

Four Foundations Top Ten Habits of Great Teaching

The first of the Four Foundations Top Ten is:

#1 "I make it a habit to plan unit and daily lesson learning targets *before* planning activities."

Planning the targets first helps to focus our attention and time on what is truly important for our students to learn in that unit and that lesson. It also encourages us to keep the lessons tuned into the learning rather than the activity itself--learning activities are simply means by which students gain the target. With the target in mind we're in a better position to select the best activity.

Let's make it a habit to think through carefully the learning targets for each lesson *prior* to planning activities.

For more on this, see pages 5-7 of [Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#)

Next on the FF 'top ten' list is:

#2 "I make it a habit to write clear, student-learning-focused learning targets."

While all of the 'top ten' are important habits for us as teachers to cultivate, this one--writing clear learning targets that are focused on student learning--may be the most crucial. The foundation laid by having learning targets that are clear in your mind, that focus on what students learn and not on the topic or (worse) what the teacher does, allows us to build interesting and successful lessons.

If we're unclear on what the student learning is, or if we focus on the wrong things (topic, teacher action), we won't know--and students won't know--when the desired learning has actually happened. One sign that we might be veering from clear targets is if we're having difficulty coming up with formative assessments to check for understanding. If we're confused about what we're checking for, the first place to look is at the target.

For more on writing clear, student-learning-focused learning targets see:
[The Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#) (pp 6-8)

Making learning targets clear and sharing them with students is fundamental to good teaching. Students who understand what the learning is about are more engaged and better focused on the learning (as opposed to the activity or the grade) than those students who are not clear about the goal or target for the learning.

Next on the FF 'top ten' list is:

#3 "I make it a habit to share the learning targets with students."

Sharing the learning target must become a reflex, a habitual practice. As teachers, we should feel uncomfortable with proceeding with the lesson until we have posted (at least in secondary classes) and shared the learning target. There is room for variety in this, of course, but the principle is foundational: learning targets need to be shared with students. In elementary classrooms it may look different depending on the abilities of the students and the subject. In secondary classrooms, however, it will mean writing the LTs on the board and making sure students understand them before engaging in the lesson.

The previous habits highlighted the importance of some fundamental teaching practices that we implement in our classrooms at Veritas:

- planning unit and daily lessons with the end in mind, before planning activities
- writing clear, student-learning-focused learning targets
- sharing learning targets with students

As we continue to review the FF 'Top Ten', we come to:

#4 "I make it a habit to plan frequent formative assessments to check for understanding during lessons."

Formative assessment, or checking for understanding during learning well before any tests or grade-book scores are taken, is an essential practice that great teachers use routinely. Teachers need to know how close students are to grasping the learning target, and students need this feedback, as well.

To be effective, checking for understanding must be frequent, involuntary, and all-inclusive. All students need to be checked frequently. Just calling on eager volunteers who raise their hands gives both the teacher and the other students a potentially false read on the understanding of all the class.

Formative assessments should, of course, be connected to the learning targets. This connection not only guides what is asked but can also influence the means. For example, a learning target that calls for students to "recall" or "list" will be easily checked by an exit pass. A target of "evaluate" will require something more--some kind of discussion or extended written assessment will be needed.

For more on checking for understanding, see [The Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#) (pages 10-15).

Number five on the Four Foundations Top Ten list is:

#5 "I make it a habit to be sure that formative assessments are involuntary and all-inclusive."

This habit was mentioned previously, but it's so important that a review is in order. Checking for understanding should occur frequently during the learning, and we need to plan to check all students and not only the eager volunteers.

In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say that we should rarely call on students with their hands up. We should check the entire class often, and when we do call on individuals it should be targeted cold calls rather than responding to volunteers. We may want to take volunteers sometimes as a way to encourage them, but normal procedure for checking for understanding should be involuntary and 'all-play'.

There's more on formative assessment in [Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#) (pp 10-16).

We've considered five of the [Four Foundations Top Ten](#) habits so far:

- plan unit and daily lesson learning targets before planning activities
- write clear, student-learning-focused learning targets
- share the learning targets with students
- plan frequent formative assessments to check for understanding during lessons
- be sure that formative assessments are involuntary and all-inclusive

Next on the FF Top Ten is:

#6 "I make it a habit to give frequent feedback to students that is specific and descriptive."

Students need frequent feedback from teachers in order for them to know how they are doing in achieving the learning targets we have set for them. This feedback should be consciously connected to specific aspects of the learning, and it should be descriptive. Feedback that merely praises (e.g. "good job!") doesn't communicate to students what they are doing that is working well (and what is not), and how they can improve. Worse, it may ingrain a fixed mindset, even in stronger students, leading them to focus on maintaining their 'excellent' standing rather than on learning. Giving specific, descriptive feedback helps to shift the responsibility for learning increasingly onto the student--which is where we want it to be.

See [The Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#), page 12, for more on this topic.

