

The Common Themes of the Framework for Teaching¹

Some educators, when they first study the framework for teaching, are concerned that it seems to exclude some important aspects of practice; they might ask, for example, "Where are concerns for individual differences, or cultural awareness? What about technology, or high expectations?" Those concepts are, indeed, essential to good teaching; abundant research supports their inclusion, in any comprehensive description of good practice. However, these items do not reflect the work of teachers; they are not what teachers do. Instead, they are reflected in the manner in which teachers do what they do. For example, a successful teacher's instructional outcomes and feedback to students, as well as the teacher's interaction with families of students, all reflect high expectations and attention to the needs of individual students. The same considerations apply to the other common themes; they permeate all the different components and elements of the framework for teaching and serve to define performance at a high level. These themes are described in the following sections.

Equity

Implicit in the entire framework, particularly those domains relating to interaction with students (Domains 2 and 3), is a commitment to equity. In an environment of respect and rapport, all students feel valued. When students are engaged in a discussion of a concept, all students are invited and encouraged to participate. When feedback is provided to students on their learning, it is provided to all students.

This equity imperative is particularly meaningful in the context of an educational tradition of elitism. Schools in the United States have traditionally served many students well. Students have been offered academic courses of high quality and have graduated to pursue opportunities in higher education. But our public schools have not served all students equally well. Those who have been underserved are primarily students of color or students living in poverty, especially in urban areas; and females, particularly in science and mathematics. And even when the inequities have not been institutionalized, as they were in segregated schools before 1954, they have been nearly as insidious.

A commitment to excellence is not complete without a commitment to equity. Such a commitment provides equal opportunities for stimulating academic achievement, with the open doors to higher education and careers that result from success in that arena, and (2) additional levels of support for those traditionally underserved, to enable them to overcome individual and community-wide doubts about their capability to succeed with distinction. In a school committed to equity, one would never hear a science teacher or a physical education teacher in the faculty lounge say, "She did pretty well, for a girl." Nor would teachers, even implicitly, accept lower performance from some students because of their perceived ability or their background. This practice constitutes a particularly insidious form of bigotry.

Cultural Competence

Students may arrive at school with traditions that are different from or in conflict with those of many U.S. classrooms. Children in some cultures, for instance, are taught not to look adults in the eye because it is a sign of disrespect; yet many U.S. teachers interpret a child's looking away as insolence. Similarly, the way questions are used in many classes is unfamiliar to some students. For example, when teachers use questions that they know the answer to as a way of checking whether students have done the assigned reading, these students are baffled: "Why would a teacher ask a question to which he already knows the answer? Clearly, this is not a real question; but if it is not a question, what is it?" Such thoughts interfere with a student's ability to participate fully, and the teacher may well conclude that the student is a slow learner. Other such examples abound in the research literature (Villagas, 1991).

Teachers who are sensitive to the cultures of their students pay particular attention to Component 1b (Demonstrating Knowledge of Students). In learning about students' backgrounds, these teachers ensure that they are aware of relevant information about cultural traditions, religious practices, and patterns of interaction that may affect a student's classroom participation. In addition, the teachers ensure that the materials they use (Components 1e and 3c) and the examples they employ (Components 3a and 3c) do not refer to items or traditions unfamiliar to students, or that they explain such materials and examples fully. And they take particular care that in their communication with families (Component 4c), they demonstrate cultural respect.

Cultural competence extends far beyond an awareness of the traditions, dress, and foods of a particular culture. Although "Mexican Day," for example, can provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their skill in dance, to wear traditional dress, and to share traditional foods, real cultural competence, goes much further. By the time they enter school, children will have absorbed from their communities a sense of the world and their place in it. Schools have an obligation to help students recognize that in a democracy, no one, and no cultural group, is marginalized (Irving, 1990).

High Expectations

For years, research has confirmed the importance of high expectations in promoting high levels of student achievement, particularly for those students traditionally underserved by schools. Accomplished professionals believe that all students are capable of extremely high standards of learning, and they organize their teaching accordingly. They are also aware of the dynamics of expectations and the connections between expectations and reality. When teachers believe that some students are particularly capable or slow in learning, such expectations tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

High expectations are reflected in many components of the framework for teaching. For example, teachers set their instructional outcomes (Component 1c) at a high and challenging level. The rigorous culture for learning (Component 2b) explicitly includes, as one element, high expectations. The questions posed during a lesson (Component 3h) are at a high cognitive level. The feedback students receive (Component 3d) during class or as comments on their papers reflects the teacher's confidence that they are capable of high-level work. And the teacher's communication with families about their children's work (Component 4c) sends the same message of high-level learning.

