

TEACHING DESIGN – ON THE EDGE BETWEEN TORMENT AND FORMALITY, ON ONE SIDE, AND THE GENUINE EFFICIENCY, ON THE OTHER SIDE

Rodica Mariana NICULESCU, PhD,
University Transilvania of Brasov, Romania
rodica_niculescu@yahoo.co.uk,
rodicanic@unitbv.ro

Abstract: *This time, the paper put the reality of the school under the scrutiny of critical reflection, having as core concern, the planning the didactic activity, the design of the lesson plans. Some questions that came from the school life are stated and brief answers are formulated. A special attention is given to the design of the lesson plans with some core aspect involved. Steps of the design of the didactic strategy are presented and explained. A special attention is given to the objectives, in terms of presenting their role and the implied connection with the lesson type.*

Key words: *lesson plans, design of learning situation, utility – futility in curriculum design on tactical level*

*If you want to really crush, destroy a human being,
give to this human the punishment the most awful,
so even the most harsh killer should shudder
at the thought of this punishment,
and be afraid of it beforehand, then
it would be enough to give for his work
a character of total uselessness, or complete absurdity.*
[Dostoievski](#) in The House of the Dead

Very often, the informal discussions inside the methodological meetings, transform the official precious tone of the formal context, when the deep concern for well doing of paperwork (including planning) as required, to the desperate complaints of futility. It is true that publications do not reveal this reality, but school life shows this image painfully.

The most complains are focused on the lesson plans, they highlighting the bushy nature of the documents created according to the requirements and stress the lack of utility.

An in depth analysis of such a reality should separate some aspects. Several distinct questions are to be formulated:

1. May someone speak about the pair of concepts *utility* - *futility* in relation to the act of planning the lessons?
2. Is the required structure for lesson plans the correct one, from a pedagogical perspective, in conjunction with efficient time management of the educator?
3. What is to be said about the deepening of the emotion of overload generated in front of the joining of requests for drawing up these documents, with the requirements for developing a consistent number of other plans, portfolios, reports and other papers?

Some answers for these questions may be presented.

1. For the first question the answer is quite simple. Never a lesson planning is an act of futility. Each teacher must design learning situations. But, what does it mean to design? First, it means to think about, not precisely to write a consistent number of pages. Teachers have to know the stones of the management of the learning activities with the students (the action facet of the design of the learning situation). They work with concrete students belonging to each team even if the grade, subject, and the topic are the same. A differentiated planning and flexibility in implementation are necessary. But the answer of the first question should be correlated with the answers of the following questions and needs a more elaborate presentation which is the topic of a further sequence.

2. The official requirements are sometime "strange" and probably it is difficult to talk about totally correct or appropriate pedagogical perspective, because at least for some levels of education the things are not very clear, even for people with decision-making positions. The effectiveness of the time management for the educator seems to turn into a delusion, day after day. While the number of the required paper increases from one year to another, from one semester to another, while the structure of every document requested is becoming more bushy it is really difficult to talk about an effective management of time for educator.

3. It is not only about the school time of the teacher but about the full life time. A day has only twenty four hours, but, even if it is the implacable truth, the number of the requested items asks to double the time for a single day. Which is the effect on the actors of the educational scene? A constellation of perverse effects can be detected, and they interrelate in an interesting way.

- For the educator, the overuse determines a deep fatigue that installs with an insidious development of a state of rejection even of what is considered useful. Detours are sought more or less consciously. Most of the paperwork is done superficially, the focus being stressed on the form and quantity, as an irrefutably proof, while the fund is forgotten increasingly more.

The prioritizing of answering the tasks is based more on the conjuncture interest, usually related to climbing the career, detrimental to the genuine quality of the progress. Instead, the papers elaborated as proofs for quality are more and more numerous. Bookshelves are fully put in ordinance in closets, while clutter in the core professional activity, with demotivation and emotional mess, that become often companions.

- For the students the effects are born in their relation with the type of educator described before, on one side, with the real world with its temptations and specificity of nowadays, on the other side. The new school climate has effects upon the students' results, with reaction from parents' side; these reactions are highly different and nuanced.

All these issues appear to be the reality; they are not openly shown but they are put in lyrics on internet or talked at a coffee, beyond the scene.

What it is to be done?

