

Teach on Purpose!

Responsive Teaching
for Student Success

Leslie David Burns and Stergios Botzakis

Foreword by Donna E. Alvermann



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Introduction

Teaching on Purpose

BEING REAL ABOUT TEACHING

Let's acknowledge a few things before we get started. First, teaching is really, really, *really* hard work. It is not just that it isn't for the faint-hearted. We mean teaching will eat you for breakfast, suck the marrow from your bones and pick its teeth with one of your ribs before finishing its first cup of very black coffee that morning. As Donald Quinn famously asserted, most people have no idea just how difficult teaching really is. Quinn (n.d.) suggests the following analogy:

If a doctor, lawyer, or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn't want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer, or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of the classroom teacher's job.

We would love to watch the reality TV show where that was the premise.

Think teaching is easier than medicine, law, or scraping people's teeth with a steel hook? Okay, try doing what you do with smooth expertise while operating under the conditions actual teachers deal with every single day. Our point is that anyone who has spent even one day working in a classroom quickly realises that teaching is much harder than it looks. People with such experience are also likely to notice that *good* teaching under normal conditions is an amazing, complex accomplishment that requires not just effort but serious, deep, professional expertise.

Teaching isn't only hard. It's complicated. Some scholars have suggested it doesn't take 10 000 *hours* to master the job, as Malcolm Gladwell (2008) made a lot of money claiming, but 10 *years*. That's 87 600 hours for those of us who fear maths, and it's so much more complicated that we want to suggest to Mr Gladwell that he be more careful about making such false claims in best-selling books sold to people who wish life was simpler. Ten thousand hours may get you started, but it won't make you an expert. It certainly won't save you when you face 180 students the first day of school

Motivation, Engagement and Designing Classrooms for Responsive Teaching

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

- Haim Ginott

LET'S GET ENGAGED!

It doesn't take a genius to realise many young people would rather do anything than sit in school all day, 9 months per year, for 13 years. Short of putting them in a rubber room and forcing them to watch *Golden Girls* reruns *Clockwork Orange*-style, many adolescents today would choose anything except sitting through classes chosen for them because adults who don't know them have decided those classes are important for them, whether the students know it and like it or not. And, again, let's be honest: anyone who's sat through 7-8 hours of highly routine, tightly scheduled classes every weekday for 12-13 years has felt the urge to pull a Ferris Bueller, grab a friend and escape in a borrowed Ferrari.

And in cases where classrooms are designed so students sit in rows, don't move, rarely interact, receive commands from the teacher, and have little choice about what they do, when or how? Such traditional modes of school are, frankly, worse than boring for anyone. They actually can teach students to view learning as undesirable. Such classes are miseducative (Dewey, 1938). That is, they impose experiences that discourage students from engaging and learning to desire more new experiences. In this chapter, we talk about how to create responsive classrooms and act in ways that

Engagement

When students have sufficient motivation to learn in a purposely designed classroom environment focused on sincerely treating them as valuable partners in the process and helping them learn in ways that are meaningful to them, they become more likely to engage. Engagement can be defined as willing, focused, active participation. Engagement is characterised by purposeful use of strategies to achieve goals (Guthrie, Alao, & Rinehart, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Engaged learners comprehend better and have stronger classroom outcomes than disengaged learners (Guthrie et al., 2006). The question, then, is this: How can teachers purposely generate positive motivations in classrooms that lead to fully engaged students?

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) outline an *engagement perspective* that may be used to design classrooms and instruction and achieve these ends. We present the engagement perspective here as a cluster of six conditions and explain how teachers can use them to create environments in which all learners find and use motivations that increase their self-efficacy, help them engage positively and purposefully and enable them to learn well.

ENGAGEMENT: SIX CORE CONDITIONS

Generating classroom motivation and engagement involves establishing six basic conditions in your classroom. These conditions are not always typical or simple to generate and sustain, especially in schools where curriculum has been narrowed or instruction has been heavily standardised. In this era of standardisation, teachers must work very purposefully to achieve truly engaging classrooms. The six conditions are:

- Establishing clear knowledge goals
- Providing choice and variety within structure
- Delivering explicit strategy instruction
- Providing real-world connections
- Supporting collaboration
- Being a caring teacher (Guthrie et al., 2006)

Next, we're going to take a look at each of these conditions, explain why they matter and discuss how they work.

Clear Knowledge Goals

Establishing knowledge goals provides learners with clear purposes for classroom work. Such a pedagogical move seems like common sense, but many teachers simply assign students to “read chapter 7 and complete exercises 1–5” for a class and call that the objective for the day's lesson, without

RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

In our experiences as teachers and teacher educators, we've seen all kinds of unit plans and lessons. No doubt you have too. At one end of the range are broad outlines based on a topic word or phrase, followed by a list of activities that might or might not be connected to particular specific content-area standards. That version of a plan might be familiar to readers as "outlining" and looks something like Figure 4.1.

