

REFLECTIONS

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A NEW KIND OF LEARNING

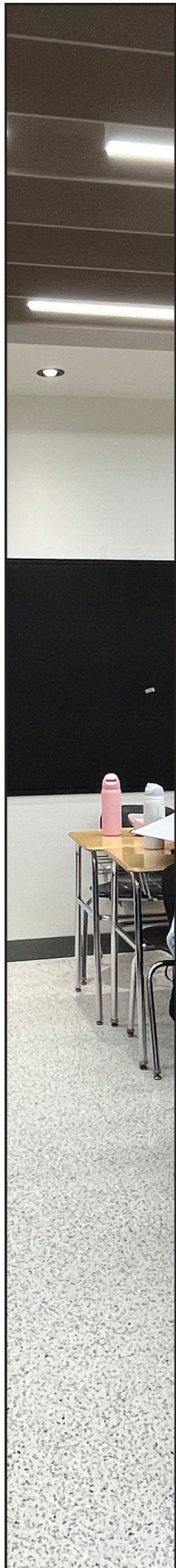
AN ARGUMENT FOR INTRODUCING NEW INSTRUCTION METHODS IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS.



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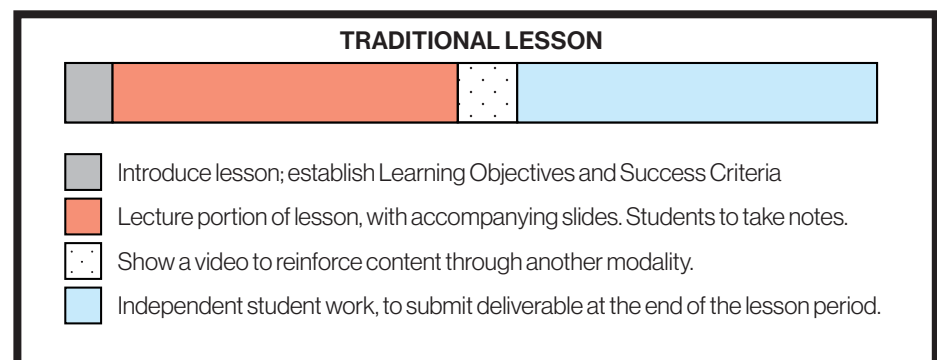
This past September, I began the Professional Master of Education program at Queen's University. The piece below was written for an assignment which asked me to prepare a presentation that would "inspire [my] colleagues to be innovative in their own curriculum planning and design." I chose to share an anecdote about an activity I ran in my Grade 9 Communication Technology class that attempted to upend the traditional structure of a classroom and introduce new methods of instruction. My goal was to focus on developing creative and critical thinking, not rote memorization. While the activity had its limitations, I believe that it was worth sharing as an example of how much more learning can be accomplished when the structure of teaching is changed.

Say I'm trying to teach my Grade 9 Communication Technology students about design thinking.



If I were teaching a traditional class, it might go something like this:

I open the class with a set of slides. I clearly state the learning goal, success criteria, and then launch into a lecture that thoroughly explains each step of the design thinking process. After, I'll probably show a YouTube video that demonstrates a case study of design thinking in practice. Then, I'll give them some sort of activity that allows them to apply their knowledge to a structured scenario, with a handout to complete for me to mark as an assessment of their learning.

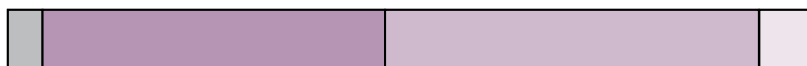


This could work. It probably would. But it's reinforcing a structure of learning where I as the teacher hold on to all the information that I then graciously share with my students. It also plays into a learning fallacy described by Roland Case (2005, p. 45; 2013, p. 198) where we assume that students need to go through lower-level learning (in this case, the knowledge dump in the lecture) before they move onto higher-level learning (in this case, application of their knowledge to a novel scenario).

But what if we turned that on its head? What if we targeted high-level learning from the get-go?

