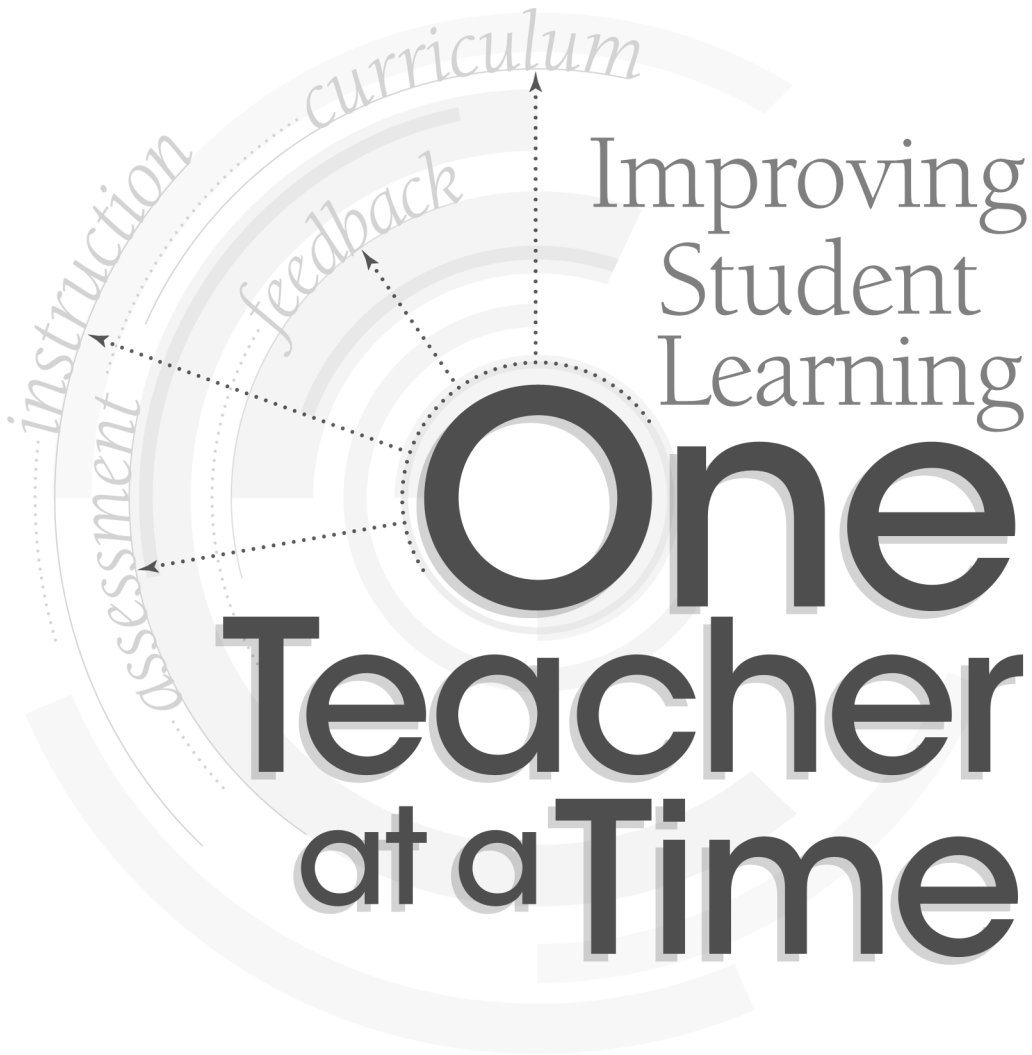


JANE E. POLLOCK



Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development ■ Alexandria, Virginia USA

Improving Student Learning One Teacher at a Time

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Introduction

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

—A Nation at Risk

I FIRST MET SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER GARY NUNNALLY IN THE FALL OF 2001 WHILE WE WERE attending a staff development seminar on instructional strategies in Lincoln, Nebraska. Sitting in front of me with his leg in a cast, Gary appeared to be giving me the dismissive “talk to the hand” signal with the underside of his foot. It was fitting, given the heated pedagogical exchange we were about to have. I clearly remember what started the volley: Gary good-naturedly bemoaned his students’ disinterest in completing homework assignments and identified this lack of motivation as the cause of plummeting grades in his course, behavioral problems in his classroom, and, by extension, many uncomfortable parent-teacher encounters.

In response, I offered an audacious argument—at least, one that was audacious from Gary’s point of view. Perhaps, I said, his homework assignments weren’t worthy of his students’ time. Maybe if he spent his energy improving the instruction in his classroom, the homework issue would sort itself out. In

1

Replacing Hope with Certainty

The Big Four approach provides a way for each individual teacher to improve the learning of every student. Adhering to the Big Four means

- Using precise terminology to describe what students will learn
- Undertaking purposeful instructional planning and delivery
- Employing purposeful assessment
- Applying deliberate assessment and feedback strategies

“TAKE HOPE OUT OF SCHOOLS” SEEMS AN INCONGRUOUS SLOGAN TO EMPLOY IN THE QUEST to improve learning, but if you recall any number of comments you and your colleagues are likely to have made, its relevance becomes clear: “I *hope* this lab works; I spent a lot of time collecting the specimens and setting it up for my students.” “I *hope* the students can identify the adverbs and adjectives on the test; we spent so much time reviewing.” “I *hope* that tonight’s concert goes well; I am so nervous, even though every section has worked hard and we went over every piece again in today’s rehearsal.” “I *hope* they learned it; I guess next year’s teacher will find out.”

