Guidelines for Planning and Teaching a Unit and for Reflecting on My Teaching and My Students’ Learning

These guidelines are designed to assist you as you think through the design of a unit plan and the collection of individual lessons that make up the unit. The guidelines are in the form of questions you will ask yourself about any topic in any subject matter you teach. They are intended to guide your thinking as you organize your plan for teaching, and to aid your analysis of and reflection on your teaching and your students’ learning.

This is not a template in which you simply fill in the blanks. The aim of the questions is to help you

• think hard about what you want to teach and why,
• be thoughtful about the choices you make about topics, tasks, and materials,
• consider how to best organize students for the tasks you select, and
• monitor students’ progress toward the learning goals you have for the unit.

This is the kind of planning that thoughtful teachers do as they approach any new topic. While many experienced teachers do not always write elaborate plans, they do the kind of thinking and planning reflected in these guidelines.

The questions are organized under what seem to be appropriate headings. You do not need to answer each and every question each time you plan a lesson. A range of questions is purposely offered to cover a variety of planning and teaching situations. You decide which questions are most helpful but you should consider questions from each heading.

PLANNING QUESTIONS TO THINK AND WRITE ABOUT

1. Questions to help me think/write about the big ideas, or big picture of this unit, and my learning goals for all students:

   • What do I want my students to learn, think about, be able to do as a result of this unit (learning goals - including concepts, processes, attitudes, social and personal responsibility)?
   • Why do I think these are important - why am I teaching this unit?
   • What do I know about this content and what more do I need to learn and work on in order to teach it?
   • How will this unit help me address my district’s curriculum guidelines, state frameworks, and national standards?
   • In what ways does this unit connect to other subject matters?
   • What resources are available to support my teaching and students’ learning? How good are they?
   • What sequence of activities will help students learn these ideas?
   • What do I want to learn from teaching this unit?

2. Questions to help me think/write about my students:

   • What do my students already know and how can I build on this knowledge?
   • How does this unit connect with, build upon students’ interests?
• What kinds of accommodations will I need to make for specific students in my classroom?
3. Questions to help me think/write about specific lessons:

- What do I want students to be working on, thinking about, and learning in this lesson (lesson objective)?
- How does this lesson build on previous lessons and prepare students for lessons to come?
- What might be easy or hard for students?
- What will happen in this lesson and in what order?
- What kinds of engaging activities will I prepare for this lesson?
- How much time will be devoted to different parts of the lesson/activity?
- How will I get students into the lesson?
- What will my students and I be doing during this lesson?
- What kinds of questions will I ask to get at students' understandings, at how they are making sense of the task?

4. Questions to help me think/write about the logistical details of the unit:

- What materials, supplies, equipment will I need?
- How will I manage the time, both within lessons and across the unit?

5. Questions to help me think/write about assessment:

- How will I know what my students are and are not learning in this unit?
- How will students know what they are learning?
- What kinds of ongoing assessment strategies will I use?
- How will I keep track of, and record students' progress?
- What kind of culminating activity will give students a chance to consolidate and demonstrate what they have learned and how will I evaluate it?

6. Reflecting while teaching:

- What are different students learning and what evidence do I have? What are different students struggling with and what evidence do I have?
- How can I adjust my teaching to help students in those areas where they need more work? What are some alternatives and what reasons do I have for choosing a particular course of action?
- How can I take into account differences among students and promote genuine learning for all?

7. Reflecting after teaching a unit:

- What did I learn about my students, about the content, about myself as a teacher?
- What went well? What were the surprises?
- What would I do differently and why? What do I need to learn more about?
WRITING UP THE UNIT PLAN

The written format of plans will vary depending on a number of factors including the purpose of a lesson, the nature of the activity you have planned, and the contexts in which you are teaching (some schools have specific formats that teachers are expected to use). While learning to develop unit and lesson plans, you might structure the writing in three parts. In **Part One**, you address mostly the questions in #1 and #2. In **Part Two**, you lay out a map of the actual lessons you will teach - addressing mostly the questions in #3, #4, and #5. **Part Three** is written during your teaching (#6) and after you have completed the unit (#7) - from reflective notes on your teaching and your students' learning that you keep while teaching the unit.