Developing great classroom habits is critical to our success as teachers, that is, our students' learning. According to [research](#), it takes an average of 66 days to develop an automatic behavior--a habit. As teachers, we want the excellent practices described in the 'top ten' to become second nature, to be so natural and integrated into our classrooms that they are virtually habitual. We shouldn't just do them unthinkingly, of course, but certainly we want them to be so much a part of our classroom routine that something would seem out of place if we *didn't* do them.

So, I encourage you to make it a goal to establish these practices as habits in your classroom. Put them deliberately into your daily plans for the next quarter and see if they don't become an important, nearly automatic, part of your daily teaching. Your students will benefit tremendously!

Next on the list of practices of great teachers is...

#7 "I make it a habit to plan activities that require full involvement of all students."

Effective teachers make sure that *all* classroom activities engage *all* students. There are some students in every class who would love to answer every question and do every demonstration, and others who would be content to let them. Instead, teachers should set up all activities in such a way that all students must participate.

It's important to avoid 'batting practice', or a situation where one student works and others merely observe (observation can be valuable, as long as students know that they will need to account for their observations in some way). This can be challenging during whole-class teaching or presentations. Here are a just a few ideas for making sure everyone stays involved in the learning:

- Rather than just 'follow along' or watch others at work, students fill in a study guide or graphic organizer, or correct their own work.
- During presentations or speeches, students use a grading sheet or rubric to assess student presentations.
- During teacher presentations (which should be rare!) stop frequently and have students write three questions they have, briefly summarize the main point, or have them tell how they did the process differently.
- Stop and have students engage in 'mini-discussions' with a partner on a specific question. Have one partner report to the class.

For more on this very important habit, take a look at pages 19-25 in [Four Foundations of Great Teaching](#)

Next in our consideration of the top ten habits of great teaching is:

#8 "I make it a habit to frequently use models of strong and weak work."

Imitation is a powerful tool for teaching and learning. Models of strong and weak work help to make the elements of quality clear to students, leading them to have a similar understanding of quality that the teacher has.

A couple of things to keep in mind:

- Use anonymous examples of previous student work, or create them as needed. (Start collecting samples now for use next year.)
- Working individually or in small groups have students apply rubrics to sample work. Have them group the work into general categories ('stronger', 'weaker'), then hold a class discussion to assign a specific rubric score or placement.
- Have students occasionally assist in creating rubrics, as appropriate. This will build deeper understanding in students and will focus them on the learning rather than the activity.

Next on the 'top ten' of great teaching is:

#9 "I make it a habit to make sure that students talk more than I do."

It's important for teachers to make sure that students are doing most of the thinking and the talking in class. Teachers who talk too much, or who tell rather than ask, short-change their students. Great teachers pay attention to the ratio of teacher to student talk. Instead of merely telling, great teachers use a variety of strategies to deepen student thinking and to require student talk. Cold call, follow-up questions, open-ended questions, and asking for student summaries are some ways to do this. Great teachers employ wait time effectively.

John Milton Gregory, in *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, writes about the law of the teaching process:

"Excite and direct the self-activities of the learner, and tell him nothings that he can learn himself."

"It is only the unskillful and self-seeking teacher who prefers to hear his own voice in endless talk, rather than watch the working of his pupil's thoughts."

"Questioning is not, therefore, merely one of the modes of teaching, it is the whole of teaching..."

Teachers should form the habit of making sure that students do the 'heavy lifting' in class. Students, and not teachers, should do most of the thinking and the talking. As Gregory writes, "...the true and only function of a teacher is to stimulate and help the learner to do what he might otherwise do by himself and without a teacher."

Last on the 'top ten' list of habits of great teaching is:

#10 "I make it a habit to be clear about expectations for transitions and other routines."

Creating a classroom culture that is both supportive and predictable is a priority for excellent teachers. Great teachers take the time to think through in advance, and clearly communicate to students, the expectations for movements between activities, actions, and daily routines.

Emphasis on clarity of routines, and even practice of the routines, early in the school year is a characteristic of well-managed classrooms. The goal is to create a classroom where the focus is on learning and where that very precious resource--time--is used most effectively.

Some characteristics of effective classrooms:

- Students are ready when the lesson starts
- Quick transitions
- Routines are completed independently without distracting other students
- Succinct, consistent instructions

Some characteristics of less effective classrooms:

- Students are dependent on the teacher for repeated routines
- The teacher often reminds
- Teaching without attention
- 'What do I do now?' is heard frequently in the classroom from students

Here again are the Four Foundations Top Ten Habits:

I make it a habit to...

- plan unit and daily lesson learning targets before planning activities
- write clear, student-learning-focused learning targets
- share the learning targets with students
- plan frequent formative assessments to check for understanding during lessons
- be sure that formative assessments are involuntary and all-inclusive
- give frequent feedback to students that is specific and descriptive
- plan activities that require full involvement of all students
- use models of strong and weak work frequently
- make sure that students talk more than I do
- be clear about expectations for transitions and other routines