



A CONVERSATION FOCUSED ON CONTENT CLARIFIES TEACHING OBJECTIVES

By Jon Saphier

I recently had a 15-minute conversation with a very capable middle school science teacher that radically transformed the three-lesson mini-unit she was about to teach on the human respiratory system. I hasten to add that all the improvement in the lessons came from the teacher, not me. My only role was to follow the discipline of focusing the conversation *only* on the content for those few minutes, getting her to explain certain aspects of it to me, and keeping the conversation away from all the other topics: activities, materials, groupings, concerns about particular students, etc.

Guidelines for conferences before an observation almost always call for the teacher to start with a statement of the objective. But it's usually a very short cycle

of question, answer, end of transaction. More rigorous conference protocols may ask the observer to get the statement in language that defines what "students will know or be able to do." But then the conference moves on to assessments, student activities, grouping, and concerns about particular students.

Here is an alternative to that approach: Dwell for 10 to 15 minutes on conferring with a singular focus on the actual content and no dialogue *at all* yet about the activities or other aspects of the lesson. This process can yield huge dividends. Such a conversation may be called "digging deeply into content" for the relationship of ideas in it, and

Watch a content planning conference take place with science teachers who are members of a common planning time team.
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the items that should be isolated and highlighted because they are difficult, easily missed, or especially important.

These 10- to 15-minute content analysis conversations, whether or not followed by observation and feedback, can be immensely helpful to teachers and thus their students because they generate clearer thinking on the teacher's part about objectives. In addition, these conversations make clear what ideas should be highlighted and what relationship the ideas in the content have to each other.

This benefit will accrue to all teachers and their students, but these conversations are particularly necessary for those whose planning is weak. West and Staub first described the value of conversations similar to these in *Content-Focused Coaching* (2003).

As a result of my 15-minute conversation with the middle school science teacher, she realized what should be highlighted — and could easily have been drowned in the mass of material — in her three-lesson series on the human respiratory system.

These realizations, which came about because she had to explain the content to me in detail, dramatically changed the nature of the events in the lesson she taught. They also caused her to frame the lesson in a different form than originally planned and say it in student-friendly language. See her revised plan in the box at right.

THE MISSING LINK IN PLANNING

Between knowing the content and having a repertoire of content-specific pedagogical tools for the content is the intellectual capacity to *analyze* the content and tease out of it what is most worthwhile and what could be most confusing.

The best planners look at their materials: They do the problems, analyze the texts for a document-based question, read the short story for what is most important to milk out of it. And thus, for example, they replace the literature anthology's five comprehension questions on O. Henry's *Hearts and Hands* with an exploration of inferential language, because O. Henry loads his stories with clues a good inferential detective can decode ("Her cheeks tinged pink with recognition."). Or a good planner seeks connection between adolescent readers' experiences and the themes the story is built around: young love, humiliation, the compassion of an older person for a younger one.

REVISED LESSON PLAN ON THE HUMAN RESPIRATORY SYSTEM

Students will be able to:

- Describe the mechanism by which oxygen enters the body and the pathway it follows.
- Explain the magic moment when oxygen crosses cell membranes (the alveoli) into capillaries and thus enters the transportation system of the bloodstream/circulatory system.
- Explain the process by which oxygen does its work in the body.
- Explain what and how the respiratory system expels items the body needs to get rid of (carbon dioxide and water).

Big ideas:

- Every cell in the body needs oxygen, not just muscles. That includes bone marrow, hair, everything.
- When oxygen arrives at a cell, the chemical reaction within the cell of the oxygen with glucose releases energy. So oxygen is absolutely necessary for all cells to grow, muscles to move, etc.
- The bloodstream is the highway that carries oxygen to the cells.
- We also have to get rid of the carbon dioxide that is the product of this release of energy. If we didn't, we'd die. The respiratory system is taking care of this "get rid of the stuff" function as well as the delivery of oxygen to do its work.
- Respiration is a process, and it's a lot more than what we call "breathing."
- Respiration is a process for getting oxygen into the body so the oxygen can do its work.

