**Where Great Teaching Begins**

by Anne R. Reeves

[Table of Contents](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/111023.aspx)

**Instructional Design: Who and What Is It For?**

Visualize a teacher at work. What do you see?

Most of us imagine a person standing in front of a group of students, talking to them, giving them information, demonstrating something, asking questions, or monitoring group work or seatwork. Those of us who are teachers might also picture ourselves at our desk or at our own kitchen table, grading a stack of papers.

It is natural to think about teaching in terms of performance in front of the class. As children, we absorbed an understanding of what teachers do from what we experienced as students in the classroom. We were aware of teachers' delivery of information, their interactions with us and our fellow students, and the activities or assignments they required us to do. We were certainly aware of teachers' role as evaluators. What we were generally not aware of, though, was the work our teachers did to plan *what we would learn* and *how we would learn it*.

Here's an alternative picture of a teacher at work: a woman is sitting at a table with a few colleagues, pen in hand, laptop open, surrounded by textbooks, journals, magazines, and three-ring binders filled with teaching materials, including copies of state academic standards and the district's curriculum. This teacher and her colleagues are talking about a unit on the local community that they are in the process of planning. Together, they are exploring ways to bring social studies, English, science, math, and art into this unit—working to design instruction that will lead their 7th graders to achieve the grade-level curriculum learning goals. They are thinking less about their own performances than about what will be going on inside their students' minds. They are asking, "How can we translate the requirements of the state's academic standards into specific examples that will make sense to our students? What are the students ready to learn? What will engage them? What will they remember in the weeks, months, and years following this unit? How can we design this unit to be an effective, useful, and meaningful learning experience for them? How can we describe this plan in clear, precise, concise statements that will keep teachers and students on track throughout the unit?"

This is the "deep work" of teaching: designing instruction that takes teachers deep into content and deep into consideration of their students' learning. And although this example shows teachers planning collaboratively, it may be done just as effectively by individual teachers. What makes this approach to instructional design successful is that it goes far beyond selecting activities and writing tests; it extends past the teacher's performance to address the bedrock of the whole educational enterprise—demonstrated student learning.

The term "deep design" is intended to distinguish student- and learning-centered lesson planning from the classroom-centered, activity-oriented planning that is common among beginning teachers. Deep design work is not directly visible to students or to anyone else who is not part of it. Preservice and novice teachers may be only somewhat aware of its existence and its importance. It is based not on questions of "What will I do Monday morning?" or "What activity will my students enjoy?" but on questions of what and how students will learn, and how teachers and other education stakeholders will know that students have learned.

Figure 1.1 contrasts the extremes of these two approaches to instructional design.

**Figure 1.1. Contrasting Views of Instructional Design**

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| --- | --- |
| **Teacher- and Classroom-Centered Instructional Design** | **Student- and Learning-Centered Instructional Design** |
| Focus on activities | Focus on what kinds of thinking students do |
| Focus on teacher performance | Focus on intellectual skills students develop |
| Focus on classroom events and experiences | Focus on what students take away from the classroom events and experiences |
| Burning question: "What will we be doing today?" | Burning question: "What will students be learning today?" |
| Planning addresses only the teacher's time with students | Planning addresses long-term outcomes |

The visible parts of a teacher's job—the instructing, assigning, organizing, and assessing—are not easy to do, but their functions and importance are obvious. But because the teacher's planning for every student's learning is not so visible, it's harder to explain who and what such planning is for. New teachers, or teachers who have not been trained to design instruction in the deepest sense, may reasonably assume that planning is for teachers; it tells the teacher what to do. Or they may see planning as something done for administrators, who want to ensure that every teacher has a plan in place to address state academic standards. The idea of planning being for students' benefit might be last on the list—or missing from it altogether.

This book provides a step-by-step look at the process of designing instruction that is centered on student learning. As we begin, let us consider some immediate questions you may have.

**"Is Deep Design Really Necessary?"**

A teacher whose official success is measured in terms of students' strong test scores and the satisfaction of students, parents, and administrators may feel that there is no need to engage in deep design if current planning practices get good results. It is true that results are the measure of success. However, at any time, individual students may experience difficulties that will require the teacher to focus more intently on their learning. Deep design will equip a teacher to tackle this challenge.

Even when all is going well, you can deepen your understanding of your own practice by asking questions like

* What assumptions about student learning underlie my choice of activities?
* Can I explain the learning goals I have for students?
* Do I explain to students the kinds of thinking and intellectual skills that my activities require?
* Am I confident that I am maximizing the development of long-term skills and knowledge in each and every student?

