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## *What Are the Components of Effective Instruction?*

**T**eaching is the systematic presentation of content assumed necessary for mastery within a general area of knowledge. **Instruction** is a general term that means providing knowledge in a systematic way. The characteristics of effective instruction can be represented in four groups:

1. Planning instruction
2. Managing instruction
3. Delivering instruction
4. Evaluating instruction

All teachers plan, manage, deliver, and evaluate their instruction, whether they are working with students who are gifted, students with disabilities, or students without special needs.

### PLANNING INSTRUCTION

If all students in a class were at the same instructional level and if the goals and objectives of schooling were clearly prescribed

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and the same for all students, then instruction would consist of doing the same things with all students, in the right order, at the right time. But all students are not alike, and the goals and objectives of instruction are not the same for all students. This is why planning is such an important part of instruction.

Planning means making decisions—about what information to present, how to present the information, and how to communicate realistic expectations to students. Planning instruction, then, involves three steps:

1. Deciding what to teach
2. Deciding how to teach
3. Communicating realistic expectations

Each of these three steps for planning instruction includes specific tasks. Use *Table 1.1* as a quick reference to the steps and tasks that comprise effective instructional planning.

**Table 1.1** First Component of Effective Instruction: **Planning**

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### **Deciding What to Teach**

1. Assessing students' skills
2. Analyzing the instructional task
3. Establishing a logical instructional sequence
4. Considering contextual variables
5. Analyzing instructional groupings
6. Identifying gaps between actual and expected performance

### **Deciding How to Teach**

1. Setting instructional goals
2. Selecting instructional methods and materials
3. Pacing instruction appropriately
4. Monitoring performance and replanning instruction

### **Communicating Realistic Expectations**

1. Actively involving students in learning
  2. Explicitly stating expectations
  3. Maintaining high standards
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## Deciding What to Teach

Deciding what to teach enables teachers to match instruction to each student's skill level. The process of deciding what to teach includes:

- Assessing students' skills
- Analyzing the instructional task
- Establishing a logical instructional sequence
- Considering contextual variables
- Analyzing instructional groupings
- Identifying gaps between actual and expected performance

### *Assessing Students' Skills*

In making decisions about what to teach, educators have to assess their students' skill levels. They have to identify which skills students have and which skills they do not have. Typically, teachers assess students using tests, observations, and interviews. Much of this assessment goes on during instruction. For example, some teachers assess students' performance by asking them to read aloud from their books, spell the words on their spelling lists, or solve the problems that are in their math texts. Teachers use this kind of informal assessment along with the results of achievement tests to plan their instruction.

Achievement tests indicate students' level of knowledge in academic content areas (e.g., mathematics, reading, science, social studies). **Norm-referenced tests** are used to compare students to each other and to groups on which the test was originally developed. **Criterion-referenced tests** are used to compare students to standards of mastery relative to the content being measured. Using norm-referenced tests, teachers can make judgments about their students' knowledge relative to other students taking the test. They can also estimate the grade levels at which their students are performing. Using criterion-referenced tests, teachers can identify the specific skills their students have or have not mastered. With an understanding of students' academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses, teachers can modify their instructional methods to meet the needs of individual students.

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### *Analyzing the Instructional Task*

It is not enough to know what students are able to do; teachers also must know exactly what it is they want students to do. Only then can they match content to their students' skill level. Part of deciding what to teach is analyzing the instructional task. **Task analysis** consists of breaking down a complex task into its component parts. For example, to solve the problem  $105 \times 3$ , a student must understand numerals, know the meaning of the multiplication sign, and have a basic understanding of both place value and multiplication. All of these components of the task must be taught to students before they will be able to solve the problem.

### *Establishing a Logical Instructional Sequence*

Task analysis helps teachers plan a logical sequence of instruction. Students are more likely to learn if teachers present material in a clear, logical sequence. When planning what to teach, teachers must understand that the acquisition of new skills depends on the learning of lower-level skills.

### *Considering Contextual Variables*

Contextual variables also play a part in deciding what to teach. Relevant **contextual variables** may include where instruction will take place, how long the lesson(s) will be, and who will be in the room during instruction. For example, knowing that a lesson requires the use of special materials (e.g., science equipment, computers, library resources) or more than the usual amount of instructional time is essential before starting the lesson.

