Self-Evaluative Questions for Lesson Plans
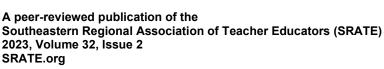
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Abstract: Teacher candidates are called on to create effective lesson plans to implement during their student teaching semester, and certain components of lesson plans are recognized as particularly significant. Viewing lesson plans as the foundation for impactful instruction, it is necessary for teacher candidates to have skills in evaluating their plans before implementing them in the classroom. This article seeks to provide a set of questions teacher candidates may use to self-evaluate their lesson plans based on three major methods to assess lesson plans.

Introduction

Lesson planning involves systematically designing instruction and includes resources, goals, and tasks designed to evaluate the teaching and learning process (Wacker, 2019). Crafting a lesson plan is a methodical, intentional, and crucial step in the teaching process, as is its execution within the classroom (Lee et al., 2022). Planning is a skill set required of all teachers and is understandably heavily emphasized in teacher education programs. Therefore, teacher lesson plan evaluations often start at the pre-service level. According to P.A. Jenkins, "teacher evaluation is a systematic, ongoing process used to assess teachers' competence, performance, and effectiveness in the classroom" (2018, p. 1658), and teacher evaluation should include the evaluation of lesson planning proficiency. Despite this emphasis on the ability to plan strong lessons, teacher candidates continue to make planning errors due to a variety of factors, including poorly defined lesson objectives and improper use of summative assessments (Jones et al., 2011). Acknowledging that these errors are taking place, it is incumbent on teacher education programs to take steps to properly emphasize those components of lesson planning that are most valued and seen as keys to success for the lesson planning process. This impetus is emphasized by many current standardized models for evaluating lesson plans, including the Danielson Framework (Danielson, 2011), the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, & Equity [SCALE], 2023), and the Teacher Work Sample (TWS) (Girod, 2002). The Danielson Framework, edTPA, and TWS represent valuable resources that empower educators, including pre-service teachers, to surmount the challenges posed by the theory-practice gap in teaching. These frameworks provide a structured approach to lesson planning enabling pre-service teachers to enhance their teaching practices.

The Danielson Framework

The Danielson Framework, edTPA, and TWS offer a structured approach to address these lesson planning hurdles. When bridging the gap between theory and practice teachers encounter issues when writing lesson plans (Lee et al., 2022). Through thoughtful lesson planning and ongoing reflection, teachers can address specific challenges and adapt their teaching methods to better bridge the divide between theory-practice by more effectively aligning their lesson planning with the objectives (Girod, 2002). This alignment ultimately benefits students by providing a more engaging and relevant educational experience and should therefore be emphasized in teacher education programs. Teacher education programs may utilize their own models for lesson plan evaluations, but the preceding three frameworks reflect the core components of any such lesson evaluation methodology. Each of the three evaluative instruments focuses on specific components of lesson planning, such as learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment, though each framework has its own language for those components. If teacher candidates are more fully apprised of how their plans will be evaluated, even if by another method besides the Danielson Framework, the edTPA, or the TWS, they can better write those plans to meet the evaluative criteria. As the evaluative criteria should consist of best practices for teachers, it is appropriate to encourage teacher candidates to write to the standards upon which their lesson plans will be assessed.

Teacher candidates would therefore be well served to have straight-forward self-evaluative tools they can apply to assess their own plans and units of instruction. Having a set of questions to ask themselves about their lessons that address the common themes found in Danielson, the edTPA, and the Teacher Work Sample, or other program-specific evaluation models, will help these teacher candidates refine their skills in lesson planning while still ensuring they are utilizing best practices in their instruction. These questions should have a broad appeal, as many teacher preparation programs are already providing teacher candidates formal, program-created lesson planning tools. Any general guidance questions a teacher candidate might implement should be viewed as an additional support in the self-evaluation of lesson plans.

Before such a set of questions can be presented it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the lesson planning criteria contained in each of the three specific example evaluative models. This review is not meant to be exhaustive of the evaluative planning models and not to suggest one is better than another. Rather, this overview is meant to provide insight into the common lesson plan components emphasized by these three models, which will set the stage for the proposed series of holistic self-evaluative questions that will follow.

The Danielson Framework consists of four domains: Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Professional Responsibilities. Each of these domains contains up to six components related to the primary domain. For Planning and Preparation, there are six subcomponents:

1) Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy.
2) Demonstrating knowledge of students.
3) Setting instructional outcomes.
4) Demonstrating knowledge of resources.
5) Designing coherent instruction.

