

Clear Benefits

Added teacher clarity is the low-hanging fruit of learning improvement

By Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Olivia Amador

Here's a challenge: Visit 10 percent of the classrooms in your school every day, and ask five students the following questions:

- What are you learning today?
- Why are you learning that?
- How will you know whether you've learned it?

Don't focus on the percentage of students who can answer in a given classroom. Instead, calculate the percentage of students who can answer each question after you have visited *all* of the

classrooms. If 90 percent of the students in your school can answer, congratulations! Your school has achieved a solid level of teacher "clarity."

Improving Understanding

Of the 252 influences examined by John Hattie in his groundbreaking "Visible Learning" study, teacher clarity ranked near the top. Some practices can have a bigger impact, but they take more time to change. Teacher clarity is relatively easy to address,

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and it can result in significant increases in student learning.

Simply put, when students know what they're supposed to learn, why they are learning it, and how they will know whether they have learned it, they are more likely to demonstrate mastery.

Our experience says that asking these questions regularly affects teacher practice. Instead of asking students what they are doing (focusing attention on tasks and assignments), ask them what they are *learning*. Help teachers identify learning intentions (often called goals, targets, or objectives) that begin and end with the standards. What is it they want students to learn each day? Teachers should tell students what they are expected to learn.

Sample learning intentions might include:

- We are learning about the impact of the setting on a character.
- We are learning about the rotation of the sun and moon.
- We are learning about the persuasive techniques used in advertising.

When students let you know what they are learning, you can determine whether expectations are appropriate for the grade level. An amazing lesson for third graders at first-grade standards produces fourth graders who are ready for the second grade.

Reasons Behind the Learning

The second question is about relevance. Teachers should make content interesting to students.

When students can answer the “why” question, they tend to be more engaged and dedicate cognitive resources to their learning.

If your students' answers to this question are lacking, help teachers explore the ways in which students will use the content taught later. For example, a teacher might say, “We are learning more about syllables today because they help us read big words. And reading bigger words lets us read new books and understand what we're reading.”

The third question requires teachers to understand what success looks like—a secret that all too often is kept from students. Success criteria provide students with clear, specific, and attainable goals and can spark motivation in some of the most reluctant learners.

Teachers focus more often on what students need to learn but less frequently on how students know that they have learned it. When teachers articulate success criteria, they are more likely to enlist students in their own learning.

Success criteria are often phrased as “I can” statements. Students in one first-grade class, for example, were learning to write number sentences based on models and pictures. The teacher noted, “When we can write number sentences, we can create riddles for our friends. And we can solve problems faster than [we would from] only trying to figure it out from the picture.”

Tracking Clarity

As you provide feedback and professional learning focused on teacher clarity, continue to visit



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How often have you asked students, “What are you doing?” and then focused on the task in front of them rather than the learning outcome?
- Think about the learning that has been relevant to you. How can you help teachers make learning more relevant for their students?

classrooms and track student responses. Doing so can result in significant changes in teacher practice, and the evidence suggests that it will accelerate student learning rapidly.

Once these aspects of teacher clarity are in place, you can begin to focus on the quality of the instructional tasks and their alignment with learning intentions. But it will be a challenge to provide teachers with feedback about the lesson if what's supposed to be learned and what success looks like aren't clear. **P**

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