Let's condense those opening slides to a three-to-five-minute introduction of the concept of design thinking and where it's used. Then, let's set out a scenario for the students to consider. In this case, let's ask the students **to create an alternate model of a classroom to improve our students' learning experience**. We'll split the students up into groups, so that the focus is on collaboration and discussion. To help the students work through this scenario, we'll hand out a [sheet](#) (Maker Empire, 2018) with guiding questions and room for notes. We'll provide craft supplies so that the students can actually prototype and test out their ideas. And, most importantly, we'll let the students navigate this themselves, without any top-down direction.

SCENARIO-BASED LESSON



-  Introduce lesson; frame scenario and explain activity objective.
-  Students explore scenario in groups using handouts and collaborative discussion.
-  Students collaborate to prototype their design solution.
-  Students present their work to other groups.

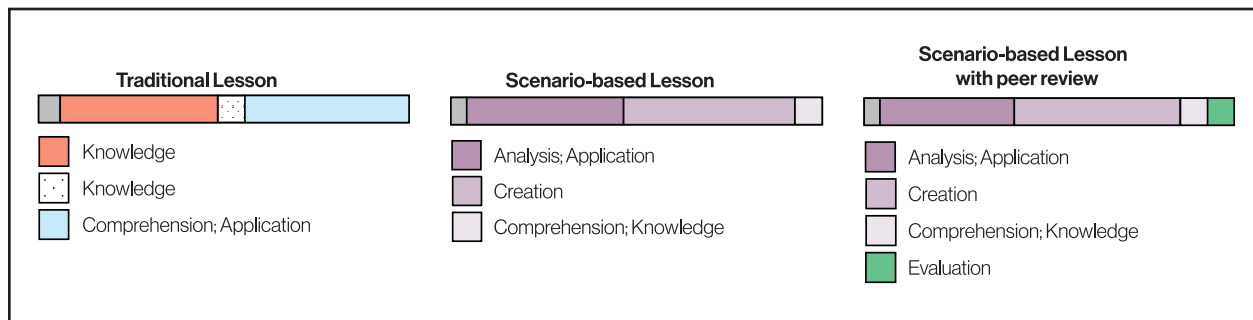
Then, let's add in an evaluation step: Students will present their thinking process and prototypes to their peers, and we can ask the students to consider how to refine their thinking and prototypes. In this way, we can include both lower-level and higher-level thinking, while developing our students' abilities to collaborate and give them an opportunity to learn through doing rather than through lectures and notes.

SCENARIO-BASED LESSON WITH PEER REVIEW



-  Introduce lesson; frame scenario and explain activity objective.
-  Students explore scenario in groups using handouts and collaborative discussion.
-  Students collaborate to prototype their design solution.
-  Students present their work to other groups.
-  Students review their peers' work and critique their interpretation of the scenario.

With Bloom's Taxonomy in mind, let's see what learning is included in each scenario:



I ran this exact activity in my class, and quite nervously too. I was worried about how Grade 9 students would respond to having very limited oversight and direction: would they spend their time talking instead of working? Would social dynamics lead to the quieter and ELL students being isolated and excluded? Would any actual learning take place, or would this just be a protracted arts and crafts activity? But almost instantly, I saw there was no reason to worry. I had buy-in from every single one of the students, even the ones with poor social skills or short attention spans. Even more importantly, all students collaborated so beautifully with each other—I heard them asking each other for advice, lending a helping hand where needed, taking turns with supplies, and taking initiative to bring in items from home to make their visions come to life. At the end of the activity,



Students at work constructing prototypes of their redesigned classrooms.

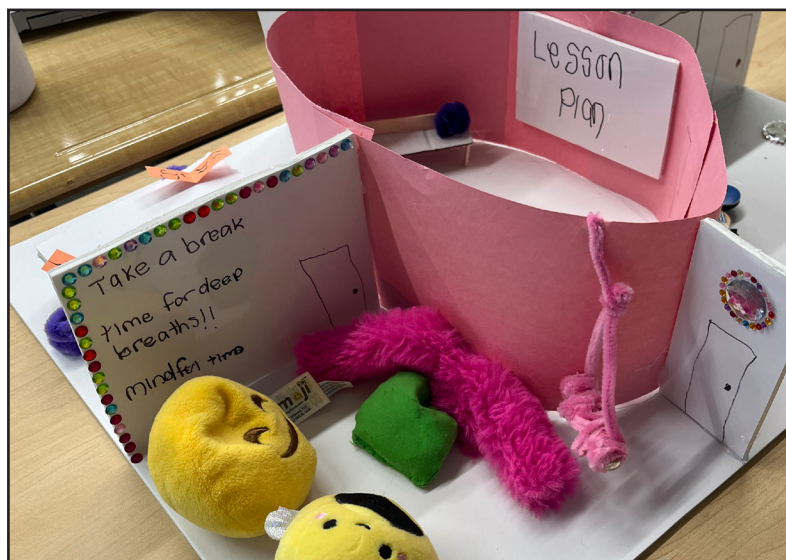
several students asked for more lessons to be run like this in the future; they clearly enjoyed the opportunity to be active learners rather than passive recipients.