Within the professional community there are a wide range of planning models and all thoughtful teachers have a **repertoire of models** to guide their planning and their teaching. These models are underpinned by different theories of teaching and learning and vary primarily by the roles of teacher and students at various points in a lesson.

One model - direct instruction - is used by teachers when they want to present a skill that is central to the lesson (for example, showing students how to construct a stem-and-leaf graph or a scatterplot). Underlying this model is an assumption that the teacher's role is to show students what they are to learn, model through examples, and then give students sufficient time to practice and master this new skill. The student’s role is to practice the skills that were demonstrated until the skills are mastered. In this mode of instruction, students are generally quite dependent on the teacher to show them what they are to learn and guide them through the learning activity. Many teachers in Michigan are familiar with a particular variant, the Madeline Hunter model, in which a lesson has five elements:

- **anticipatory set** - the teacher gets students ready for learning. Teachers can do many things in this first phase of the lesson. Some ideas include: reviewing homework directly connected to the lesson; having a class discussion about what students already know.
- **learning activity** - the teacher models the skill to be learned. In this phase, the teacher is dominant, showing steps or processes that students are to follow.
- **guided practice** - students practice the skills on exercises with the teacher still guiding them through the process. In this phase, the teacher continues to have a dominant role, correcting students’ mistakes, demonstrating the skill again for students having difficulty.
- **independent practice** - students practice the skill on additional exercises without the guidance of the teacher.
- **closure** - students and/or teacher discuss what they learned, why it is important, how the learning connects with other things they've learned. It might also include recognition or praise for well done. Sometimes it is evaluative, allowing teacher and students to determine exactly how successful the lesson has been.

Another model - sometimes called **inquiry-oriented or problem-centered teaching** - is used by teachers when they want students to investigate a new concept through interesting situations and to build a deep understanding of important concepts and processes. Underlying this model is an assumption that students construct their own knowledge and the role of the teacher is to provide rich learning situations that will help students make sense of big ideas in any subject matter. One variant of this model that is used in many of the standards-based mathematics curriculum projects involves three phases of instruction:

- **launch** - the teacher introduces a problem, making sure that students understand the context or situation in which the problem is posed. In this phase the teacher helps students be clear about what they are expected to do and how they are expected to record and report their work. The teacher decides how to group students, makes tools available that students may want to use. This is also the time when, if necessary, the teacher introduces new ideas, clarifies definitions, reviews old concepts, and connects this problem to past experiences students have had.
• **explore** - students work in pairs, small groups or individually (depending on the nature of the task) to solve the problem. The teacher’s role is to move about the classroom, observing what students are doing, listening to what they are saying, encouraging on-task behavior. The teacher recognizes there will be different levels of understanding among groups and individuals. The teacher encourages students to persevere by asking appropriate questions and providing confirmation and redirection when needed. For more able and interested students, the teacher provides extra challenges related to the ideas embedded in the problem. The goal of the teacher is to create an environment in which students increasingly rely on each other to explore and make sense of new situations.

• **summary/reflection** - after students have made sufficient progress toward solving the problem, the teacher engages the whole class in a discussion about their efforts with the problem, drawing out the relevant ideas, making them explicit. (The big ideas in a problem are not automatically revealed to students through simply doing the task, even when they get the “right answer.”) This reflection helps students become more consciously aware of their own knowledge, helping them develop networks to connect previous and new learnings.

These are only two of many models of teaching. One of our goals for your learning is to help you develop a repertoire of models along with the professional sensibility to choose a model that is appropriate given your learning goals for students (subject matter, affective, social) and the nature of the task.