

From Model 1 to Model 2: Reframing Instruction for Equity and Learning

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Classrooms are shaped by the models of instruction that teachers carry with them. In the absence of a deliberate, shared understanding of what high-quality instruction looks like, each educator works from an idiosyncratic mental model of good teaching, based partly on their own experience as students, partly on what they were taught in preparation programs, and partly on the professional development, curriculum materials, evaluation systems, and local norms they have encountered along the way. Those models influence how teachers define their role, how much they explain, how they differentiate, what tasks they assign, how they interpret student behavior, and how they decide who is ready for more challenging work.

In this paper, we describe two contrasting models of teaching that have profound implications for student learning and equity: Model 1 and Model 2. These are archetypes, verging on stereotypes, offered for comparison and clarification. They should not be read as simple distinctions between good and bad teaching, or between inept and expert teaching. In either model, teachers may be knowledgeable or not, experienced or inexperienced, skillful or less skillful in classroom management and climate. Nor are we suggesting that teachers who operate from one model care more or less about students than teachers who operate from the other. The distinction lies not in effort, virtue, or intent, but in the design of the learning environment and the distribution of cognitive work.

Across thousands of classroom visits over the past two decades, and consistent with decades of research on classroom practice, certain instructional patterns appear with remarkable regularity. Scholars have described the persistence of a “grammar of schooling,” in which classroom life is organized around familiar routines: the teacher explains, questions, directs, checks, and evaluates; students listen, respond, complete, and produce. These patterns are not universal, and there are many examples of ambitious, intellectually vibrant instruction. But they are common enough to matter. The average student, dropped into a random classroom in America on a regular school day, is more likely to encounter instruction organized around clarity, pacing, coverage, and completion than around sustained sensemaking, shared reasoning, and public revision of thinking.

That dominant pattern is what we call Model 1.

Model 1: The Teacher as Explainer and Arbiter

Model 1 reflects an instructional orientation that has been dominant for decades and continues to shape how teachers are prepared, observed, evaluated, and supported. At its heart, the teacher is positioned as the central holder of knowledge, the main explainer of content, and the arbiter of quality. Teachers explain concepts, model procedures, pre-teach vocabulary, sequence questions, provide examples, clarify misunderstandings, and decide when students are ready to move on. Student success is often defined by completion, correctness, and the production of work that conforms to the teacher’s expectations.

This orientation has strong historical grounding. Many teachers were explicitly taught that these are the hallmarks of good instruction: clear explanations, skillful questioning, careful modeling, calibrated scaffolding, and appropriate differentiation. Done well, many of these practices are valuable. Explicit instruction has a legitimate and important place in teaching, especially when students need access to essential facts, procedures, terminology, or conventions. There are times when the most efficient and helpful thing a teacher can do is explain something clearly. There are also students and moments for whom additional support is necessary. The problem with Model 1 is not that teachers explain. The problem is that the model tends to concentrate meaning-making in the teacher.

In Model 1 classrooms, learning activities are often designed for clarity and completion. Tasks are structured so students know what to do, how to proceed, and what counts as success. Directions are clear, expectations are concrete, and there is usually a visible finish line. Student work tends to be uniform in structure, strategy, and representation. Many activities emphasize following the right steps, applying procedures, locating correct answers, or producing a finished product. There may be moments of challenge, but struggle is usually short-lived and quickly resolved, often by the teacher.

Students' cognitive work is frequently private. Sensemaking happens in notebooks, on worksheets, in individual heads, or in brief exchanges with the teacher. Student reasoning is not consistently made visible to peers in real time. Students seldom compare strategies, test interpretations, revise public representations, or use one another's thinking as a resource for making progress.

When collaboration is used, it is often logistical rather than deeply cognitive. Students may work in pairs or groups, but the group may function primarily to share materials, divide steps, or complete a task more efficiently. In many cases, the same work could be completed just as easily by an individual student. Students may work alongside one another rather than with one another; their ideas do not necessarily depend on, challenge, or extend each other. Group work, in other words, does not automatically increase cognitive demand. Sometimes it merely relocates individual work into a social format.

Question-and-answer exchanges are typically brief and teacher-initiated. Most communication flows between the teacher and individual students rather than among students. Class discussion often consists of short responses to teacher prompts, followed by teacher affirmation, correction, elaboration, or redirection. The teacher keeps the lesson moving, which is understandable given the pressure of time and coverage. But the result is that students often have limited opportunity to build on one another's ideas or engage in extended reasoning.

Assessment moments are also often distinct from instruction. Teachers check for understanding after instruction through quizzes, exit tickets, written products, or tests, rather than continuously using student thinking as the main guide for what should happen next. This is not because teachers are indifferent to student understanding. It is because Model 1 places the teacher in the position of managing content, pacing, explanation, participation, and assessment all at once. It is a heroic job description, and heroism is a terrible improvement strategy.

