

A Good Activity is Not Enough



It is important to remember that just planning a good learning activity will not be enough to ensure that pupils do actually learn what the activity should teach them. Learning is more complicated than that; the changes in an individual's understanding that may result from following the activity can't be seen directly and must be inferred from their performance. This is why it is useful to plan an activity so that it also considers in detail what exactly a novice learner will need to securely grasp the targeted lesson material. This involves the teacher modelling the skill. For this to work, pupils must:

- see/hear the teacher demonstrate what it means to think skilfully in the context of the subject learning by watching the teacher:
 - thinking out loud as they consider the stages to follow in the course of an activity; and
 - thinking out loud as they make decisions in the course of an activity; and
- see worked examples of what the skill looks like when applied in practice, and;
- follow opportunities to practice the application of the skill themselves.

Therefore, when you are planning learning intentions for lessons, it is useful to consider which pedagogical approaches will best serve the aims of the subject learning, for example:

- which teaching materials to use;
- which illustrations;
- which graphs;
- which media sources or articles will help pupils grasp the concepts you want them to understand;
- when to use direct instruction;
- when to demonstrate techniques;
- when to include paired or group work; and so on.

It helps to plan activities in a way that not only covers subject content, but also what pupils will have to do in order to make it their own. That means focusing on lesson design so that the information is packaged and delivered in ways that facilitate ready understanding, and so that you can check their comprehension along the way. The same goes for the assignments you set associated with the topic: in the early stages pupils might benefit from close direction which you gradually withdraw as they become more independent.

In this sense merely stimulating thinking is not enough to teach pupils how to think more skilfully. There needs to be an explicit emphasis on the particular thinking skills that the pupils need to develop. Pupils initially need to be guided through the stages of skilful thinking by seeing and hearing how the teacher does it.

This is related to the idea of the worked example: where learners are shown what practising the skill looks like in practice. Often this takes the form of the teacher applying a particular problem-solving technique. Later, learners can follow a similar example with only some of the stages 'worked', before then practising on problems that are related but slightly different. Later still, you could give the pupils an assignment requiring them to apply the same method or to adapt it to a new situation as a way of checking how well they have assimilated the material.