P.L.A.N.
for Better Learning

4 simple steps for designing
lessons that boost thinking and
maximize learning

Kevin Bird | Kirk Savage

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Contents

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Introduction

This book holds an answer to the seemingly complex question: *How can we improve education?* In it, we will explore common pieces of successful classroom teachings that are surprisingly simple and replicable. Masterful presenters utilize a common framework in their planning process that is attainable for all educators, whether the purpose is to teach a concept to a class, compose a speech for a keynote address, or lead a staff meeting.

> Kevin: Many years ago I found summer employment as an instructor at a water ski school on Okanagan Lake in British Columbia. Over the course of the summer, my colleagues and I taught water-skiing skills to hundreds of adults and children. We created a "never fail" plan of instruction that was replicable. Using our teaching plan, we could quickly train new staff. These new staff members proved to be just as effective as teachers as we were.
>
> Our students were delighted with our program. Who doesn't love success? Some of our students had struggled for years to learn to ski. These students walked away with new found confidence and pride. Novices were equally impressed with themselves and left looking for opportunities to show off their new skill.
>
> Before you get carried away thinking about what truly exceptional teachers we must have been, I will let you in on a little secret. Early on, we noticed there was a difference between what looked like two identical sets of skis. Using one set of skis, students met with failure, but, using the other set, they succeeded.
>
> What was the difference between the sets of skis? One of our instructors went underwater to observe the skis in action. He found that the sets of skis had different pivot points. On close inspection it was discovered the boots on one set were positioned further forward on the ski than the boots on the other. This slight difference was all it took to unbalance an inexperienced skier.

This story is a fitting introduction to the structure that underlies the premise of this book: namely, the value of applying a foundational coherent structure to each learning opportunity. Teachers have always looked for better ways to

help their students learn, and this search has resulted in a common approach for structuring lessons. One such approach breaks down learning opportunities into three categories and is most often seen in literature classes:

1. Connect
2. Process
3. Transform

(Brownlie, Feniak, & Schnellert, 2006; Close, McClaren, & Stickley, 2002)

A research-based instructional model, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) has proven effective in addressing the academic needs of English learners throughout the United States. It consists of eight interrelated components:
- Lesson Preparation
- Building Background
- Comprehensible Input
- Strategies
- Interaction
- Practice/Application
- Lesson Delivery
- Review & Assessment

(Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2013)

These categories are used to group strategies in the British Columbia Language Arts Curriculum through a before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading structure (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). The model can also be seen in the tenets of such programs such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Program (SIOP) for English Language Learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short).

SMART Learning is a transformational approach to teaching reading that follows the latest in brain research. Like the water-ski instructor who noted something (i.e., balanced skis) was missing in order for students to achieve success, Susan Close saw that a part was missing from the learning structure. She refined the process and added a fourth aspect—Reflect—to further enhance student learning:

1. Connect
2. Process
3. Transform
4. Reflect

SMART Learning and its ideas about instruction, leadership, and classroom environment has served as inspiration for both the content and spirit of this book. If you are interested in further enhancing your teaching skills, particularly in the realm of reading and writing, we encourage you to visit the SMART Learning website: www.smartreading.ca

Close's refinements included detailing nine steps that flowed from the four aspects and formed the core nucleus of SMART Learning. Working with a team of teachers from the New Westminster School District in British Columbia, Close built SMART Learning into a leading research-based literacy program for instruction. First as participants in the research and then as school administrators, we have watched SMART Learning produce tangible results in classrooms, schools, and districts.

This book is compatible with the framework of Connect/Process/Transform/Reflect. We answer the question: *How do we teach all lessons, regardless of curricular area, with the big ideas of skills, comprehension, and engagement in mind?* It is our goal to bridge

> the gulf between the research community and the practice community, because the former has not been able to develop a concrete manifestation of the concept that can inform practice. (Leet, 2000)

P.L.A.N. is a concrete teaching process that is replicable and accessible for teachers. This straightforward teaching framework will work in any classroom, regardless of content or grade level, and requires minimal in-service—with P.L.A.N. you can *learn today, do tomorrow*.

P.L.A.N. is made up of the following steps, which are integral to the learning/teaching process. This does not mean all learning looks the same; rather, there exist underlying concepts that need to be present for learning. P.L.A.N. is not

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a lockstep process; if you build on the foundational structure, there is infinite space to personalize this approach to individual teaching styles and situations. The non-negotiable or foundational part of the approach is that four steps need to be included in each presentation, to a lesser or greater extent:

1. Preparation for Learning
2. Learning Sequence
3. Authentic Application
4. New Thinking

In order to explain the P.L.A.N. approach in this book, we will use a variety of lesson examples, ranging from literacy, to math, to physical education. We will explain how flexible the P.L.A.N. approach is and how it can be used in any content or curricular area.

We will outline and detail a roadmap for educators to use in their classrooms, regardless of the resources, systems, or philosophies in place. Because we detail how to deliver high-quality, universal instruction, educators who implement Response to Intervention (RTI) will find this book invaluable. Schools working on developing 21st-century learning plans will likewise find that P.L.A.N. informs this conversation and supports the development of creative and critical thinking.

Kirk: Many years ago, I was teaching middle-school physical education. One of the units that I, like every other PE teacher, taught each year was basketball. One year, as we were nearing the end of the unit, I decided to teach my Grade 8 class the *pick and roll*. In this staple play in the basketball world, two offensive players—the one with the ball and a teammate—work together to create a two-on-one play at the basket.