6) Designing student assessments.

The Danielson Framework expects teachers to, in their lesson plans, show their understanding of the discipline-specific content being taught and pedagogical practices that will best support instruction. It also expects teachers to include teaching strategies that incorporate what the teacher knows about their students, and to create appropriate lesson objectives with clear ties to established curriculum standards (Morris-Mathews et al., 2021). It also expects teachers to incorporate various and diverse resources to support student learning, including resources that demonstrate obvious connections to real-world applications. All these expectations are further meant to be part of logically sequenced instruction ("coherent instruction") and to be formally addressed by the utilization of varied formative and summative assessments, using both formal and informal assessment methods. There is an important aspect of planning that must be noted in how the Danielson Framework addresses academic vocabulary. Though not mentioned in the Planning for Instruction portion of the Framework, vocabulary is a crucial part of Domain 3: Instruction (Danielson, 2011). Therefore, teacher candidates being assessed by the Danielson Framework would be well-served to include and emphasize vocabulary in their lesson plans.

To summarize the Danielson Framework regarding planning, the expectations are outlined by the six subcomponents listed above. The lesson plans should reflect what teacher candidates know about the course and grade level curriculum they are teaching, as well as effective instructional practices to teach that content. The plans should also make it obvious that the teacher candidate knows the students, their interests and motivations and can plan learning activities that appeal to the class. The plans should contain specific and measurable objectives, which would address a deficit noted by Jones et al. (2011) and incorporate appropriate instructional resources to best engage and instruct the students in the class. Learning activities described in the plans should help students' progress towards mastery, which will then be measured by an accurately described assessment, which would again address a deficit noted by Jones et al. (2011). And though not specifically noted in the Planning Domain, vocabulary should not be ignored as it comes into play in the Instruction Domain of the Framework. The planning tenets set forth by the Danielson Framework are clearly focused on the important aspects of the planning process, and these aspects are also contained in the next evaluation model, the edTPA.

edTPA

The edTPA has handbooks that are grade-level and content area specific, meaning the lesson planning criteria has some slight variations across these handbooks. Regardless of these variations, the common themes addressed by the edTPA planning rubrics can be generalized to the following five components (with a specific exception being the special education handbook, which has a focus on an individual learner and communication needs):

1) Lesson plans are logically sequenced to help students master a skill/objective.
2) Lesson plans have obvious supports for whole class learning, as well as supports for students with specific learning needs.
3) Lesson plans have obvious links to students' strengths and interests.

4) Lesson plans contain supports and opportunities for students to comprehend and apply academic language associated with the lessons.
5) Lessons have formative and summative assessments that allow students to demonstrate their abilities in a variety of ways.

It should be noted that the edTPA requires a 3- to 5-day learning segment, an instructional unit designed around a central focus (Cronenberg, 2022). Individual plans should still address the above five components as they combine to move students from first encountering a concept to mastering the concept. To summarize what the edTPA expects from lesson plans in the learning segment, the first expectation is that the lesson plans flow logically and build upon each other. The plans must include learning supports to aid students in acquiring and applying skills and content, and also appeal to student's personal, cultural, and community assets (SCALE, 2023). The plans also should have an obvious emphasis on how academic language pertinent to the lesson is emphasized during instruction, and contain formative and, where appropriate, summative assessments that allow students to demonstrate their achievement of specific learning objectives.

There are links between the edTPA's expectations for lesson planning and those set forth in the Danielson Framework. The edTPA heavily emphasizes how lesson plans progress clearly from the introduction of new content or a new skill to a logical summative assessment of that content/skill. The edTPA also expects that the lesson plans will include specific language describing how students will be supported in learning and applying new content or skills. These supports can be graphic organizers, semantic maps, Word Walls, sentence starters, or anything else put into the lessons plans to support student learning. And much like Danielson, the edTPA expects plans to be crafted in a way that appeals to students' strengths, interests, and motivations. Learning activities should clearly appeal to what motivates the students in a class, and this will include appeals to interests beyond the classroom (e.g., bringing in examples from the community or state, linking the content directly to the students' home lives).

The edTPA is much more specific in its expectations for academic language acquisition and practice, and that simply means the plans should contain obvious instances where the class is introduced to new vocabulary and asked to apply it in a manner befitting the curriculum. Lastly, the edTPA expects a variety of proper assessments throughout the lesson plans to gauge student progress towards mastering the objectives. This also will address the assessment deficit noted by Jones et al. (2011). The similarities between the Danielson Framework and the edTPA are evident, and aspects of both are also reflected in the next evaluation system, the Teacher Work Sample.

