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Stop planning lessons!

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https://www.teachsecondary.com/

PUBLISHER

Aceville Publications

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Foster, Colin. 2020. “Stop Planning Lessons!”. Loughborough University.
https://hdl.handle.net/2134/17100356.v1.

STOP PLANNING LESSONS

Enough. Put down the pens and close the laptop. Because there is another way, urges **Colin Foster**...

I have a radical proposal – *stop planning lessons*. I don't mean abandon planning altogether; I mean stop planning individual lessons as self-contained units of learning. Instead, I suggest planning a long ribbon of activities designed to support students in learning whatever it is that you want to teach them, without worrying about where the lesson breaks will come.

Doing this will actually make planning much easier, by removing a hard constraint that everything must fit into lesson-sized units. The result will be appropriate activities that take as long as the teacher judges, rather than as long as 'there is'.

In the conventional way of planning lessons, lesson time is frequently wasted when the teacher has, say, a five-minute activity to do at the end of the lesson, but there's still another five minutes to go before it's time to start said activity. The students are left either doing a prior activity for longer than the teacher would ideally wish, or another activity chosen less because it's pedagogically appropriate, and more because it will fill the gap.

Trying to package learning into lesson-sized chunks is also extremely wasteful of teachers' planning time. Teachers will often hunt for activities that last for a specific length of time, but only find activities that are too long or too short. Eventually a compromise is made and something is found, but then once the lesson is in progress, the other activities leading up to that one turn out to take longer than expected. That 10-minute gap contracts to five minutes, or disappears altogether, so the activity can't be used anyway. And if the subsequent lessons have already been planned as individual units, they'll have to be redesigned. Again, a very poor use of teachers' precious planning time.

