

Terrible Trope Tuesday #7: Planning Teacher Questions

The weekly series where we break down longstanding norms of teacher professional development sessions to get better results.

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We don't know about you but we are tired of having the same conversations in data and planning meetings that usually yield the same results. The teachers who would have likely performed well without the meeting perform as expected, and the teachers who typically struggle to get the same results continue to get lackluster results.

For years, building administrators and site instructional coaches have tried to increase the sophistication and complexity of the questions teachers ask during instruction. This has had many names over the years. It has been called increasing rigor, lesson differentiation, higher level questioning, depth of knowledge and even backward by design.

All of these systems have run on a simple premise. If teachers look to a set of standards or an assessment and plan out what questions they want to ask, they will be more likely to ask those questions during a lesson. Thousands of PD's have involved categorizing and classifying, sorting and resorting banks of sample questions and other questions stems that teachers could choose from in order to make their instruction more effective.

And in some classrooms, for some teachers, it worked. But for many other teachers who prepared and utilized the same planning and resources, outcomes have continued to fall short.

This predictable outcome is a symptom of focusing on the process of teaching instead of the product of teaching. By focusing on the process, the questions that will be asked during a lesson, teachers can deliver instruction, ask the planned questions and feel successful because students were exposed to the planned and approved questions provided by their district instructional leaders.

However, many of these lessons that have been labeled completed and effective because rigorous or higher order questions were posed have continued to fall short of achieving desired results.

In some classrooms, students have been asked these questions as a ticket out the door. The teacher finds out only after that they were unable to fully articulate an academic response. In other rooms, as an effort to scaffold or support students, many teachers have ended up asking and also answering their own questions. This has left students to merely repeat complex responses that only the teacher could generate.

At the end of the day though, feeling successful for having accomplished the goal of asking the required planned questions, most teachers have self-certified their ability to utilize this important skill. Not only have many stop seeking support from their site coaches but they have also begun turning away offered coaching help because, “I already do that.”



Instead of focusing on the process of questioning, let us agree to turn this trope on its head. Planning and professional development should still be about all of the goals

mentioned above. Getting students to think deeply about a given piece of content, utilizing that content through specific application and demonstrating their new knowledge and skills in a way that they will eventually be assessed is vital. But to get there, we need to stop focusing on the process of questioning and start focusing on the product - the desired responses.

At your next PD session or planning meeting, get the teachers’ attention by asking them to step back from planning questions and step forward onto articulating desired student responses!

Try having teachers bring lesson plans, curriculum guides or common assessments to a meeting. Ask them to choose a lesson, standard or skill.

For their chosen piece of content, have them clearly articulate the answers to the following questions.

And by articulate we don’t mean a loose paraphrasing of the content standard. We mean, what is the exact sentence they hope to hear leave the mouth of a student or the tip of a pencil. At the end of the demonstrations, the guided practice and independent application, when it is all said and done, if the students were able to say this, the teacher will know that they have achieved the product that they were hoping through their instruction.

Ask them:

What exactly do you want to hear a student say at the end of the lesson? What would the bare minimum expectation of success be?

Then ask:

What if they can already articulate that prior to the end of the lesson? What would be a better response?

Finally ask:

In a perfect world what is the best response you can think of? What is a response that would be so good that you would want to call home to celebrate?

You may be surprised that many teachers struggle to articulate these things which shows that the issue is deeper than better questions.

Others teachers will be able to have a clear observable target to use beyond their objective that is likely written on the board.

The most important part of this process is that it changes the way teachers look at the success or failure of a lesson. Teachers stop asking themselves if they taught the lesson well. They begin asking themselves if the students were able to meet the predetermined expectation.

Not only will you quickly see better questions being utilized because teachers now have a clear finish line to meet, but you will also begin having more teachers request support from site coaches as they see a new need that otherwise has been hidden by the focus on process. There is a need to achieve a better product.

Let us know what you think about this concept in the comments below. Ask questions. We will help you plan this into your next professional development session, planning or data meeting.

Even better, let us know what other professional development tropes always fall short but keep being repeated so that we can offer you better solutions!