea in reading, writing research papers, division, landforms, and Harriet Tubman. That's a lot for a little mind to take in!

On top of all that, kids have good days and bad days just like adults. They might be tired, hungry, distracted, worried, or upset during different days and different lessons. Students are not going to understand, attend to, or retain every detail from every lesson (obviously). And yet, we often expect them to do just that!

If you want to see your students get more from the lessons you teach, start making a point to connect every lesson back to the BIG IDEAS.



Here's an example... Let's say you're teaching a Social Studies unit about heroes. In this unit, the kids might learn about ten or more important heroes. Maybe you focus on one important individual a day, reading about their life and accomplishments. There's no way a student will remember every hero studied, or be fully present during each of these lessons. And that's okay, because the big idea of this unit is that individuals have the power to impact and change communities through traits such as courage, perseverance, selflessness, and compassion. If you make a point to connect back to that big idea during each lesson in the Heroes Unit, your students WILL remember what matters. *Without the big ideas, all you have are endless strings of skills, facts, and activities.*

You can easily address this problem during lesson planning. Simply add in guiding questions or summary activities that allow students time to connect back to the big ideas. You can have students write in journals or talk to partners, or just hold a quick discussion at the end of the

lesson. Make the big ideas the center of every lesson, and you'll see huge gains in student learning!

In my last post about the [questions to ask during every Social Studies lesson](#), I share questions that hit on the big ideas of Social Studies in general. If coming up with the big ideas for every lesson is overwhelming, consider posting key questions that connect to each area of study. It's okay to use broad ideas!

If you're looking for help with lesson planning, I've just created the [Lesson Planning Pack](#). Here you'll find guides, resources, and editable templates to make writing lesson plans easier and more effective than ever before. I've also included ideas and tools for creating a year overview, planning better units, and improving team planning.

The word "Kady" is written in a pink, cursive font. A horizontal line with arrowheads at both ends passes through the middle of the letters. The arrowheads are also pink.