



The “how” of teaching is straightforward and uncomplicated — and when implemented, incredibly successful.

## The stunning power of good, traditional lessons

ACT reading scores have dropped again — to 1970s’ levels. No doubt, a variety of factors account for this. But one of them is how we teach. How much impact would reasonably good, well-structured classroom lessons have on ACT scores or on virtually any test, in any subject? The answer: a helluva lot.

No educational innovation, no new teaching tool, method, product, or “proven” program holds a candle to the effect of traditional, reasonably well-executed lessons. Other than a coherent, literacy-rich curriculum (Schmoker, 2011b), no in-school factor would have more effect on the achievement gap or on preparation for the demands of college, careers, or citizenship. Even so, very few schools consistently implement the most fundamental elements of a good lesson, which were formalized by Madeline Hunter and others almost a half century ago (Marzano, 2007).

What consequences ensue when we ignore those elements? I was recently invited to study a group of K-12 schools in one of the nation’s largest school districts. They had made significant gains on their state exam. And yet, in every classroom at every site, daily lessons violated the most basic principles of good teaching.

- There was no attempt to prominently post and

then clarify exactly what students would need to know or do by the end of that day’s lesson.

- Not one lesson was taught in short, carefully calibrated progressions, each one followed immediately by “guided practice” — the opportunity for students to process new knowledge or practice with it — alone or in pairs.
- There were no all-important “checks for understanding” during and after each guided practice to see how many students had mastered each small slice of the lesson. Teachers made no ongoing attempts to reteach or clarify student misconceptions for each step before moving on to the next step.

When lessons lack these indispensable, well-known elements, only a fraction of students learn each day’s lesson. After my classroom observations, I asked a representative group of these teachers to estimate about how many students succeeded on daily assignments. Their collective response was “about 20%.” As a result of such teaching, about 80% of students were failing on daily lessons! So, you might wonder how these schools made comparatively good test score gains: by all but eliminating social studies,

science, and authentic reading and writing. Such high daily failure rates left no time for these fundamental elements of good curriculum. Most students spent hours each day being drilled by tutors on test-preparation exercises. The architects of this program, awash in favorable publicity, couldn’t see the lifelong harm they were doing to these children. Our failure to implement the most obvious, effective teaching practices corrupts the entire education enterprise.

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This is only an extreme variation on what I see in schools in every region of the country. Despite lip service to the importance of these elements of good instruction, they’re implemented in most classrooms only intermittently.

### Sound lessons: The research

What would happen if such lessons became the rule rather than the exception? I’m looking at several recent studies on my desk.

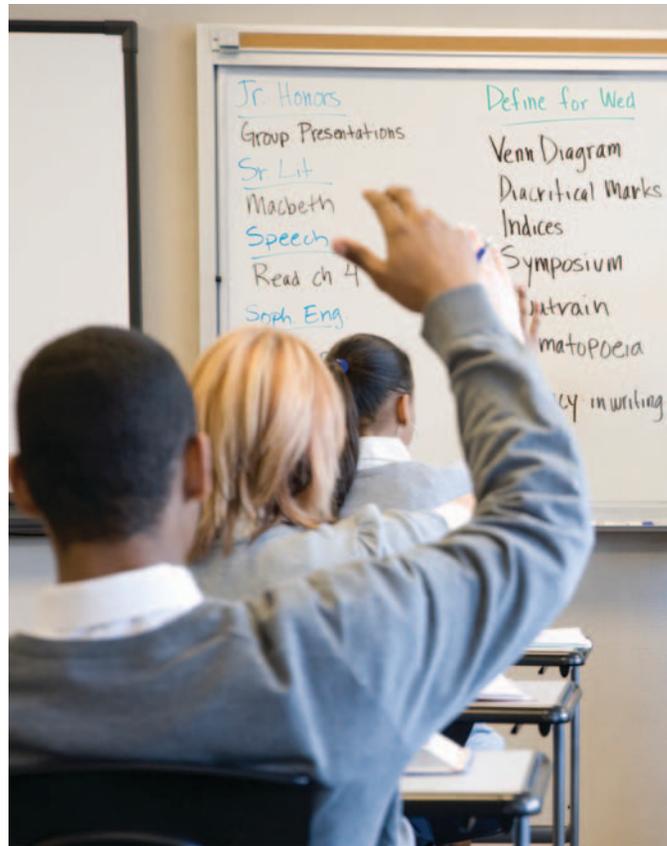
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Each set out to identify the factors common to the highest-achieving teachers in their respective districts or regions. In every case, the predominant factor was their consistent use of these same essential components of good teaching. A report of one of them in a *Kappan* article

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describes how the highest-performing teachers in low-performing urban schools made explicit use of “Madeline Hunter’s sequences.” That calls for modeling, guided practice, and multiple “checks for understanding” punctuated by frequent opportunities for additional instruction, clarification, and then more practice between each step until students master the material. Interestingly, they found students in such classrooms were not only successful, but more engaged and happy (Poplin et al., 2011, p. 41).

We shouldn’t be surprised. According to James Popham, such lessons account for some of the largest gains ever recorded in education research. Marilyn Burns, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey regard these as game-changing elements of instruction. Perhaps the most arresting findings come from Britain’s Dylan Wiliam. He found that such teaching adds six to nine months of academic growth per student per year, without abandoning a content-rich curriculum. Whole classes learn up to



Prominently post and then clarify exactly what students need to know.

four times as quickly when we employ these well-known elements (Schmoker, 2011a, pp. 58-60). No wonder Robert Marzano implores us to make them “routine components of every lesson” in every subject. But he adds this: Most schools don’t implement them even though such implementation requires no additional resources or materials (Marzano, 2007, p. 176).

We can change this. I’m working with schools that are addressing this problem simply and systematically. They aren’t buying inately complex products and protocols for doing classroom observations. Avoid these. Instead, they are starting with a clear, simple focus on the most fundamental elements of good lessons. Then, they are providing in-house training around these elements, using plenty of clarifying

examples and modeling until every teacher is clear on each component and its immense impact on daily lessons. Finally, in a radical step, they focus on improving just one element at a time. In one school, the incidence of clear, student-friendly lesson objectives rose from near zero to over 75% in two weeks. At this rate, all faculty could be implementing the most essential elements with reasonable facility by mid-year. At that point, teams will be ready to fine-tune their teaching, using helpful resources like Doug Lemov’s excellent book, *Teach Like a Champion* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Until we ensure the consistent implementation of these elements, we’re preventing students from succeeding on every measure of student success — from daily classroom assessments to graduation

rates to the ACT. We are denying millions of students the life-altering benefits of an education. We may never educate every student up to an ideal standard. But let’s stop pretending we can’t have an appreciable and immediate impact on learning, this school year. We can — but not until we drop the fads and programs and other educational ephemera and focus only, at least for a time, on first things first. **K**

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