Planning with Purpose

Instructional coaching combines lesson planning with lesson design alongside teachers to provide tailored support that addresses specific classroom challenges and goals, ensuring that lessons are both effective and relevant. This collaborative approach fosters a deeper understanding of instructional strategies, enhances teacher confidence, and ultimately leads to improved student outcomes.

SREB's Powerful Instructional Practices delineate the behaviors of both teachers and students, as well as the expected artifacts indicative of effective instruction. When utilized in conjunction with coaching, the Powerful Instructional Practices offer a framework for coaches and educators to design lessons, assignments, and assessments that empower students to take ownership of their learning and achieve higher levels of success across all content areas. The Powerful Instructional Practices can be found here.

Purposeful planning must include the following:

1. **Planning for Coherence:** A coherent curriculum is essential for fostering connections among concepts, and allows students to see relationships that enhance their overall understanding. When students experience a coherent approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they gain clarity about what is expected for success. Coherence not only supports deeper learning but also empowers students to navigate their educational journey with confidence and purpose.
2. **Designing for Learning:** Instructional design for deep learning is crucial because it provides a structured framework that promotes critical thinking and the retention of complex concepts. By employing systematic approaches and active engagement strategies, instructional design enhances the understanding and application of deep knowledge across various contexts.
3. **Designing for Understanding:** Instructional design centered on understanding fosters deep engagement with the content and incorporates formative assessments to evaluate students' comprehension of concepts across various contexts. This understanding is evidenced when students can articulate a concept in their own words, exhibit flexibility in applying that knowledge in diverse situations, and draw connections to other subject areas.

Jason Kennedy, author of *Let's Stop Teaching and Start Designing Learning*, posits that lesson planning is focused on what the teacher will be saying, assigning, or assessing. Lesson design focuses on what students will be discussing, and how they will engage with or demonstrate their understanding. Lesson planning involves alignment and pacing. Lesson design involves the learning experience. Teachers plan for coherence, but design for learning and understanding.

Planning for Coherence

How is it possible that a student achieve straight A's in a class at nearly any school in America, yet perform below grade level on the end-of-course assessments? This scenario highlights an obvious disconnect between our long-term educational goals and our short-term instructional strategies. If our objective is to cultivate critical thinkers who can apply their content knowledge and reasoning skills beyond rote textbook questions, we must attend to coherence between assessment expectations, curriculum, and instruction.

During mid-year data discussions with students regarding their interim test results, it is concerning to hear comments such as, "What we do in class doesn't look anything like what I saw on the test." Such feedback indicates a disconnect that suggests our current instructional planning may lack cohesion, thereby inadequately preparing students for future challenges. We must acknowledge the necessity for a more integrated approach that aligns our curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessments, ensuring that all students receive the comprehensive education they deserve. Students deserve better.

If our goal is to cultivate confident, persevering learners, our instructional preparation must align seamlessly with our methods of how students will demonstrate their understanding. This alignment is critical for enhancing retention, accurately measuring student performance, and fostering an environment that supports sustained academic growth.

Designing for Learning

Before the introduction of college and career readiness standards, a common critique of teaching and learning was the superficial approach to grade-level content, often described as "an inch deep and a mile wide." This issue arose from the overwhelming number of standards, which left educators with insufficient time to delve into meaningful exploration of each topic. The shift towards new standards—whether nationally or state-specific—was intended to foster a paradigm where learning progressions would emphasize depth over breadth, capturing the essence of "an inch wide and a mile deep."
However, this transformative vision has not yet been fully realized in all classrooms. The persistent mindset of "covering" standards continues to dominate instructional planning, often at the expense of fostering a robust understanding of the content. When students engage with content on a deeper level, they cultivate the ability to apply their knowledge to unique or non-routine tasks, enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

To ensure that students are genuinely learning and developing understandings that transcend mere memorization and temporary performance, educators must adopt a more intentional approach to instructional design. Ron Richhart, from Harvard's Project Zero, aptly states that "learning is a consequence of thinking." This underscores the necessity of designing lessons that actively engage students' cognitive processes, encouraging them to think critically and reflectively about the content.

Instructional design focused on effective and meaningful learning begins with clear learning objectives prioritizing depth over breadth. Educators should develop assessments and learning experiences that evaluate not only knowledge retention but also the ability to apply and synthesize information in a variety of contexts.

To effectively implement instructional design that aligns with deeper learning goals, educators must prioritize quality over quantity in their curricula. This involves designing lessons that encourage exploration, inquiry, and critical analysis, enabling students to make connections between concepts and apply their learning in diverse contexts. When instruction is anchored in deep understanding, students are not only better equipped to tackle complex problems but also gain confidence in their ability to draw upon a rich toolbox of concepts and facts. Ultimately, fostering such an environment requires a commitment to thoughtful curriculum design, ongoing professional development, and collaborative practices that emphasize deep learning as a foundational goal in education.

Designing for Understanding

By refocusing learning and teaching on deep understanding, we establish a more equitable and effective educational system that prepares students not merely for superficial performance but equips them with lifelong skills and tools. This shift emphasizes the importance of cultivating a profound grasp of content, which, in turn, fosters the development of transferable skills that extend beyond the classroom. When students achieve deep understanding, they cultivate confidence and flexibility, enabling them to persevere in the face of uncertainty and adapt to a variety of challenges in and out of the classroom.

Fostering a classroom culture that values questioning, discussion, and exploration is essential. This type of environment encourages students to express their thoughts, challenge assumptions, and articulate their reasoning, leading to deeper comprehension. Educators should also provide opportunities for formative feedback, allowing students to reflect on their learning processes and make adjustments to their understanding as needed. Feedback helps flip the switch from extrinsic motivation to intrinsically motivated, self-regulated learners.

Finally, integrating diverse instructional strategies and differentiated instruction ensures that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or learning styles, have access to rich learning experiences. By prioritizing understanding as a goal in our instructional design, we not only equip students with the tools to navigate complex problems but also empower them to become lifelong learners, capable of thriving in an ever-evolving world. We must remind ourselves that we are preparing our students for careers that do not currently exist. A commitment to designing student experiences for deep understanding will transform learning into a powerful catalyst for personal and societal growth.