Content planning conference guidelines, pp. 58-59.

The missing link in good lesson planning is examining the materials and the content itself for these valuable nuggets and for the relationship of ideas to one another. That act often transforms both the activities and the framing of activities one chooses for students. When practiced in 15-minute conversations with peers, coaches, or administrators, content analysis quickly becomes a habit of mind that individual teachers internalize. The reward is intellectual satisfaction as well as better student learning.

REFERENCE

West, L. & Staub, F.C. (2003). *Content-focused coaching: Transforming mathematics lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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HOW TO HAVE A CONTENT PLANNING CONVERSATION

A content planning conference analyzes the content to be taught for the relationship of the ideas, their hierarchy, sequence, the knowledge required to do the tasks assigned, and the most important and worthwhile takeaways for students.

Use these guidelines to conduct a conversation focused on content. These conversations are equally applicable in peer observations, coaching meetings, principal-teacher interactions, and common planning time meetings of teacher teams. This conversation format can lead to increased lesson clarity and student learning.

TIPS

- Don't start the conversation with "What are you going to do?" or "What are the student activities?" Resist all questions about the lesson, grouping, timing, and student activities until the discussion of content and objectives is complete.
- Make sure the objectives identified are worthy objectives. Do not allow objectives to focus on anything but content, and make sure that the selected objective is really worthwhile.
- Make sure to focus on specific definitions. Avoid generalities and such language as "stuff" or "things."
- Focus on understanding vs. the mechanics of completing a task or operation.

TEACHER MATERIALS

Basic level:

- Ask the teacher to bring all the materials that he or she plans to use, including books, worksheets, homework, and assessments.
- Ask the teacher to prepare the objective in student-friendly language.

Advanced:

- Ask the teacher to group the concepts in a hierarchical order.
- Ask the teacher to bring any examples of student work that might be relevant.

CONTENT PLANNING CONFERENCE GUIDELINES

STEPS	WHAT TO SAY
1 Dive right into the content.	• “What content will you be focusing on?”
2 Examine the materials that will be used to teach the content.	• “Is there a chapter in the book that goes with this content?” • “What materials will you be handing to the students?”
3 Focus on the key concepts that the teacher wants the students to take away from the lesson.	• “What are the most important things that you want them to understand?”
4 Delve deeply into the meaning of the content, with particular focus on the key concepts. (It is OK to admit you do not understand the material, as your struggle more than likely reflects student struggle and allows the teacher to get clearer about the content.)	• “Can you explain that a little further?” • “What exactly do you mean when you say ‘process’...?” • “I’m not sure I understand...”
5 Group the concepts hierarchically. First identify what knowledge students must have to be successful in the new task. Then break down the current task into steps: What must be understood first in order to understand the complete concept?	• “So, what would students need to know from experience in order to be ready to move forward?” • “How would you break down this concept into parts?” • “Which part of this concept do you think students need to understand first?”
6 Have the teacher state the objective (big idea) in student-friendly language exactly as he or she plans to say it to the class and have the teacher explain how he or she plans to display the objectives.	• “How will you present the objectives to the class?” • “Say it aloud now just as if you were talking to the class.” • “How will you present the information? On the board? Smartboard?”
7 Ask the teacher how he or she plans to track student progress and understanding.	• “How will you know if students are understanding or not?” • “Will you have an assessment?”
8 Summarize. a. Ask the teacher to summarize exactly what he or she wants the students to learn. b. Summarize the accomplishments of the conference thus far.	• “So, if you were to go around and interview the students at the end of the day, what would you want them to tell you to show they really understood?” • “So far, I think we have really gotten clear on the content and defined the objectives, which are ..”
9 Now turn the focus to the activities. Make sure the activities relate directly to the objectives and that they do not require students to deal with too many variables.	• “OK, so now what are you going to have the students do?”