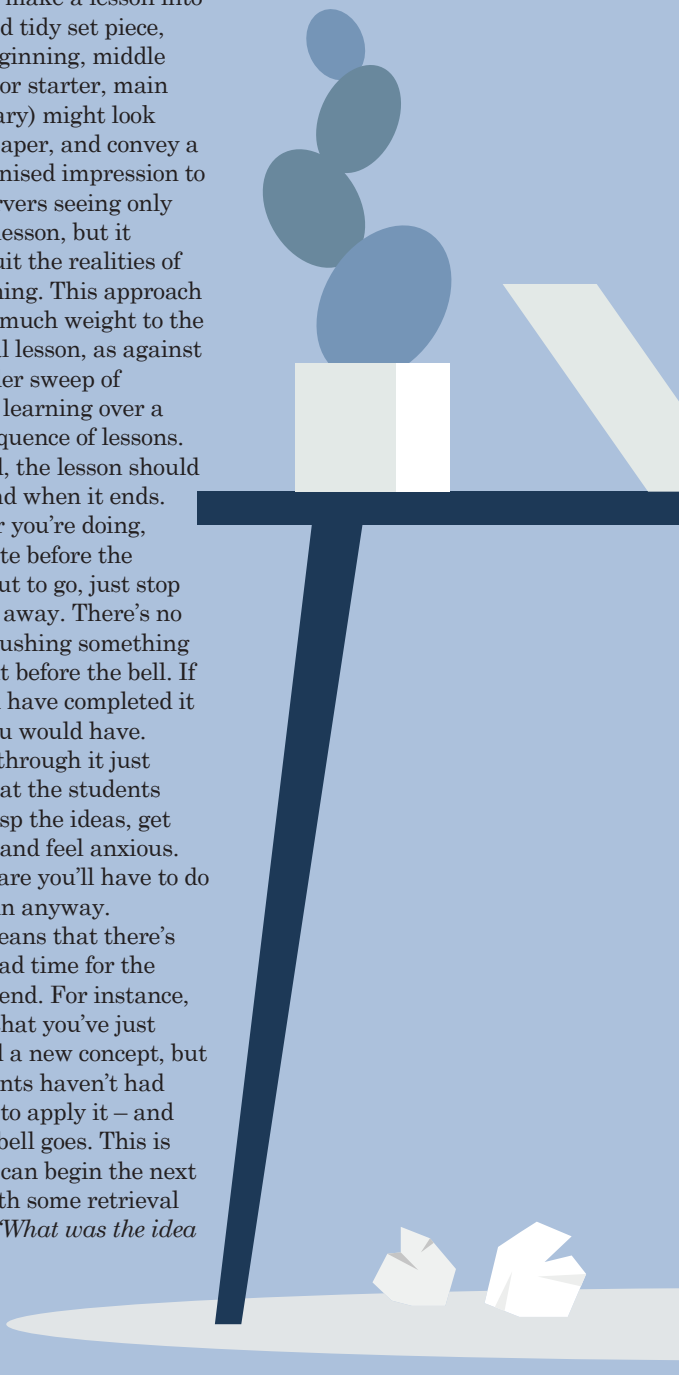
A messy process

Instead, let's embrace the fact that learning is inevitably a messy process that's hard to predict, even for an experienced teacher working with students they know very well. Unanticipated things come up. Students fly through things you expected them to find hard going, then come unstuck over what you thought was a trivial point. Teachers need the flexibility to respond to whatever happens and slow down or speed up as appropriate, and tightly-planned individual lessons don't allow for this.

There's no point in 'doing formative assessment' if, having identified a student difficulty, your lesson planning effectively prevents you from addressing it. Trying to make a lesson into a neat and tidy set piece, with a beginning, middle and end (or starter, main and plenary) might look good on paper, and convey a well-organised impression to any observers seeing only that one lesson, but it doesn't suit the realities of real learning. This approach gives too much weight to the individual lesson, as against the broader sweep of students' learning over a longer sequence of lessons.

Instead, the lesson should simply end when it ends. Whatever you're doing, one minute before the bell's about to go, just stop and pack away. There's no point in rushing something to finish it before the bell. If you could have completed it faster, you would have. Rushing through it just means that the students won't grasp the ideas, get confused and feel anxious. Chances are you'll have to do it all again anyway.

This means that there's never a bad time for the lesson to end. For instance, suppose that you've just explained a new concept, but the students haven't had any time to apply it – and then the bell goes. This is fine. You can begin the next lesson with some retrieval practice: *'What was the idea*



5 STEPS TO PLANNING LESS AND DOING MORE

1. Stop planning for individual lessons
2. Plan a continuous ribbon of activities that address exactly what you want your students to learn
3. Sequence your ribbon of activities in the best way for learning
4. Don't worry about where the lesson breaks will come
5. Monitor your progress against your curriculum every week and adjust your speed as necessary

"Lessons don't have to be neatly rounded off at the start and end"



I introduced at the end of last lesson?' Now we can do something with it.

Or suppose that students are half way through a discussion and no resolution has yet been reached – and then the bell goes. This is also fine. The students can be invited to think about the issue more before the next lesson and come ready with their thoughts. Then, at the start of the next lesson, you can take comments before you recap and continue.

Desirable difficulty

There's plenty of evidence from cognitive science about the benefits of retrieval practice – especially after a time interval (spacing) and other things have intervened (interleaving) – so there are powerful advantages to breaking up learning in this way, as Yana Weinstein, Megan Sumeracki and Oliver Caviglioli observe in their 2018 book, *Understanding How We Learn*. It might make the learning process harder and feel less smooth, but it produces a 'desirable difficulty' that tends to lead to better learning outcomes in the long term.

Lesson boundaries are artificial. Learning doesn't take place in lesson-sized units. Planning a long ribbon of activities is more realistic. Of course, the teacher will want to put approximate timings alongside their ribbons of activities, but these are just a guide. They are to be checked in with on, say, a weekly basis, with a view to what needs to be completed by the next assessment point, such as half term. In this way, it's the suitability of each activity for the learning journey, rather than how long it's expected to take, that's uppermost in the planning, which is far better for students' learning.

Lessons don't have to be neatly rounded off at the start and end. Students don't always have to walk out of the classroom with a sense of closure. Walking out with some unresolved ideas and things to ponder further could be far more beneficial.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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