High expectations are necessarily grounded in clear and open standards for achievement. The characteristics of a good persuasive essay, for example, are rigorous, known to all students, and apply to all. And, echoing the commitment to equity, teachers are committed to helping all students reach the standard. They may have a learning disability, or they may learn very slowly. In these cases, high expectations will be based on the students' own unique history and will reflect significant achievement for them. But regardless of the absolute level of mastery, every student is challenged by high expectations for learning.

Embedded in the concept of high expectations for students is a culture of hard work and perseverance. Skilled teachers do not accept sloppy work from students or work that does not represent sincere effort; such practices convey the message that just submitting an assignment is good enough, regardless of its quality. The culture of hard work is a direct consequence of the teacher's presentation of the task at hand as important and representing important learning. But significant learning requires concentration and intellectual "elbow grease." When teachers permit students to "blow it off," they communicate that such a level of achievement is the best they can expect from those individuals.

Developmental Appropriateness

How students engage with academic content is shaped in part by their level of intellectual development. Teachers observe important patterns of development despite students' many individual differences. These patterns are especially important in certain academic areas—science and mathematics at all levels, and literature and the social sciences at the high school level. For example, until students can conserve number, which is usually achieved by the time they are 6 or 7, they cannot fully understand addition facts. (They might be able to memorize the correct answers, but until their concept of number is stable, they cannot truly understand the concept.) Similarly, until students understand the concept of separating and controlling variables, usually by age 11, they cannot design a scientific experiment independently. And until students can achieve formal thought (at about age 14), they will have trouble understanding the role of chance in history or engaging in serious literary criticism.

Developmental considerations are central to a constructivist view of learning, as described in Chapter 2. How students understand a concept is influenced by their cognitive structures at the time they are introduced to it. The research literature is filled with examples of student misconceptions of certain ideas, sometimes with amusing consequences. For example, even many university graduates believe that the reason it is warmer in the summer than in the winter is that the earth is closer to the sun in the summer. This belief conforms to their naive understanding of heat transmission, but it is false; the earth is actually closer to the sun in the winter. In spite of having been taught in their science classes that the explanation for the seasons lies in the tilt of the earth rather than in its proximity to the sun, many people—even into adulthood—persist in holding this erroneous belief.

Attention to developmental appropriateness relates to many components of the framework for teaching, particularly (though not exclusively) those in Domain 1 (Planning and Preparation). Teachers who are sensitive to developmental patterns choose their instructional outcomes (Component 1c), activities and materials (Components 1e and 3c), and assessment strategies (Component 1f) carefully. But attention to child development also influences the other domains. Teachers demonstrate respect in developmentally appropriate ways (Component 2a). They ask developmentally appropriate questions (Component 3b) and provide feedback (Component 3d) in ways that stretch but do not intellectually overwhelm students.

Attention to Individual Students, Including Those with Special Needs

Every classroom is composed of individual learners; therefore, the challenge of teaching includes not only organizing the group but also attending to the particular characteristics of individuals. This is not a trivial matter; organizing for the productive learning of a large number of students, each with unique characteristics, is a daunting prospect. It is made all the more challenging by external insistence on ensuring that all students attain certain standards of performance.

But, fundamentally, learning is done by individuals, not by groups. So although it is essential for a teacher to know that some students in the class learn quickly, or that another group of individuals does not understand a particular concept, the knowledge of group needs is only a compilation of the knowledge of individual characteristics. Therefore, in planning learning experiences for students, skilled teachers design activities that are challenging on a number of different levels simultaneously and thus are appropriate for more students than would be possible with more narrowly focused activities.

Sensitivity to individual students must be extended to include appropriate accommodations for students with special needs. Some of these needs are intellectual; others are physical or emotional. And with greater inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms, all teachers require at least some understanding of special needs.

For many teachers, the use of electronic technology represents a foray into unfamiliar territory; they did not grow up with such tools, and some resist acquiring the necessary skill. Being new to these tools is frightening; one is forever concerned about making an error, or breaking the equipment, or losing important documents. These hesitations are overcome through experience, by increasing familiarity with the machines and what they will do. Of course, learning about technology is, for teachers, a task that is never finished. Just when one has mastered a new tool, another becomes available. Staying abreast of developments in technology is an important component of professional development for many teachers.

Teachers and schools must also be aware that the private resources available to students in the area of technology are extremely uneven. Many families now have computers at home, complete with games and all the latest enhancements. Many others do not. Thus children's familiarity with technology is diverse and is reflected in how they can use technological tools in their academic work. Part of a school's responsibility is to provide access to technology for all students.

Educators need to remember that technological tools are just that—tools. They should never be considered ends in themselves, and they should not be misused. For example, if students learn to perform operations by using a calculator exclusively, they may not know how to do the problem without it. That is, if students don't understand the concept of multiplication or how multiplying by 10 affects a product, then using a calculator to get the right answers leaves them vulnerable. They may discover that their computational skill is dependent on access to a calculator. Similarly, it is essential for students to know their multiplication facts so they can recall them quickly and easily. But once students have acquired the necessary concepts, the calculator can save them a great deal of time.

