



The Four Basic Questions for Designing an Effective Lesson

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Effective teaching is a series of professional decisions made before, during, and after an instructor interacts with students (Hunter, 1982). As such, educators should always consider the professional decisions they make (or those that should be made) before, during, and after each lesson.

As a secondary teacher, I had a particular student in class who was renowned for asking the same question every day: “Mr. Robinson, why are we learning this?” I learned quickly that responses such as, “Because it will be on the test” or “Because it is the next chapter in the book” not only left him dissatisfied, but they damaged my credibility with other students as well. In time, this student conditioned me to think deeper about the specific purpose of each lesson I taught so that I could be prepared to answer him appropriately.

In his book, “Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction,” Ralph Tyler (1949) laid out four questions that every educator should ask, and answer, prior to teaching any lesson.

1. What is the purpose of the lesson?
2. What experiences are needed to accomplish the lesson’s purpose?
3. How should those experiences be organized?
4. What evidence will exist that learning occurred?

Although fundamental, these four, basic questions are essential to lesson planning and delivery. It took years to understand what my student was trying to tell me. He wanted to know why the lesson would be important to him (Question #1), why it would matter to him, and how it would help him later in life. Each instructor should ask that same question before teaching the content. Helping students understand *why* they need to learn the material being taught and *how* it will help them in life is a great way to increase the meaning and relevance of the topic.

With each lesson, there are multiple experiences or activities that can help students learn the material. Therefore, it is important for instructors to brainstorm the various activities that will make the lesson come to life for students (Question #2). Then, once identified, instructors should focus on the order in which these experiences must occur to accentuate optimal learning (Question #3).

Finally, each lesson should end with conclusive evidence that learning occurred and the objectives were accomplished (Question #4). Evidence can be found in several forms: quizzes; tests; students' verbal responses to an instructor's questions; short, one-minute papers over the main concepts taught that day; and *tickets to leave*, which might consist of answers to basic questions or a *one-minute paper* summarizing the day's lesson. Regardless of how an instructor chooses to end class, evidence regarding whether or not students learned the criterion material is vital.

Although posed originally in 1949, Tyler's questions are still relevant today. As instructors, let us all be mindful of the professional decisions we make before, during, and after the lesson so that we will have an adequate response prepared for the student who might ask, "Why are we learning this?"

References

Hunter, M. (1982). *Mastery teaching*. El Segundo, CA: TIP Publications.

Tyler, R. W. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