Teacher Work Sample (TWS)

The Teacher Work Sample examines five sources of evidence to evaluate teaching, and all five can be found in lesson plans. These five sources are:
1) Contextual Factors
2) Learning Goals
3) Assessment Plan
4) Design for Instruction
5) Instructional Decision Making

For the TWS, lesson plans are meant to show that teacher candidates are aware of how specific student characteristics, such as community, school, and classroom factors, and students' varied approaches to learning (Girod, 2002), influence the instructional process. The learning goals in the plans should be appropriate yet challenging, built from state and/or national standards, and be clear. The planned assessments should be aligned with learning objectives and thus based on state/national standards, be technically sound and have clearly stated directions/expectations and represent diverse assessment methods that appeal to students' learning needs. The design for instruction should have a clear alignment with the learning goals and be an accurate representation of the content, should incorporate a variety of instructional methodologies, and incorporate appropriate technology. And the instructional decision making should reveal quality professional practice, differentiation strategies based on students' learning needs, and logical connections between differentiation strategies and learning goals. Note that among the three models presented, the TWS does not contain language specifically referencing vocabulary usage in the lesson plans or instruction. It is this author's contention that the concept of vocabulary acquisition and application may be inferred from how the TWS emphasizes strong links to state standards, which often contain new vocabulary for students to learn and apply.

The TWS clearly has much in common with both the Danielson Framework and the edTPA. Student characteristics and the classroom environment should, according to the TWS, be addressed in the lesson plans. Lesson objectives and assessments should be clearly established and well-defined, which once again addresses the deficits noted by Jones et al. (2011). The TWS also emphasizes the "design for instruction," which means the lesson plans should be coherent and cohesive, and obviously implement strong pedagogical practices while utilizing appropriate resources to support student learning. That means teaching and learning strategies should stand out, as should the use of technology and other resources that help the students master the curriculum. Lastly, the TWS expects lesson plans to be built on knowledge of the students' needs, so that appropriate modifications and accommodations can be provided. These adaptations to instruction should stand out, in much the same way they would for the Danielson Framework and the edTPA.

Based on the review of the three common evaluation models, certain planning components are common amongst the instruments. Appeals to students' prior knowledge, planned supports for student learning, appeals to students' interests and motivations, placing proper emphasis on vocabulary, and including well-designed assessments are five components that stand out. Now that the three example evaluative models have been reviewed, a set of questions will be presented that teacher candidates may apply to their lessons. These questions are designed to help students think about the rationale for their planning decisions, to help the teacher candidates justify and defend their lesson plans. For programs who have their own lesson planning evaluation methods, these questions may serve as an additional support mechanism. The questions each begin with "How…" which should suggest teacher candidates can explain their answers to the questions.

Self-Evaluative Questions for Lesson Plans

Having reviewed the lesson plan evaluative criteria for the Danielson Framework, the edTPA, and the TWS, it is now possible to propose a set of self-evaluative questions that teacher candidates can apply to their lesson plans. Five themes emerged from the review of the three models, which are addressing prior learning, including planned supports, appealing to students' interests, providing opportunities to build and apply vocabulary, and creating objective-based assessments. The proposed questions are designed to review a lesson plan holistically and are not meant to suggest that these five questions alone can evaluate a lesson plan. Using these questions should serve as a guide for teacher candidates when they consider whether their lesson plans will meet the evaluation criteria from any of the three evaluation models previously addressed but should work well with any instrument designed to assess lesson plans. Following each question will be a brief rationale explaining that question's significance.

(1) How do your lesson plans explicitly reference prior learning?

As lesson plans are meant to build upon one another and lead students through a logical progression, there is an inherent need for plans to contain direct references to students' prior learning. Such direct references can often be found in a lesson's introduction/anticipatory set or closure when mention of the previous day's learning or what tomorrow will bring make perfect sense. But prior learning can be addressed at any point of instruction and teacher candidates should be mindful of when they can enhance their students' schemas for particular content and skills. If at any time a lesson can be strengthened by a specific mention of or a concrete link to students' extant knowledge, that is considered best practice (Dunlosky et al., 2013).

(2) How do your lesson plans explicitly describe differentiation techniques to support students with specific learning needs?