The defining feature of Model 1, then, is not explanation, organization, or clarity. The defining feature is that the teacher does most of the cognitive coordinating. The teacher identifies the relationships among

ideas, chooses which representations matter, determines what counts as an acceptable solution path, interprets student responses, and decides how new knowledge connects to prior knowledge. Students are expected to follow, reproduce, apply, or demonstrate the reasoning the teacher has already done.

This design has two predictable consequences.

First, it is often inefficient for learning. Students learn by thinking. They build understanding when they connect new information to what they already know, test ideas, notice patterns, confront inconsistencies, explain reasoning, and revise their mental models. When the teacher does most of that work, students may appear engaged: they listen, copy, respond, comply, complete, and sometimes even perform well on immediate checks. But the depth of learning is limited if students have not had to do enough of the intellectual work themselves. As Daniel Willingham puts it, memory is the residue of thought. Students remember what they have had to think about.

Second, Model 1 is inequitable in practice. In classrooms organized around teacher explanation and teacher-managed questioning, the majority of visible thinking tends to come from a relatively small subset of students: the confident, the quick, the fluent, the students who already understand the game of school. The teacher calls on students who appear ready, provides more elaborate feedback to students who offer more promising responses, and often lowers the level of demand for students who appear confused, hesitant, or less prepared. None of this has to be malicious. It is a predictable outcome of a model in which the teacher must make rapid judgments about who is ready, who needs help, who can be pushed, and who should be protected from frustration or embarrassment.

Those rapid judgments occur in what Deborah Ball has called the discretionary spaces of teaching. They are the countless small decisions teachers make every day, often under pressure and without full information. These decisions are shaped by expectations, by prior experience, by stereotypes, by local norms, and by what seems kind in the moment. Over time, some students are asked to think more often and more deeply. Others are allowed to remain quiet, compliant, dependent, or peripheral. Gaps widen not because of fixed differences in capability, but because of differences in access to cognitive work. This is the key limitation of Model 1. It does not reliably distribute the work of making meaning. And without meaning-making, learning is both shallower and more uneven.

It is important to acknowledge that many practices associated with Model 1 emerged from a genuine commitment to equity. Differentiation and scaffolding, for example, were intended to ensure that students who might otherwise be left behind receive support tailored to their needs. Many teachers use these practices because they care deeply about students and do not want them to fail. The equity problem is not the intention. The problem is that support can become substitution. Scaffolding can quietly remove the thinking students most need to do. Differentiation can become a mechanism for assigning some students less demanding work. Help can become rescue. And rescue, though often compassionate in the moment, can become a long-term denial of opportunity.

Model 1, then, is not a caricature of bad teaching. It is a widely shared mental model of good teaching that has real strengths and serious limitations. It prizes clarity, order, support, and teacher expertise. But

when it becomes the default, it tends to ration opportunity to learn by familiarity, speed, confidence, compliance, and perceived readiness.

Model 2: Task, Thinking, and Responsiveness

Model 2 reframes instruction around a different premise: students learn when they actively engage in the cognitive work of making meaning. They construct understanding by connecting new ideas to prior knowledge, testing interpretations, comparing representations, explaining reasoning, and revising their thinking. The role of the teacher is to design and facilitate learning so that all students do this work, and to support them in ways that preserve, rather than replace, cognitive demand.

In Model 2, the task is the engine of learning. A task is not simply an assignment or an activity. It is the intellectual work students are asked to do in order to learn. The task determines what students must pay attention to, what relationships they must notice, what decisions they must make, and what kind of reasoning the lesson requires. A powerful task does not have to be long, elaborate, clever, or novel. A brief prompt can be powerful if it requires students to make sense of important ideas. A long project can be weak if it mainly requires compliance, decoration, or the assembly of already-known information.

Tasks in Model 2 are grade-level by default, accessible through multiple entry points, and structured so that students must interpret, connect, represent, justify, generalize, critique, or revise. The teacher's responsibility is not only to select or design such tasks, but to implement them in ways that maintain their cognitive demand. This is much harder than it sounds. Teachers often lower demand for good reasons: to prevent frustration, keep the lesson moving, avoid behavior problems, help students feel successful, or make sure everyone finishes. But when teachers over-explain, pre-teach too much, scaffold too early, or answer the important questions themselves, students may complete the work without doing the thinking the task was designed to provoke.

Model 2 therefore requires routines that democratize participation. Instead of relying on volunteers or on the students most comfortable speaking in public, the classroom is organized so that every student has repeated opportunities to think, speak, write, represent, explain, and revise. This might include independent think time before discussion, turn-and-talk, structured partner reasoning, vertical non-permanent surfaces, public recording of multiple strategies, normalized cold calling, student-to-student discourse, or routines for making all students' thinking visible. No single technique defines Model 2. The point is not the format. The point is the distribution of cognitive work.