While altered significantly, it is important for readers to know the plan presented in Figure 4.1 was drawn from an actual plan used by actual teachers in an actual public secondary school and actual students were expected to learn how argumentation works by using it. *And it is not good enough.* It is not responsive to students and it is not designed to be. It lacks even the most basic procedural components discussed early in this chapter as key elements of any instructional plan. We question whether the teachers, let alone their students, could make sense of such a plan's intended content, procedural requirements or outcomes, except that the topic apparently was written argumentation and that instruction would involve heavy doses of textbook reading, quizzes and reviews of individual rhetorical techniques traditionally used in academic writing.

We've seen units like this designed and implemented, as well as lessons that had minute-by-minute instructions for when and how to move during a lab task in chemistry, and even what exactly to say when modelling how to use primary source texts in humanities and social sciences classes. Some teachers seem to believe they can succeed using nothing more than a few basic notes, while others prefer and even require whole scripts and specified instructions to control the lesson every second. Most planning falls somewhere in between, mostly due to the "triage" mode of teaching described in Chapter 1. When we operate only in terms of triage, we simply cannot be as purposeful as we must be if we want to attain real student success and do more than "get through" our lessons to "cover" the content. That isn't good enough either.

We don't pretend the basic planning components we will discuss in this and future chapters are revolutionary. As noted, the Hunter model and backward planning approaches described earlier are now traditional for good reasons. They enable basic planning for academic instruction. Chances are nearly every reader with any teaching experience is familiar with some if not all of the basic instructional elements that follow, from context descriptions to learning targets to procedural steps to assessments to standards alignment.

Most teachers use the basic components we will explain here as organisational guides to ensure their plans flow logically and cover content – whether that means following a textbook on a schedule or arranging classroom activities so students will be more likely to receive all the information about disciplinary concepts and skills they need in order to be assessed during class.

Model Unit Plan 1

Using Funds of Knowledge to Engage Students in Learning Mathematical Functions

*Maureen Cavalcanti,
University of Kentucky*

I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.

- Albert Einstein

MODEL UNIT PLAN: TEACHING STUDENTS ABOUT FUNCTIONS IN MATHEMATICS

Functions are everywhere. How do we use functions to make sense of real-world problems? There is no short answer. An instructional unit for building understanding about mathematical functions helps students develop their own conceptual understandings of knowledge and skills and standards. And they do that by working with me to model how functions get used in their personal worlds every day. Why does modelling with functions in personal contexts matter? The US National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2009) explains why engaging in mathematical modelling is important:

Mathematics should help students understand and operate in the physical and social worlds. They should be able to connect mathematics with a real-world situation through the use of mathematical models. The connections between mathematics and real-world problems developed in mathematical modeling add value to, and provide incentive and context for, studying mathematical topics. (p. 2)

SINCERE QUESTIONS

Questions should have their origins in real student thoughts and concerns. They should be what Harvey (2002) calls “sincere questions”, driven by students’ curiosity. Young children are not shy about asking many questions, like “Why don’t the Three Bears lock their doors?” “Why is the sky blue?” or “How do you know the refrigerator light really goes off when you close the door?” They are curious and concerned about lots of things, but in school many teachers treat students’ curiosities as distractions from the curriculum and “real learning”, instead of considering how to use those genuine questions to design instruction that will excite students by making them feel smart, capable and valued. This often is especially true as students get older. Teachers and parents take less time addressing what older students *want* to know and more time teaching what they feel students *ought* to know. For the record, those *oughts* need to be taught, to some degree, but they become unhealthy when they become the centre of what we do. *We can* and *should* frame those very same questions students ask and make them the fodder for a great many desirable and interesting learning tasks, opportunities for student inquiry and fun discussions that connect students’ academic work explicitly with their lives in general. Basic questions can be corralled, repurposed and used to guide instruction in any unit if teachers can revise them in ways that are connected and responsive to their specific students’ needs and goals at a specific time. Sincere questions make those connections obvious and explicit.

Scholars have wrestled with multiple contentious questions over the years and although we are not deluded enough to think all our students will go on to spend their days inquiring into the mysteries of the universe 24/7, there are many avenues for evoking lively, relevant, thoughtful conversations about texts and topics we teach across all subjects. Many texts we teach contain ambiguities or strange juxtapositions that beg to be discussed and they do not always lead to clean conclusions. The most productive questions allow divergent answers – answers that differ and lead to variable conclusions, many of which are appropriate, valid and evidence-based at the same time. Sometimes we cannot predict where responses to sincere questions will take us, a condition that Fecho and Amatucci (2008) wrote can feel like “spinning out of control” (p. 5). However, we need to risk spinning with our students sometimes and use all the resources available to us as professionals to invite and attract students into discussions of reading, writing and thinking about the world, no matter what subject is labelled on the schedule. It sometimes may be uncomfortable for teachers or students to engage in such circumstances, especially if they lack experience and practice. We must remember that there are rarely definitive answers to truly sincere questions and that some people seek definite resolution of these matters and must be helped to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. But it is the