

Robert Marzano Sets the Record Straight

In this feisty *Kappan* article, author/researcher Robert Marzano pushes back on what he believes are three distortions of his work in schools:

- *Focusing on a narrow range of strategies* – Many teachers have told him that their districts limit themselves to nine teaching strategies described in one of his books (identifying similarities and differences; summarizing and note-taking; reinforcing effort and providing recognition; homework and practice; nonlinguistic recommendations; cooperative learning; setting objectives and providing feedback; generating and testing hypotheses; and cues, questions, and advance organizers). This is poor practice, says Marzano. “Unfortunately,” he writes, “in many schools and districts, walkthroughs have devolved into terse, formulaic feedback to teachers.” He believes that effective teaching is complex and contextual. The nine strategies, along with others recommended in his books, are *high-probability* approaches, but they aren’t a perfect fit in every situation. Better to start with a comprehensive list of 41 teaching strategies (see below) and decide which are the best match for each situation.

- *Assuming that certain strategies must be used in every class* – It distresses Marzano that some districts use the same narrow checklist to evaluate many different types of instructional settings and criticize teachers for not using the strategies in every lesson. “A specific instructional strategy is effective only when used in the specific situation for which it was designed,” he says. Summarizing and note-taking, for example, is good when introducing new content but makes no sense in a lesson with cognitively complex tasks that require students to generate and test hypotheses. When administrators make short classroom visits, they should ask themselves, “What am I observing right now?” It could be routine activities (at the beginning and end of a class, for example). It could be the introduction of new content or practicing and deepening content that was previously introduced. It might be relationship-building with students. Or it might be a situation that demands a quick, on-the-spot reaction from the teacher (for example, a disciplinary challenge from a student). Administrators have to tune in to what is happening and adjust their feedback accordingly.

- *Assuming that high-yield strategies will always be effective* – Marzano says he stopped using the term “high-yield” ten years ago because the classroom strategies he and other researchers have identified don’t always work. Even the best have zero impact or negative impact 20-40 percent of the time. “If a strategy doesn’t appear to be working well,” he says, “educators must adapt the strategy as needed or use other strategies.” No teacher should be required to use specific strategies, he says. “Since none are guaranteed to work, teachers must have the freedom and flexibility to adapt or try something different when student learning isn’t forthcoming.”

Given these cautions, what does Marzano suggest? First, that districts and schools develop a common language of instruction that is comprehensive and robust and encompasses three areas: content lessons, routines, and things that occur in classrooms that must be addressed

on the spot. Second, that this common language forms the basis of discussion and feedback with teachers after classroom visits. Those who observe classrooms (hopefully including teachers who take part in “learning walks” or “instructional rounds”) should debrief with each other and gain insights about their own practice as well as sharing their impressions with those they observe.

And third, that student learning is the ultimate test of classroom strategies. This means teachers need to give high-quality interim assessments to figure out what’s working and what isn’t and following up with struggling students. (In addition to interim assessments, a surprisingly effective way to judge the effects of teaching is asking students how much they have learned in a given lesson or unit.) “In terms of providing teachers with feedback,” concludes Marzano, “the focus must always be on student learning and the perspective must always be that instructional strategies are a means to an end. Checklist approaches to providing feedback to teachers probably don’t enhance pedagogical expertise, particularly when they focus on a narrow list of instructional, management, or assessment strategies. In fact, such practice is antithetical to true reflective practice... [and] is profoundly anti-professional.”

Here is Marzano’s comprehensive list of 41 strategies that relate to effective teaching, drawn from his four books:

I. CONTENT

- A. Lessons involving new content
 - Identifying critical information
 - Organizing students to interact with new knowledge
 - Previewing new content
 - Chunking content into “digestible bites”
 - Group processing of new information
 - Elaborating on new information
 - Recording and representing knowledge
 - Reflecting on learning
- B. Lessons involving practicing and deepening content that has been previously addressed
 - Reviewing content
 - Organizing students to practice and deepen knowledge
 - Practicing skills, strategies, and processes
 - Examining similarities and differences
 - Examining errors in reasoning
 - Using homework
 - Revising knowledge
- C. Lessons involving cognitively complex tasks (generating and testing hypotheses)
 - Organizing students for cognitively complex tasks
 - Engaging students in cognitively complex tasks
 - Providing resources and guidance

II. ROUTINE ACTIVITIES

D. Communicating learning goals, tracking student progress, and celebrating success

- Providing clear learning goals and scales to measure those goals
- Tracking student progress
- Celebrating student success

E. Establishing and maintaining classroom rules and procedures

- Establishing classroom routines
- Organizing the physical layout of the classroom for learning

III. BEHAVIORS THAT ARE ENACTED ON THE SPOT AS SITUATIONS OCCUR

F. Engaging Students

- Noticing and reacting when students are not engaged
- Using academic games
- Managing response rates during questioning
- Using physical movement
- Maintaining a lively pace
- Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm
- Using friendly controversy
- Providing opportunities for students to talk about themselves
- Presenting unusual information

G. Recognizing adherence and lack of adherence to classroom rules and procedures

- Demonstrating “with-it-ness”
- Applying consequences
- Acknowledging adherence to rules and procedures

H. Maintaining effective relationships with students

- Understanding students’ interests and backgrounds
- Using behaviors that indicate affection for students
- Displaying objectivity and control

I. Communicating high expectations

- Demonstrating value and respect for low-expectancy students
- Asking questions of low-expectancy students
- Probing incorrect answers with low-expectancy students

“Setting the Record Straight on ‘High-Yield’ Strategies” by Robert Marzano in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2009 (Vol. 91, #1, p. 30-37); this article is available for purchase at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/index.htm>