

# Doing the Activity Plan

Avoid a lot of grief and read this introduction carefully. From experience we know that writing the two activity plans which have considerable weight in the course can involve some confusion. We want you to read this and then pose some questions before you begin your work. You'll see the Discussion Board post assignment at the end of this.

## Planning

*"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley"*

Planning work for classrooms always has a provisional feel to it. Revision is as key to teaching plans as it is to any other sort of composition. One needs one eye on the plan and another on the students for whose learning it is intended, and whose hearts, minds, and behaviors are ever instructing us, as we would instruct them. We need to plan, and as experience grows, to improvise on the plan.

But for every generation of teachers there seems to be a new theoretical model of how planning should be done. When the two of us began our teaching, we wrote endless "aims" and "objectives" to set the purpose for our sequenced activities, but those aims and objectives came from our own sense of what language and literature offered young people, or from what we thought they needed in order to be effective university or college students, or just plain citizens. The government did not write them for us. This led, in time, to an unacceptable diversity of purpose, particularly after the province dropped its final provincial exams for graduates, and so we arrived where we are today (in most countries in the English-speaking world) facing hefty documents itemizing results, expectations, standards, outcomes - fixed end statements of what it means to learn in English.

We are now "accountable," and planning means something different.

## Design Down

In the pursuit of accountability, current planning in the Ontario curriculum pursues a tight logic. For each course there is a list of expected learnings. Planning to teach begins with those end statements and works back, deductively, to what needs to be done. It's called *Design Down*, a coinage by two American educators, McTighe and Grant Wiggins (*check names*). What should students do to produce evidence of the expected learning? What assessment tools will we use to determine the quality and level of that learning? What are the specific teaching strategies to support the learning? What resources will we need?

Answer those questions, in that order, and Bingo, you have a plan in the *Design Down* model.

It seems quite sensible to itemize the knowledge and skills students should have by the end of a course, and to ask teachers to plan to make that learning happen. Except that all the expectations and achievement charts and rubrics can weave themselves into a kind of Gordian Knot promising grand knowledge of the world - if only someone could untie it.

We hope that our approach to planning avoids the tie-up, and keeps things reasonably simple and flexible.

*Design Down* theory would have us work in linear steps (as above):

1. Expectations first
2. Then Assessment tools to define the learning (using criteria)
3. Then student demonstrations to be assessed by those tools
4. Then teaching strategies to support the learning
5. And finally, the resources.

We agree that all five of these **elements of planning** are essential. Further, we agree that they make a kind of integrated whole (please see the venn diagram in .....). Our point of departure from strict *Design Down* is that we accept any of the five elements as a starting point in planning. You might be looking at a particular play assigned to the course you are teaching (the resource), reading it over the summer and asking yourself what it suggests that students might do (demonstrations). Your planning has begun. Or, you might learn of some teaching strategy and begin to plug in the resources and expectations available to you as an Ontario teacher. Your planning has begun again, from a different starting point.

In Ontario, what seems critical is that you are able to show that the expectations for the course are integrated with the other four parts of your planning.

We call this *Design Around* - not because we want to write the book, but because we want you to understand that in our course we'll be happy if you simply provide a plan in which *the five elements are linked*.

## Lessons, Units, and Activity Plans

Now we come to some critical language defining the length of the plan.

To us, what is critical is that you can demonstrate that you can set a plan involving the five elements working together as an integrated package. It used to be common to require "units" in which, for example, you would write out your plans for teaching Grammar, or Macbeth. But these are very lengthy plans that contain many iterations of the five elements in order to complete the study of Grammar or Macbeth. They are larger than we need in order to see basic planning ability.

So why not go for lesson plans? Well, it's a Goldilocks question. We're looking for the planning assignment that's just right. Not too big; not too small. The problem with a lesson

plan is that it is unlikely to include, in a single 80-minute class, an assignment of sufficient importance to merit an assessment tool, and enough time to include assessment or supportive teaching strategies.