Calculators, computers, CD-ROMs, video players, overhead projectors, cameras, and other tools of technology are, to varying degrees, available in U.S. schools and classrooms, and to a large extent students have access to electronic technology at home. Using these tools to enhance learning is an important responsibility of today's teachers. Such tools can be used in classrooms with students (Components 3a and 3c), to help with records management (Component 4b), or to communicate with families (Component 4c). Moreover, teachers can use the Internet in their planning (Domain 1) and in pursuing opportunities for professional learning (Component 4e). The use of email has greatly enhanced the reach of many teachers, in their participation in a professional community (Component 4d) and in their ongoing communication with families (Component 4c). And most school districts and many schools maintain Web sites that describe the school's program; in some cases, teachers use this resource to post homework assignments, and they use email to communicate with students after the school day.

Appropriate Use of Technology

Attention to individual students throughout the framework for teaching. Naturally, the teacher's knowledge of students (Component 1b) includes knowledge of individuals. Attentive teachers' instructional plans and assessment strategies (Components 1e and 1f) are suitable to the needs of every student in the class. Interactions with students are appropriate to individuals (Component 2a), and feedback (Component 3d) is suitable for where each student is in his or her learning. Records are maintained to permit ongoing monitoring of progress (Component 4b). And, of course, in communicating with families (Component 4c), attentive teachers are responsive to the situations of each student.

Furthermore, teachers who have students with physical limitations must also attend to the implications of how physical space is organized (Component 2e). Students with visual or hearing impairments must be situated in a classroom so they can see and hear to the maximum extent possible. Students with emotional needs impose particular responsibilities on teachers as they respond to student behavior (Component 2d), as well as to other aspects of student interaction in Domain 2 (The Classroom Environment).

Student Assumption of Responsibility (added to the 2007 edition)

It is important to remember that small children direct their own learning—and do so with great energy and commitment. Babies want to learn to walk, although for many of them, at least at first, it is a slower way to get around than crawling. Children are naturally curious about their environment and actively seek to understand it. It would be a rare 5-year-old who displayed intellectual laziness; however, by the time students are 12, many of them have become lethargic about their schoolwork.

An important aspect of the framework, and one that is manifest in many of the components is student assumption of responsibility—for the work students undertake, for the physical arrangement of the class, and for their participation in a purposeful learning community. This is not to suggest that the teacher is not in charge, but part of being in charge is to enlist student energy in ensuring the success of the class.

A class in which a teacher is clearly setting the agenda, however, can still become a community of learners. For example, as students learn more about the Civil War, they will—and should be encouraged to—formulate questions that the teacher may not have considered. Depending on the teacher's instructional purposes, such questions may be suitable for investigation. And once students have gained some insight, even on questions the teacher has posed, they are in a position to share those insights with other students, entering into a dialogue about the subject with their peers and resource people, which the teacher monitors and facilitates but does not always direct.

The framework for teaching is clear about a teacher's role in creating an environment for productive learning. Setting the broad agenda is part of a teacher's responsibility. The environment, however, can consist of a learning community. In such a community, the lines between teachers and learners become somewhat blurred; individuals move back and forth across that line in the course of their work, without relinquishing responsibility. Teachers are not afraid to acknowledge when they do not know a particular fact, and they recognize and specifically use student contributions to the production of knowledge.

It is a hallmark of a community of learners that every individual is highly engaged and is invested in the endeavor. It is the hallmark of an accomplished professional that the classroom has made the shift from a learning environment completely managed by the teacher to one in which students themselves assume some responsibility. It is manifested in many aspects of the teacher's practice. For example, the teacher's instructional outcomes (Component 1c) may reflect suggestions from students, and students may have suggested the evaluative criteria to be used to assess student work (Component 1f). In the classroom, students themselves will ensure standards of civility (Component 2a); they will take initiative in implementing, or even improving, the routines and procedures (Component 2c); they will ensure compliance with the standards of conduct (Component 2d); and they may make suggestions for how the room arrangement could better support their learning (Component 2e). Similarly, in Domain 3, students will formulate questions and ensure that all students participate in class discussions (Component 3b), and they will actively use formative assessment results in their learning (Component 3d).

Inexperienced teachers tend to be fearful of allowing students to share responsibility for the class. Indeed, it can be a frightening prospect; some teachers have had the experience of students behaving irresponsibly when given too much latitude. Or they may have found that some students, when given a choice in the matter, will choose to not work at all. Creating an environment in which students take responsibility not only for their own learning but also for that of their classmates might, in some situations, represent a considerable departure from past practice. However, with experience, many teachers find that students respond to such efforts with enthusiasm and reward their teachers with a renewed commitment to learning.