The answer is simple and complex in the same time. It is simple, because it can be put into a short wording: a genuine educational reform, implying a rational and effective curriculum reform, is strongly necessary.

The answer is also complex, because such a reform must have a very serious, consistent and coherent strategy, involving smart, adaptive, and effective tactic sequences. For each part, genuine professionals are requested, with adequate competencies for each level and for each moment. An appropriate financial and material support is a clear condition. No doubt that it is necessary an effective and efficient management of the general and specific plans of the curriculum reform design. Further, curriculum implementation in each school should be flexible but keeping the core requests of the National Curriculum and ensuring the development of effective competencies of students must be a reality. All these aspects and, especially their co-ordination, represent an extreme complex issue.

A series of articles published, were related to different part of the complex issues involved in this picture and others will be addressed in the future.

In this article I will refer to the issue of design lesson / activity in kindergartens. On this level, another "mermaid" that persists in education could be detected. It is about the related twinning, not always happy, between the old approaches, some obsolete, and the modern, sometimes for the modern sake, other times simply misunderstood.

Core ideas in lesson planning

I do not intend to open the Pandora's Box of the unfinished debate about the importance of objectives in planning. As long as planning means to build a strategy, it is necessary to give a consistent and functional answer to the following questions when it is about to design a learning situation for a very specific group of children/ students. (Table 1 and fig. 1)

Table 1 Questions and answers about the didactic strategy

Fig. 1 Lesson plan as a strategy

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
<p>1. Why is it necessary to design the learning situation and to establish what expected results are you going to wait from that specifically defined children?</p>	<p>Objectives formulated as expected results from a specific group of students They are usually structured on the components of competences: Knowledge: concepts, principle, rules, values, cognitive bases of capacities etc. (what/ cognitive objectives) Capacities with implied abilities (skills) that are to be practice using the previously mentioned knowledge and the already existing knowledge achieved by students (psihomotric and operational-cognitive objectives) Attitudes implied in the students participation at the educational activity (as vectors in evolution of their personality); these are emotional/attitudinal objectives</p>
<p>2. What is to be learned?</p>	<p>This is the CONTENT. It may belong to a single area of knowledge or may be a connection among more areas of knowledge (connected by methodology, when an inter-subject/interdisciplinary approach is taken into consideration or connected to a theme/ topic where are rendered more areas of knowledge all serving for the integrated approach of the theme). Sometimes the contents may belong to only one subject and a disciplinary approach is considered even if by methodology the discipline/ subject is put in service of competencies' achievement.</p>
<p>3. When and how long is to be implemented the learning situation into a learning activity based on the elaborated strategy expressed by the lesson plan?</p>	<p>The time of teaching and learning (as position and duration within the school program with connection to the free time of the students for further learning)</p>
<p>4. How is it appropriate to approach the content according to its specificity and the students' specific features in order to ensure the achievement of the expected results?</p>	<p>Teaching methodology, focused on students' learning Connected with the necessary material supports (textbooks, didactic materials and technical support for teaching)</p>
<p>5. How the process assessment and the final evaluation are designed in order to be consistent with the answers of all the other questions?</p>	<p>Assessment and evaluation methodology Specific methods and tools</p>

Steps of the design of the didactic strategy

Several clear and inter-related steps are to receive their answers according to the mentioned questions and some other connected issues.

1. The first one is the step of establishing the place of the designed learning situation (lesson plan) within the context of the set of the learning situations established by the yearly/ semester plans.

2. The second step is represented by the elaboration of the objectives. They derive from the goals and the upper aims expressed within the syllabi.

The design of the objectives is done based on the accepted taxonomies. Thus, there will be three core categories

COGNITIVE OBJECTIVES will specify the next aspects:

- **acquisition** (through *understanding and assimilation*) of general concepts, specific concepts, principles, laws, etc. followed by the accommodation of the previously acquired knowledge structures (even with their restructuring) in order to meet a task or a request

- **training** of:

- *cognitive capacities/abilities* (operational structures of thought)
- *capacities of using the processes of imagination*
- *capacities regarding the use of the logic steps*, within *inductive or deductive* strategies, depending on the age of students / eg argument, counter-argument, explaining in their own form of cognitive aspects etc;

- *capacity of memory*, mechanical memory with mnemonic processes imitated by students while they have been induced by the teacher at lower ages, logical memory also connected to the normal potential of every age)

- **consolidation, reorganization, synthesis of knowledge**

- **consolidation, reorganization, restructuring capacities** (use in different contexts)

PSYCHOMOTOR OBJECTIVES: knowledge, aptitudes and attitudes related to:

- development of *body scheme*

- fundamentals of *orientation in the physical and graphic space*

- fundamentals of *orientation in time*

- *general coordination and coordination of sequences*

- practicing and consolidating of the capacity of *orientation in physical and/ or graphics space and in time*

ATTITUDINAL AND EMOTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Emotional traits, constantly manifested, become fundamentals of the attitudes.