In other words, we are looking for the most economical plan that can demonstrate your command of the five elements. So we ask for an “Activity Plan.” Our Activity Plan is a description of a sequence of lessons **directed towards one well-defined final activity that is significant enough to be marked and counted towards the students’ final grade in English. The activity should be one for which an analytical rubric can be constructed.** So, for example, one might do an activity plan that results in a readers’ theatre presentation of a scene from literature, or in a short speech, or a poster or performance of a poem, or.....even an essay or report or summary. Any of these things can be assessed and evaluated using criteria presented in a rubric. Any of them would need some lessons planned to define and support the work - including some assessment feedback as it goes along.

So the Activity Plan can be, say, five or six lessons. It’s length is determined by the need to define and motivate the work, and to coach it to a conclusion. It is something shorter than an entire unit, but longer and more significant than the single lesson.

It may be appropriate to use either short fiction or non-fiction, or poetry or the one-act play or advertisements in the Media as the focus for such a plan since they do not demand lengthy treatment, yet can become the focus for a significant presentation or analysis.

## Expectations and Criteria

Ontario’s expectations have caused all kinds of confusion. Both elementary and secondary teachers have wondered (though by now they have settled this in various ways) just what they were supposed to do with all those stated learnings. Teach ‘em all? Mark ‘em all? One by one? In the beginning, it seemed the government was actually proposing something that preposterous.

Our suggestion is to keep your feet on the ground. Your job as a teacher is to design important work for students to do that will indicate their success in a variety of learning, a minimum of which is defined by the expectations for a course. Once you have decided that debating, for example, fits well into the Grade 11 classroom, your responsibility is to teach some form of it. As a matter of course you’ll need to let students know what the **criteria** are for a debate. They might look something like this:

- content
- organization
- research
- speaking skill
- listening skill
- debate rules

Notice, these criteria don't have value words like "good" or "thorough." Those words will appear in the level descriptors across the rubric. *Thorough* research might be at level four, for example. Sometimes criteria are call traits. A debate speech will have content, be organized, be grounded in research.....and so on.

Now that you have described what a debate consists of, you can easily look to the **expectations** for the course and see which of them you are addressing in a significant way, because you are marking something directly related to them. If by chance your department keeps score of those **expectations** that are covered by specific work in the course, you can check these off.

They will be the ones you site in your activity plan to establish that you are addressing the course standards for Grade 11.

It is appropriate to establish criteria first and to seek the relationship with expectations, second. Criteria being the bottom line between you and the students when it comes to defining the work to be done. In our planning template (and in Ontario's rubrics used for the exemplars projects), criteria and expectations are both shown in adjacent columns to establish that there IS a relationship between the work done, and achievement in the course.

## Rubrics

We ask that you construct the "analytical" rubric for the assignment in your activity plan. This the one you commonly see in ministry documents. It contains criteria in a far left column and then four columns marking out the four levels of "passing" achievement. Each of these levels contains at least one descriptor - a statement that attempts to describe what the particular criteria will look like at this level. A particular teacher might describe level three organization has having three characteristics:

- competent sentence organization
- competent paragraph organization
- competent organization of ideas around a thesis

Here are some key features of analytical rubrics:

- Level 1 descriptors taken together should describe work you are willing to pass
- Level 4 descriptors taken together should describe achievement of the top students in your class
- Level 3 is considered the "provincial standard" - achievement there clearly says success
- Descriptors should attempt to clearly distinguish one level from another
- Though the province does not, you may want a level "F" to deal with failing work in your class
- Serious mathematical problems can occur from assigning number values to the

level descriptors for the purpose of adding up a numerical mark

The use of these rubrics is essential to what is called descriptive assessment. The point is that the levels and their descriptions give meaning to a final mark. The appropriate way to use them to arrive at a mark is by:

1. First highlighting the descriptors that apply to the student work
2. Then looking at the pattern of achievement to establish the “most consistent level” of achievement
3. Finally, establishing an appropriate mark within that level.

The last step is often achieved through a system called “pegging” in which Level 3, for example, is represented by a low of 72, a median of 75 and a high of 78. If you have a result that seems most consistently a level 3 result, you simply decide whether it is a low, high or middle Level 3 and assign the appropriate mark. This can be quicker than the calculations that teachers have often done, but that is not the main reason for doing it. The main reason is to put the verbal descriptions foremost because they attempt to actually describe the achievement. The mark is simply derived from that picture.

There are, indeed, lots of problems with rubrics and we’ll draw some attention to these as we go, but for now please construct the analytical rubric as a key component of your activity plan.