These questions direct attention to the true goals of education, which begin in the classroom but ultimately lie beyond it. The benefit of shifting the planning focus to deep design is that looking at the bigger picture of what you and your students are doing—and why you are doing it—prepares you to explain to students, colleagues, and other stakeholders how your instruction will lead to lasting student learning.

If you currently use an activity-centered planning approach and feel satisfied that it is working well for your students, you may find it interesting to apply the tests of good design described later in this book to your plans. It's possible that student learning outcomes are driving your instruction after all. If so, it is likely that you are naturally aligning the elements of teaching—planning, instructing, and assessing—with state academic standards and your students' readiness to learn. Many good teachers operate effectively on their instincts and common sense. But the only way to get the most out of your instructional design is to examine it in detail. And you cannot share your good design practices with colleagues, parents, and students unless you have identified and articulated those practices.

There is one more thoroughly practical benefit of focusing on student learning rather than on activities: more effective time management. When an activity takes less time than anticipated, an activity-focused teacher must either search for ways to fill the remaining class period or give students free time. A learning-focused teacher will be glad to have a few extra minutes to develop students' knowledge further. That teacher might ask the students to explain what they have learned or to describe its connection to other topics in or aspects of the curriculum—and will almost always be rewarded with responses that show students to be up to the new challenges.

**"Doesn't Deep Design Require More Work and Take More Time?"**

Without question, deep design will be more work for teachers who are accustomed to begining and ending lesson planning by deciding what they and their students will do in class. But activity planning alone is superficial, unfinished planning. Determining what and how students will learn and how they will demonstrate their learning are not extra steps to be added but necessary steps that cannot be skipped.

The good news is that when your instructional design begins with a focus on students and then moves to classroom activities and your own performance, it does not need to take more time or effort. In fact, once you're sure of the desired learning outcomes, you'll often be able to map out the route to achieving them through activities more quickly. In short, when you shift your thinking to student learning, you are engaging in *smarter* planning, not more difficult planning.

**"Doesn't the Teacher's Focus Belong on What Happens in the Classroom?"**

Since so much of a teacher's professional life "happens" in a classroom with students, it can be disconcerting to focus on aspects of the job that do not involve actual classroom activity. Of course you must put a great deal of attention and energy into what you do with your students, but this is not an either/or situation. Deep design does not remove classroom-activity planning from the design process; it simply shifts activity planning to a later point in the process.

A teacher may also resist the idea of planning with students' long-term knowledge in mind because the shift in focus it requires can feel overwhelming. Classroom events are more or less under the teacher's control, but the responsibility for student learning that endures beyond the classroom is a heavier load to bear. Nonetheless, preparing students for their futures should be at the heart of every teacher's classroom work. With the right approach, we can *all* do this—and do it well.

**"But This Kind of Planning Does Not Describe What the Teacher Should *Do!*"**

It's true that student-centered instructional design does not necessarily tell teachers everything they need to do in a class. However, focusing on the students, their intellectual work, and the desired end point of their learning will make it easier to see what *should* happen in class. Knowing where the instruction is headed in the long term is essential to understanding what to do in the short term.

Even more to the point, a lesson plan or unit plan is not a schedule of events or an agenda for a teacher to follow. Its purpose is not to document what must be done, minute by minute, class period by class period, but to document what students must achieve. In other words, the goal of effective instructional design is to record the designer's conceptual plan for student learning and, as such, it answers certain key questions:

* What will students learn?
* To what degree will they learn? To what depth and breadth?
* How will they acquire this learning?
* How will they demonstrate this learning?

This approach to instructional design does *not* necessarily answer the more specific kinds of questions properly addressed in teacher's schedule or agenda, such as

* When will I collect homework?
* How will I prepare students for tomorrow's assembly?
* What will I do about students who missed the last test?
* How will I form student groups for this lesson?

Such step-by-step instructions for what to do and when to do it must be prepared and maintained, but the schedule for these steps becomes clear only after the design for learning has been created.

**"So Who Are Lesson Plans Really For?"**

Lesson plans are for you, the teacher. They map out what learning activities you will conduct in the classroom, what materials you will need, and what assessments you will give. Lesson plans are also for your administrators. They inform administrators of how you will go about addressing academic standards and preparing students for standardized tests. Ultimately, though, lesson plans are for students. When well-designed, lesson plans tell teachers and administrators how to generate, support, and assess *students'* learning. Any lesson plan that does not focus on student learning is incomplete.

In chapters to come, we will examine the elements of good design and work through the steps of creating effective, learning-focused instruction.

[Table of Contents](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/111023.aspx)

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