Attitudes of the students do not develop as little pieces, but as a continuous process resulted from the way of achieving of the other types of objectives

through the methodology of teaching and assessing. Therefore, the same attitudes are essentially approached in a whole set of lessons. They refer to :

- help the position of the student towards the learning process;
- attention to the lesson, active involvement, courage, curiosity for knowledge, doubt;
- desire to know.

The learning situation, designed by teacher, is transposed also by educator together with children into a teaching and learning activity; the learning activity may be used as a learning opportunity by the student *if the attitudes of the learners are supportive*. In this case the results of the student can be on higher levels.

Depending on the objectives and their using as a starting point, the lesson types should be established. The reason consists in the idea that the expected results from the students are the fundamentals and determinants of the lesson type.

Talking about curriculum centered on competencies, there are the competencies with their components or structural elements (knowledge, capacities/ abilities and attitudes based on values) to be followed by the lesson types, as long as these competencies are encapsulated in the objectives. This issue will be detailed in another paper.

The so called, *lesson scenario*, as a component of the lesson plan, should have a defined structured but not a fixed one. Each teacher may choose his or her own style in presenting this scenario as long as all the requested elements are obviously and logical expressed.

Basically the project, no matter what structure the scenario has, should contain all the components of learning situation (plus organizational issues), in fact all the answers of the previously mentioned questions, that lead to the synergistic final - the lesson strategy.

Thus, the structure of the table is not the most important issue, but its *internal logic*, the *consistency*, and *purpose of the columns* are essential. That is why, in my opinion, the old fashioned structure that presents two columns with the teacher's activity , respectively, the student's activity can be considered inappropriate and ineffective, because, most often, it involves problems in rationally filling this columns.

A possible structure of the scenario with some explanations is expressed by the following table.

Table 2. The structure of the lesson scenario

Lesson steps	Structuring on steps of the content or Content phased approach	Cods of objectives	Resources			Forms of organizing the learning process
			Procedural / or teaching methods	Material resources / or Materials and teaching	Time resources	

1	2	3	4	aids 5	6	7
	Here are to be listed the interventions of the educator following the logic of browsing the selected contents in order to achieve the objectives. This is where the logic of science must be combined with the teaching logic, the latter generated by correlating contents with the specific child's age, and with the place of the specific content in the structure of the discipline (start approach, deepening, synthesizing etc.)	They must correlate with each content item and be matched with the resources allocated. The column must show all the designed objectives at least one time				

The planning of the activities in pre-school education has its specificity. The number of the activities, under the umbrella of the mentioned themes in curriculum, focused on *experiential fields* and *areas of development* of child as a whole, is so bushy that the designing process is difficult in itself. More than this, the specific integrated approach, requested, but not entirely understood, determines an extremely laborious designing process.

Usually, the time allocated for this aspect of designing the plan for activities covers unacceptably amount of time within the labor time of the educator. This is the source of perverse effects upon the real activity with the children.

I do believe that for the day to day activities in pre-school and in primary education the lesson/ activities plans should have the form of a *functional draft*. What is genuinely important is what the educator *has in his/ her mind when the activity starts*. The planning is a mind activity, a product of thinking. Unfortunately, it appears that nowadays it turned into a product of the writing activity. Something should be changed if we want to avoid the boredom versus our professional activity, the sadness and the feeling of futility.

I want to put as a final of this paper an aphoristic definition of Paul Louis Lampert: *Boredom is the penalty for the crime of uselessness*.

Reflecting on this aphorism a passionate, rational and dignified educator will know that for he/him the penalty of crime is not a threat. This for the simple reason that, doing well the professional activity this type of educator never chose to obey for doing futile things; this educator chooses the alternative of genuine utility, which is the constant source of his/ her lack of boredom.

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