In Model 2, visible thinking is not merely a way for the teacher to check for understanding. It is a resource for the whole classroom. Students learn from seeing how other students are reasoning. They compare approaches, notice errors, refine explanations, and borrow strategies. The teacher no longer has to be the sole conduit through which all thought passes. Student thinking becomes part of the instructional material.

The teacher's responsiveness remains essential, but it functions differently than in Model 1. Responsiveness does not mean giving hints until students arrive at the correct answer. Nor does it mean stepping in to clarify the moment confusion appears. It means listening for how students are making

sense of the task and responding in ways that support further reasoning. The teacher may press for justification, draw attention to structure, connect one student's idea to another's, ask students to test a claim, invite a second representation, or consolidate a pattern that has emerged from the work. The teacher is still highly active, but the activity is in service of sustaining student thinking rather than replacing it.

Direct explanation still has a place in Model 2. The difference is purpose and timing. Explanation is most powerful after students have had an opportunity to grapple with the relevant ideas, because then the explanation has something to attach to. When students have already generated examples, encountered a conflict, or tried to make sense of a problem, teacher explanation can consolidate, clarify, name, and formalize understanding. In Model 1, explanation often substitutes for student sensemaking. In Model 2, explanation helps students organize the sensemaking they have already begun.

This orientation has direct implications for equity. Inequity often enters instruction not through explicit decisions to teach some students less, but through small, rapid judgments about who seems ready, who seems confused, who is likely to answer correctly, who can tolerate struggle, and who needs protection from difficulty. Model 2 interrupts this pattern by changing the structure of participation. Thinking is not optional, and it is not selectively allocated. All students are expected to engage in making meaning, and the teacher's responsive moves are directed toward sustaining that expectation.

In this sense, Model 2 is not merely more engaging or more student-centered. Those phrases are too vague to carry the weight of the argument. Model 2 is more equitable because it changes who gets access to the intellectual work of the lesson. Participation becomes routine rather than voluntary. Cognitive demand is maintained rather than softened. Confusion is treated as a normal and necessary part of learning rather than as evidence of incapacity. Students come to see themselves as competent thinkers because they repeatedly experience themselves thinking.

Why the Shift Matters

The distinction between Model 1 and Model 2 is therefore an equity distinction. Opportunity to learn is not determined only by whether students are enrolled in the right course, handed the right curriculum, or assigned grade-level standards. It is determined by what students are actually asked to do with the content, how much time they spend doing that work, and whether instruction sustains or reduces the cognitive demand of the task.

Model 1 can produce order, clarity, and coverage. It can also produce dependence, uneven participation, and superficial completion. Model 2 is designed to create something different: classrooms in which students are positioned as thinkers, the task creates the conditions for meaning-making, and the teacher supports thinking without taking it over.

The shift from Model 1 to Model 2 is also a shift in the teacher's professional identity. It moves from seeing the teacher primarily as explainer and judge to seeing the teacher as designer of tasks, facilitator of thinking, and steward of cognitive demand. It moves from defining success by whether students completed the product or gave the correct answer to asking whether students engaged in the intellectual

work necessary for learning. It moves from practices that unintentionally ration opportunity to practices that intentionally democratize it.

This does not mean abandoning what teachers already know how to do well. It means reframing the purpose and sequencing of those practices. Where a Model 1 teacher might begin with extended explanation, a Model 2 teacher begins with a task that invites students to think. Where Model 1 relies on hand-raising and volunteers, Model 2 uses routines that surface the thinking of every student. Where Model 1 scaffolds extensively in advance, Model 2 provides just-in-time support while preserving the challenge of the task. Where Model 1 treats assessment as something that happens after instruction, Model 2 treats student thinking as the live material of instruction. And where Model 1 defines rigor locally, through comfort and precedent, Model 2 defines rigor through access to grade-level, cognitively demanding work.

The skills teachers already bring to questioning, explanation, modeling, and structuring lessons remain valuable. What changes is how those moves are deployed. The question is no longer, “How do I make this clear enough that students can complete it?” The question is, “How do I create the conditions in which all students can think their way into understanding?”

Conclusion

The reason this shift matters is equity. Equity and excellence are inseparable. Excellence that is rationed to some students but not others cannot truly be called excellence, and equity that does not include access to rich, challenging intellectual work falls short of its promise.

Model 2, by centering grade-level tasks, making student thinking visible, and maintaining cognitive demand, creates conditions in which all students, not only the confident, compliant, quick, or privileged, have genuine access to meaningful learning. It is preferable not because it makes teachers better people, but because it makes classrooms fairer places. It distributes intellectual opportunity more broadly and gives students repeated experience with the kind of thinking through which learning actually occurs.

This is why the shift from Model 1 to Model 2 is foundational to high-leverage instructional improvement. It is not a shift in style. It is not a preference for group work, inquiry, or novelty. It is a shift in the underlying model of how learning happens and how equity is created or denied in the daily life of classrooms.

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