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Why I Write Lesson Plans

Maria Spelleri Extends on Recent TESL-L Discussion

When I was in teacher training, writing lesson plans was an onerous chore, and I looked forward to being free of it. Twenty years later, however, I am still writing lesson plans, and this time no one is grading me. I write them to reap three benefits: they enable me to facilitate more successful classes, they add to my professional persona, and they help in my professional development.

Despite several format metamorphoses in the past twenty years, my plans have always contained some common elements:

1. The lesson objective
2. A sequence of activities and actions that will help the students reach the objective.¹
3. Notes on the materials and teacher preparation needed for these activities and actions, both physical (pictures, index cards, etc.) and mental (figuring out the best way to ask a question without giving away too much information, working out explicit instruction steps that the instructor will explain to students, etc.)

Writing lesson plans helps me create effective lessons. While not the only factor in effective teaching, I believe “the more organized a teacher is, the more effective the teaching, and thus the learning, is” (Lesson Planning). Planning requires vision, and when I write a lesson plan, I envision a classroom of motivated students and think about how I can make it happen, how I can best communicate information, best use materials, and best engage students in active learning. A plan also keeps the class purposely focused, thereby making efficient use of our limited time.² Adding to both efficacy and efficiency, a written plan helps me anticipate possible problem areas, allowing me to eliminate some before they occur and think of ways to work with others that will no doubt arise.

When my ideas are written down in an organized plan, I can better see the details and tie even small components of the lesson to students’ lives, experience, and our previous lessons- ties that might not so readily spring to mind when I am in the middle of a class. Connections satisfy

important needs of adult learners: seeing “the big picture” and relevancy. Reviewing the parts of the whole also helps me verify that the lesson includes “a variety of learning activities which are interactive, meet their [the students] learning styles and prompt critical thinking and problem-solving” (Spencer, 1998), elements critical to effective adult learning.

Another benefit of a written lesson plan is that it bolsters my students’ perceptions of me as a knowledgeable professional who can guide them through their learning. This perception is a positive force in the class. When students are aware I have a thoughtful plan, they know that I share their sense of urgency for accomplishment and recognize their desire for bottom-line results. If a student balks at working with a partner, or a few worry why I don’t correct every error on their papers, I can respond intelligently as an expert because when I planned my lesson, I gave thought to the principles behind every step. Students decide how they want to proceed after hearing my reasons.

Having a lesson plan makes it easy to share with students what we are doing and why. Adult learners expect to be treated as partners in the learning process and have the cognitive curiosity to want to know what is going on. Just as writing a lesson plan helps teachers take a “giant step toward owning the content they teach and the methods they use” (Kizlik, 2006), understanding lesson objectives and the strategies used to reach them goes a long way towards the students “owning” their learning.

Last, a written lesson plan aids in my professional development. To be a reflective teacher, I need some sort of record of lessons so I can debrief myself. I review my lesson plan and note things that were done differently, unexpected outcomes, student reactions, future improvements, ideas for follow up, etc. Looking back at weeks of annotated lesson plans reveals patterns, influences, and recurring problem areas, awareness of which keep me tuned in and responsive to student needs.

I don’t find it oxymoronic to follow a lesson plan and yet say I am a student-centered teacher. Taking the time to write a thoughtful plan forces me to consider the individuality of my students and how they will respond. Planning makes me face pedagogical decisions based on what works best for my students and not just what works best for me. With all that I have to consider going into each class, I can’t imagine not laying out a plan in advance, yet I know I can deviate from it as necessary. My plan is but a proposal, after all, that begins to undergo subtle negotiations the minute class starts and my partners in the venture, the

students, begin to interact with it.

¹ Objectives come from two main sources: they are mandated by the school or some governing body, and they come from assessing student needs and goals. Class activities are selected based on pedagogical principles, and adult learners have opportunities to provide input and make choices.

² Adults are more consumer-oriented than younger students and expect a return on their investment. The investment of time means even more to them than the investment of money (Skorupa 2002).

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