How did we get to the point where teachers *hope* for good results rather than *plan* for them?

Teachers throughout the United States and in other countries are determined to do what it takes to improve learning, improve teaching, and improve

Declarative and Procedural Knowledge

Although generations of teachers have intuitively known the difference between declarative knowledge (content mastery) and procedural knowledge (skill mastery), it's only recently that we have considered the value of identifying benchmarks and objectives as declarative and procedural in curriculum documents. In *Dimensions of Learning* (Marzano et al., 1992), we discussed the idea of identifying the types of knowledge for instructional purposes, but we didn't get into using the distinction as a characteristic for curriculum objectives. A few years later, in *A Comprehensive Guide to Designing Standards-Based Districts, Schools, and Classrooms* (1996), Robert Marzano and John Kendall introduced the first curriculum format to categorize curriculum statements as declarative and procedural knowledge.

In a curriculum document, the statements of declarative knowledge (facts, concepts, generalizations, and principles) are identified by the words *understands* or *knows*. The following examples demonstrate how this works for science, math, and geography statements:

The student

- Understands the effect of balanced and unbalanced forces on an object's motion. (Science)
- Understands and applies measures of central tendency, frequency, and distribution with rational numbers. (Math)
- Understands the ways people take aspects of the environment into account when deciding on locations for human activities. (Geography)

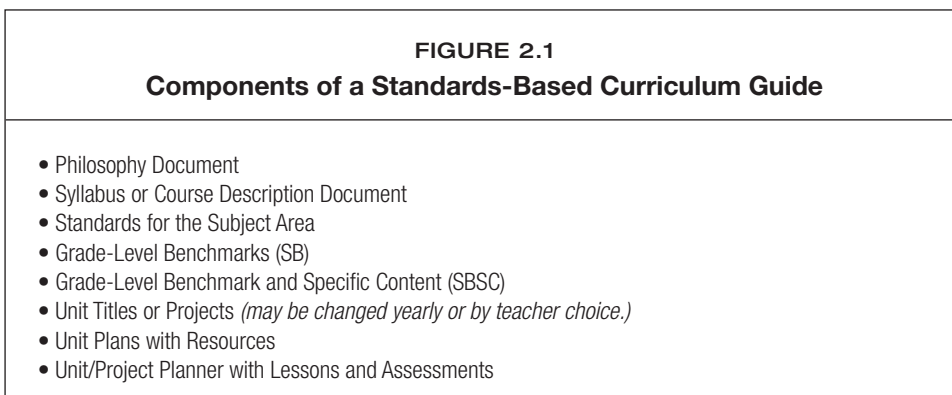
In each example, the word *understands* indicates declarative concepts and also provides the technical cue for the “verb ladder.” The verb ladder refers to the progression from low-level verbs, such as *identify* or *describe*, up to the higher-level verbs, such as *analyze* or *synthesize*, which signal most of us to design lessons to “move up on Bloom's taxonomy.” Teachers who use this format can read the declarative statement and decide for themselves which verb to use or, in other words, whether to have the students identify, describe, explain, solve a problem, compare, analyze, or apply information in a new situation. Using the verb-ladder approach, the benchmarks are the agreed-upon concepts or

about right. At the primary level and secondary school applied arts areas, those numbers drop to about 25 per subject, per year. Generally, a teacher using the Big Four identifies the number of benchmarks according to what will realistically allow him to manage feedback and ensure positive changes in learning.

Format Makes a Difference

Technology has expanded our options when it comes to creating usable curricula. Many of us are familiar with the old curriculum format: a table with multiple columns representing goals, objectives, resources, and so on, usually featuring text so compressed by space constraints that it was difficult to read. Those documents served a purpose at the time but clearly lacked the flexibility that modern electronic media provide. Today, teachers can create and revise curriculum documents using scrollable electronic spreadsheets. They can e-mail their documents to colleagues or save the documents on a CD for physical dissemination. And they can post their curriculum to a Web site, either on their district's local intranet (giving immediate colleagues access) or on the Internet (allowing access to educators everywhere).

The electronic curriculum folder upholds the tenet that teachers need access to curriculum documents that are manageable and that transfer effortlessly to grade books. The curriculum folder on an intranet site may include components such as a department philosophy or syllabus in addition to the standards, benchmarks, maps, and unit plans. Figure 2.1 shows the various



Source: Learning Horizon, Inc.