I spent two full classes showing, drawing, and demonstrating the pick and roll to my students. At the end of the two lessons, the students were unable to produce a play even close to a pick and roll. I had failed. I had taught and taught and tried and tried, but to no avail. I had a choice. I could give up and move on (after all, I had met my curricular responsibilities by "covering" the concept), or I could try something else.

This was when Kevin and I were working with SMART Learning in New Westminster. Our team was focused on reading strategies and how best to teach reading comprehension. We had been using a Connect/Process/Transform/Reflect process with readers to great result. As I was prepping for my third lesson on pick and roll with my Grade 8 PE class, I made the connection between teaching reading and teaching basketball. What if I tried the same strategies that had been working in reading in my PE class?

Guess what? It worked! From that day forward, I would never teach the same way again.

Kevin: I remember this basketball lesson experience a little differently and perhaps should refresh Kirk's memory of the events. I had been involved in the SMART Learning research group and was convinced the steps of SMART Learning—Connect, Process, Transform, and Reflect—were key to

effective learning. Kirk was extremely skeptical. He believed that for a learning theory to be really effective, its application should be universal. If it worked for literacy, it should also work for other areas of study. I pointed out that some of the steps of SMART learning were very similar to the steps an Olympic athlete takes to prepare for competition. Kirk was a World Games gold medalist and, when he paused to reflect on this new argument, he agreed that the processes were similar to those he used for his own athletic success. Mmm… Could this learning process be modified for use with other subjects? Kirk agreed to apply the method to his next basketball lesson (a complicated pick and roll play) and…Bingo! We then tried it in other classes (math, social studies, etc.) and our excitement about our evolving teaching method was uncontainable. We knew we were onto something—that the core processes of Connect/Process/Transform/Reflect would guide our teaching growth throughout our career, evolving into P.L.A.N.

Here's the brief overview of the fateful basketball lesson plan:

- First, I had students understand that our goal was to be able to demonstrate a pick and roll in a game situation.
- Then we brainstormed everything we already knew about the pick and roll.
- Then I sequenced the lesson into manageable progressions, so that students could process the information in small groups. Each group of three students was told that, near the end of the lesson, they would have the chance to play half-court games versus the other three-person teams.
  1. In the first sequence the team was to use pencil and paper to create a plan.
  2. In the second sequence the team was to actually run some pick-and-roll drills with only one defender (who was guarding the ball carrier).
  3. Finally, the team would meet again and illustrate their plan for the game with a pencil drawing.
- Each group's authentic task was to attempt a minimum of three pick-and-roll plays in their game against another team.
- After the games, the groups of three went back to their paper and discussed their team's effectiveness. Did they achieve their goal? Why or why not? What would they need to do better next time?

Once one knows what to look for, the steps of P.L.A.N. are observable in every situation and on every level where successful teaching and learning is taking place. In the basketball lesson description, each step of the P.L.A.N. was touched upon—and touched upon in order.

Over the last ten years of action research, the core concepts behind P.L.A.N. have, in various forms, been effectively used in classrooms, schools, districts, and board rooms. Whether in a single classroom, by a whole school, or supported by a school district, this process has produced meaningful and significant changes in student performance. These changes have been effectively measured through various class, schoolwide, and provincial/state assessments. The same positive

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effects have been observed in classes composed of rural and urban, impoverished and wealthy school communities.

P.L.A.N. is a universal improvement maker. One school, Muheim Elementary in Smithers, British Columbia, adopted the core components of P.L.A.N. as their school strategy at a time when they were one of the lowest-ranked schools in their province. They chose the school goal of "improving thinking for all students" and had four objectives:

1. Our students will Prepare for Learning.
2. Our students will be taught through planned Learning Sequences.
3. Our students will learn through Authentic Applications.
4. Our students will reflect on their learning to initiate New Thinking.

Following this strategy, the school went from being a bottom-level performer to a top-level performer, and it has stayed in the top tier ever since, despite its location in a community suffering from overwhelming poverty and challenging social issues.

We could list many examples, but what matters most is not what P.L.A.N. has managed to do for all the research classrooms, schools, playing fields, or presentations we've witnessed. What matters is what P.L.A.N. can do for you—and the only way to find this out is to try it. P.L.A.N. has met with success in some of the most difficult circumstances possible and, because we've seen this success, we are confident you will find it works for you too.

When watching a practitioner of the P.L.A.N. format, workshop participants often respond: "When we watch them teach—it seems so easy… I just don't think I could do it that way." Or "Wow! The students were working harder than you were in that lesson." Another common theme in comments is that the time just flies by: "I can hardly believe that our time together today is over already." Observers are always impressed by the higher-level thinking students demonstrate in their authentic tasks and in their reflections, or new thinking.

These comments speak to the ability to implement purposeful planning, personalization, and engagement. It is not enough to talk about better teaching; it is about actually doing it.

When we truly prepare ourselves to teach powerful lessons, anxiety fades, confidence builds, and we know that all we have to do is to trust our process. In fact, that is exactly what we say to each other (and to ourselves) minutes before delivering presentations to packed auditoriums of hundreds of people. "Don't fret. Just trust the process."

Whatever the subject, whatever the age of the learner, and whatever the circumstance of the learning, P.L.A.N. provides a replicable practicable structure that supports the growth of student thinking and metacognition.