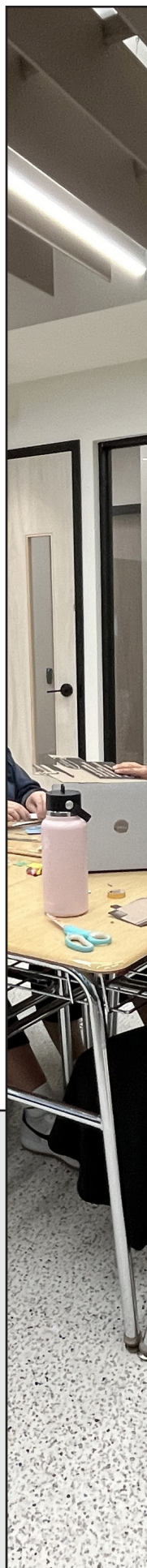
This activity was not without its limitations and failures. The students didn't quite reach the level of creative and critical thinking that I envisioned—given the scenario of redesigning the classroom, most focused on aesthetic considerations instead of structural assumptions that underly the makeup of a typical classroom. When I reviewed the handouts that organized the evaluation step of the activity (I asked students to refine their peers' rationale and prototypes), few students understood what I meant by the word "refine." Most simply reworded the original question (although some gave meaningful critiques). So, while the activity had the potential to spark deep critical thinking, the level I anticipated might have been slightly beyond the students' abilities to perform without some (or extensive) prompting from myself. However, this is just the first round of an iterative process to redesign what the classroom looks like—from my part and from the students'. After three such activities, who knows what these students will be able to do?

But I think the main takeaway from this activity is just how rewarding it can be to switch up your regular lesson structure—for you, and for the students—and how many more types of learning can be done through practical activities than lectures. Villarroel et al., in their 2020 study on experiential learning, write in their discussion that this type of learning

requires working in a team, carrying out work outside the classroom, learning and integrating subject content to make decisions, adapt procedures, contrast different sources of information to identify a

Below: Completed prototypes.





problem and apply them to create a product that seeks to solve it. (p. 11)

In other words, it accomplishes a lot more than a simple lecture. And this kind of learning can go much further than the classroom as well. Dale Dougherty, the publisher of *Make* magazine, wrote in 2012 about the importance of hands-on learning after visiting a Northern California middle school and observing the disturbing trend of using tests as a teaching tool. He quotes John Dewey as an underlying philosophy of teaching: that “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” Our students are not isolated in classrooms as a springboard for the rest of their lives. Rather, they are beginning the process of questioning the world around them, collecting information, and synthesizing it so that they can contribute their own efforts into building a better future for us all.

Professor Michael Fullan, writing in 2013 about the future of education in Ontario, advocates for education that embraces a “new entrepreneurial spirit’ ... characterized by innovation, risk-taking, commitment, and skilled problem solving” (p. 9). As educators, the question we should be asking ourselves is: Is my method of teaching encouraging this spirit in my students? At the end of the period, will they be repeating the same information back at me, or will they be thinking critically and creatively?

And so, the next time you set out to plan a lesson, I ask you to consider switching up how you present your lesson. Lectures and testing are tried and true methods of delivery, but we have the opportunity to push ourselves and our students much further. It doesn't have to be much—actually, success is more likely when you start with a small change (Hofer and Johnson, 2017, p. 54)—but I think that you may be surprised as to how impactful that change might be. You just have to take that risk. ■

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