

Teach core concepts that address “Learning Standards”

Learning standards are essentially lists of key concepts, processes, skills, and strategies that students should learn. These are divided by curriculum area (standards for social studies, standards for science, etc.) and usually by grade level (i.e., a list of geography learning standards for eighth graders). These lists have been created by groups of curriculum specialists.

There are three primary sources for lists of learning standards. The first are standards developed and published by national professional organizations (i.e., National Science Teachers Association, National Council for Social Studies). While there is never complete agreement among the individuals that compile a list of standards, those developed by professional organizations reflect the best thinking because a wide array of experts engaged in a considerable degree of debate to develop a consensus before their list of standards were published. These lists tend to focus on core concepts or big ideas, and specific facts which appear on these lists tend to be those that are important for students to learn either because (a) knowledge of the fact is essential to understanding a related core concept, or (b) the fact is one that, although trivial (i.e., the names of Columbus’ three ships), our culture has deemed important to know. Absent from these lists are the kinds of peripheral, trivial facts that tend to find their way onto students’ classroom tests because they are not the most important things students should learn.

The second source of learning standards are those published by state departments of education. These often appear in the form of state mandated curriculum guides. These standards reflect a combination of items adapted from those developed by professional organizations with those provided by a committee of individuals representing the state who are charged with developing the list. Often, these standards will reflect regional differences in curriculum, especially in the areas of social studies and geography. For example, some of the social studies standards for Alabama might reflect knowledge of Alabama history as it relates to corresponding periods of American history, whereas the standards in New York naturally would not concern the specifics of Alabama history.

While you should certainly attend to teaching the information mandated by your employer (the curriculum standards published by your state department of education), you should be aware that these standards sometimes do not reflect the same degree of quality of those developed by professional organizations. State-developed lists of standards sometimes include items that reflect limited expertise and/or the personal agenda of individuals serving on committees that develop the lists. Thus, some state department curriculum guides tend to include a great deal more trivia and focus less on major

concepts. These lists are also more prone to be influenced by political agendas of the region (e.g., whether 'creationism or evolution' should be taught in science, how multi-culturalism should be addressed; the significance of historical figures important to an individual on the standards committee, but of little importance to most historians).

The third source of learning standards are from the items that appear on state mandated competency tests. Theoretically, items that appear on these tests parallel those of the state mandated learning standards. Unfortunately, the manner in which core concepts represented by learning standards are converted into competency test questions can be extremely problematic. Standards are usually very broadly worded whereas test questions tend to address very specific pieces of knowledge. It is very difficult to design a multiple choice test question that addresses depth of understanding about a major concept while it is relatively easy to design a question about a specific fact that might be peripherally related to the concept. Thus, sometimes these competency tests evaluate a great deal of trivial knowledge, and some of it can be very obtuse.

Because these are 'high-stakes' tests, the test items can seduce teachers into using them as the primary source for making decisions about what to teach – trivial, obtuse facts rather than core concepts. Parenthetically, the greater risk students are for failing these tests, the more teachers tend to emphasize learning obtuse facts that may appear on the test and less on understanding the bigger picture. Put another way, the more at risk the student, the less meaningful the instruction, so be wary of using these as a primary source for deciding what to teach.

IDENTIFYING CORE IDEAS

LESSON PLAN THINK SHEET