Drawing Attention to Meaning

Deans for Impact

This resource from DFI's **Learning by Scientific Design Network** provides practicing teacher-educators with an overview of a learning science-informed teacher action. To access additional materials, visit **deansforimpact.org/resources**

Teachers' questions and tasks focus student attention on the meaning of content

Look for — The lesson has a clear, achievable, grade-level learning goal

Why it's important to use high-quality learning goals:

Having high-quality learning goals is important because they focus both you and your students on the core content of the lesson. From an equity perspective, we know that **students of color are more often offered lessons** that do not align to learning goals due to lowered expectations. These missed learning opportunities compound over time and fuel inequitable outcomes.

> **SUGGESTED NEXT STEP:** Support the teacher to revise the learning goal to be clear, achievable, and grade-level appropriate.

Look for — Each individual task focuses student attention on the meaning of the most important content to be remembeRed

Why it's important to align tasks to the key content to be remembered:

We can only learn what we pay attention to, and no one has endless attention! All students miss out when they waste instructional time thinking about irrelevant material. We know that **students of color receive fewer opportunities to engage in grade-level learning**, so to create equitable opportunities we need to ensure we focus on grade-level content.

> **SUGGESTED NEXT STEP:** Support the teacher to revise the tasks in the lesson to better align to the core content of the learning goal.

Look for — All learners, not just a subset, are engaged in thinking about the meaning of the most important content

Why it's important for all students to attend to core content:

Creating opportunities for all students to think about key content aligned to the learning goal is important because you're ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. If some students are attending and others are not, then we've unintentionally created inequitable opportunities for students.

> **SUGGESTED NEXT STEP:** Support the teacher to revise the lesson to ensure that all students attend to the core content of the lesson.

Common pitfalls novice teachers fall into

Activity Driven Planning: Instruction with engagement as an end rather than a means to enable deep processing related to the learning goal.

Differentiation Overload: Differentiation based on **the myth of learning styles**, or in a way that struggling students don't experience meaningful learning aligned to the objective.

Unambitious Content: Instruction is so open-ended that the aim of the activity is unclear or unachieved. Personal connections or fun facts may take precedence over content.

Mile Wide, Inch Deep Content: Instruction may be content-focused but inappropriate for grade-level, or attempting too many objectives for a single lesson, resulting in shallow or superficial learning.

Strategies for novices to try

- **Do the assignment:** Ask novices to complete student work to understand what students should know or be able to do by the end of the lesson, and ensure that the lesson tasks support students toward those ends.

- **Time stamps:** Revisit the pacing within the lesson plan to ensure that the bulk of lesson time keeps student attention on the most important learning.

- **Long-term learning goals:** It can be helpful for novices to understand the long-term learning goals of a unit, to contextualize a learning goal for a lesson.

- **Power of protocols:** Keep it simple! One easy way to keep student attention focused on meaning is to use instructional routines, or protocols, that keep engagement high — without having to explain elaborate new activities each class.

- **Teacher knowledge:** Ask novices to do "their homework" by doing their own reading about the topic to be taught.

- **Standards over time:** Ask novices to look at standards across multiple years to better understand what has come before and what will be coming up next.