### *Analyzing Instructional Groupings*

In planning what to teach, effective teachers consider the instructional groupings that work best in their classrooms. Knowing that having one or two students working together at a computer is the most efficient use of the technology directs teachers

as much as knowing that some students perform better in small groups or that a large group is the best way to present directions for an independent assignment. Usually teachers present material to students in groups, but sometimes they teach students individually. It is important to consider your students' performances, behaviors, and skills when they are in particular instructional groupings, as well as the physical space and the ways in which students interact in it.

### *Identifying Gaps in Actual and Expected Performance*

In deciding what to teach, teachers must identify any gaps that exist between a student's actual level of performance and the expected level of performance. By recognizing the difference between actual performance and expected performance, teachers are able to keep instructional goals and objectives realistic, neither too low nor too high.

## **Deciding How to Teach**

It is difficult to know ahead of time how best to teach. Teaching is an experimental process: Effective teachers try approaches and materials until they find the combination that works best in moving students toward instructional objectives. You may have thought, or even been told in courses, that the way to decide how to teach a student is to give a battery of tests, identify the student's strengths and weaknesses, then remediate weaknesses or build up strengths. But this is not enough. Yes, it is important to take into account a student's level of skill and to identify learning and behavioral strengths and weaknesses, but simply knowing a student's score on a test cannot help you decide how to teach the student.

In making decisions about how to teach, teachers must make an educated guess about the kinds of approaches that will work, then try those approaches and monitor the results. That educated guess is based on experience, either with a particular student or with others like that student. After that, the only way

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to decide how to teach is to teach, then to gather data to determine its effectiveness. This does not mean that you should teach blindly. Experience provides a basic understanding of what works and what does not work. Also, check the literature for guidelines of effective instruction like these (Wittrock, 1986):

- Begin with an overview or use advance organizers and lists of objectives to set the stage for a presentation.
- Signal transitions between parts of a lesson and review or summarize subparts as the lesson proceeds.
- Ask questions of varying levels of difficulty throughout a presentation.
- Control the pace and continuity of lessons by regulating the time allowed for students to ask or answer questions.

In addition to making an educated guess and consulting the literature, four activities come into play when you are deciding how to teach:

- Setting instructional goals
- Selecting instructional methods and materials
- Pacing instruction appropriately
- Monitoring performance and replanning instruction

### *Setting Instructional Goals*

The process of deciding how to teach begins with setting instructional goals for individual students, then establishing an instructional sequence. Most complex skills consist of combinations of simpler or lower-level skills. These lower-level skills must be taught in a logical sequence in order for students to acquire the complex skill.

### *Selecting Instructional Methods and Materials*

The next step in deciding how to teach is to choose appropriate methods and materials. This relatively easy task can become complicated when students have special needs. Students may require alternative methods (e.g., sign language or acceleration) or may need special instructional materials

(e.g., tape-recorded lessons, advanced reading materials, high interest/low-level vocabulary reading books). Together, alternative methods and materials can be a powerful teaching combination. For example, students with learning disabilities may be reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the general education classroom and, in addition, may be using an alternative form of the play in their special education classrooms, testing their comprehension with verbal quizzes and discussions after each scene of the play.

### *Pacing Instruction Appropriately*

Setting a pace is also part of the process of figuring out how to teach. **Pace** is how quickly or slowly the class moves through the material. In addition to pace, teachers need to set a ratio of known to unknown material and set standard rates of success. Effective instruction includes about 75 percent known and 25 percent unknown material. Students should be expected to demonstrate about 80 percent mastery with this combination.

### *Monitoring Performance and Replanning Instruction*

Probably the most important part of deciding how to teach is monitoring student performance and then using that information to plan subsequent instruction. Deciding *what* to teach is a form of diagnosis; deciding *how* to teach is a prescription, a treatment. If that treatment is not appropriate to the individual's needs, it can lead to educational problems.

## **Communicating Realistic Expectations**

The third component of instructional planning is setting realistic expectations for students and communicating those expectations to them. When teachers do not expect much from their students, they are shortchanging them. If they have the skills to do so, students will, over time, learn to perform at the level of expectation that teachers hold for them (Good & Brophy, 1984). When those expectations are realistically high, students succeed; when they are unrealistically low, students fail.