Differentiation is a multi-faceted concept that fundamentally means teachers will use a variety of instructional arrangements, strategies, resources, and materials to address their students' individual learning strengths and challenges (Dobbertin, 2012; Salend, 2016; Swanson, Ficarra, & Chapin, 2020; van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). If teacher candidates explicitly differentiate in their lesson plans to support student learning, they will meet the evaluative criteria of most instruments that assess them. This should be a proactive process in which the teacher candidate acknowledges through their plans that students learn differently and often require accommodations, modifications, or adaptations to truly succeed in learning. Differentiation as a practice, when applied consistently, has assuredly been demonstrated as best practice (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011).

(3) How do your lesson plans explicitly address your students' interests and motivations?

The significance of students' interests cannot be overlooked in the lesson planning process (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). Interest leads to motivation, and if students are

motivated by learning tasks, they are more likely to be engaged in the instructional process (Brophy, 2013). If teacher candidates can grasp that knowing their students beyond a superficial acquaintance can support lesson planning efforts, that is powerful knowledge. Making obvious connections to students' interests and motivations in lesson plans can demonstrate a teacher's understanding that the students' personalities play a strong role in the learning process.

(4) How do your lesson plans provide opportunities for your students to acquire, practice, and apply new vocabulary?

Word recognition is a foundational reading skill (Duke, & Cartwright, 2021). The significance of the development and application of vocabulary specific to a particular content area is therefore critical to students acquiring new subject knowledge and related skills (Snow et al., 2009). Teacher candidates must address this important concept in their lesson plans by emphasizing those portions of instruction that incorporate or emphasize new vocabulary, but also, more importantly, apply that new vocabulary appropriately. Creating language-rich environments should be a consideration of lesson plans at all levels of learning, and should, therefore, be an important aspect of all lesson plans.

(5) How do your planned assessments appropriately mirror the lesson objectives you established?

There is an adage: "You don't test what you don't teach." Unfortunately, that is not always the practice as teacher candidates sometimes lose the thread of explicitly linking lesson objectives to planned assessments. Fundamental instructional design principles emphasize the need for teachers to create objective-based assessments (Gagné et al., 2004). Teacher candidates should, therefore, develop their skills in creating assessments that reflect the lesson objectives they establish. If teacher candidates get in this habit and make obvious to their students how the planned assessments are derived from lesson objectives, then their students can have a better understanding of the rationale for particular assessments. This practice of linking objectives directly to assessments will also support teacher candidates' ability to evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction based on assessment data (Gagné et al., 2004).

(6) BONUS—How do your lesson plans contain explicit references to or citations for research-based instructional and/or learning strategies?

This final bonus question is derived from the current emphasis for teachers to utilize evidence-based practices in their instruction (Kretlow & Blatz, 2011). Methods classes in all teacher education programs rely on research and theory to teach pedagogical skills to teacher candidates, so teacher candidates have access to the research behind the practice. Developing the habit of citing specific research or theory that guides a particular portion of a lesson plan will allow teacher candidates to better justify their instructional decisions. Developing future teachers with a solid foundation in educational theory and research is a goal any teacher preparation program should have. With that in mind, teacher

candidates should be encouraged to look at the research and theory they are incorporating into their lesson plans.

Conclusion

Lesson plans serve as the cornerstone of effective teaching. While teacher candidates often learn diverse approaches to crafting lesson plans, there are certain fundamental elements that all good lesson plans share. Teacher candidates can significantly enhance their lesson planning skills by developing the ability to self-evaluate whether their lesson plans explicitly incorporate these key elements. These common points of emphasis in quality lesson plans include addressing prior learning, incorporating planned supports for students, appealing to students' interests, providing opportunities for vocabulary development and application, and creating objective-based assessments. When teacher candidates ensure that these aspects are thoughtfully integrated into their lesson plans, they can better lay a solid foundation for impactful instruction.

Implementing those plans and evaluating their success requires diverse types of questions and analysis, but if the proper foundation has been laid in the plans for instruction, then the chances for impactful instruction are increased. Using self-evaluative questions for an initial review of lesson plans can be a valuable starting point for teacher candidates to review their lesson plans' quality more comprehensively. When teacher candidates are more proactive in self-evaluation and ask themselves the right questions about their lesson plans, they can strengthen their pedagogical skills while also improving their ability to design instruction to support learning for all students. This ability to create effective lesson plans is of critical importance in the development of quality future educators.

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