Powerful Design: Active guided teaching to develop competent independent learners

Powerful design pays close attention to instruction. Sound instructional methods meet and are responsive to both the unit aims and the student needs. According to Hattie (2009, p. 243) “active and guided instruction is much more effective than unguided, facilitative instruction.”

Why
The design of such instruction starts from the endpoint: What you want your students to have achieved by the end of each lesson, and by the end of the unit. The design then actively builds and guides students’ developing knowledge and skills over the course of the session. In so doing, it also develops their competence and confidence to learn independently.

How
Plan instruction to include strategies and methods found to make a difference to student learning. Aim to actively teach, monitor, and guide learning.

Actively teach for understanding
1. Set the scene
Set the scene at the start of each lesson. Situate the learning within the broader theoretical context, the unit as a whole, and the lesson. A powerful strategy is to use a concept map showing how the concepts in the current lesson fit within the overall conceptual scheme or framework of the unit. This also becomes a useful tool for explaining how the lesson links to previous material and how it links to future material.

2. Directly and explicitly teach
Directly and explicitly teach the content and skills of your unit. Some powerful approaches include:
- using a mastery approach where content is broken into small units of learning and built sequentially
- conducting demonstrations
- working through examples and exercises (Hattie, 2009, 2012).
Also explicitly teach how to learn and think in your discipline and unit. Some powerful approaches include:

- teaching students specific questions to ask themselves that will help focus and direct their thinking in your activities and tasks (Paul & Elder, 2001; Polya, 1957; Vardi, 2013a), and
- demonstrating how to solve discipline specific problems and how to analyse in your subject.

Explicitly teach your students about your assessment tasks. Explain:

- how to go about the task
- where to get relevant information
- your rubrics or other marking criteria
- how to achieve the standards set, and
- how the exemplary models you have provided meet the highest standards (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008; Vardi, 2013b).

3. Create links

Deep understanding of a subject includes seeing the links between different pieces of the puzzle. Help students to see these links by linking information back to their experiences, prior knowledge, and previous material covered in both your unit and the course overall. Also link forward to what they will all be doing next in the lesson, in the unit, in the course, and in their professional lives.

4. Sum up

End lessons by addressing any gaps or misunderstandings in students’ knowledge or skills. Draw together the important take home messages for the students. Link back to the class activities and what the students said and did. Also link forward to what is coming next in the curriculum and what the students need to do to progress their learning.

Actively monitor learning

No matter how much you demonstrate, say, write and explain things, students understand in different ways. Include various strategies to actively monitor your students’ learning.

1. Observe and listen

Start by designing into your lesson plan, many opportunities to observe and listen to the students. These opportunities enable teachers to check for understanding, to look into the students’ developing skills and knowledge of what they understand, what they misunderstood, and what they are still working out.
2. **Probe and question**

Sometimes, observation alone is not enough. Probing students’ knowledge allows teachers to see more clearly where the students are at. Organise activities for teachers to work with individuals and small groups.

Probe and question:

- the students’ understanding, for example
  
  “Can you give an example or analogy of what you mean?”
  
  “What is the meaning or significance of this data?”

- how the students moved from point A to point B, for example
  
  “Tell me about the steps you took”
  
  “What are you basing your thinking on?”

- what students are basing their impressions, opinions, and conclusions on, for example
  
  “What evidence are you basing this on?”
  
  “Can you explain your reasons?”

Sometimes it can be useful to ask students to think aloud and talk through their thoughts while working through an exercise that they are finding particularly difficult or are becoming stuck on.

Observing, probing, and questioning techniques are the basis for actively guiding learning:

**Actively guide learning**

Actively guide learning to help steer students in the right direction. Intervene where students need redirection, and help them to recalibrate or refocus their attention, understandings, and/or effort. Vardi (2012) lists the following as the most effective forms of in-class feedback for guiding student learning.

1. **Verify**

   It is very important to let students know when they are on the right track. Depending upon the situation, it may also be important to explain what makes the answer right, or which part of what they are doing or thinking is correct. Some examples:

   “Yes, that is correct. The model does allow for …”
   
   “That’s a good way to proceed”.

2. **Correct**

   It is also very important to correct students when they are veering off the path. For example:

   “The first two steps in the sequence are good, but the third needs …”

   Take care not to overcorrect or to correct too many details at once. Some skills and understandings develop over time with exposure and practice. Correct the most important details. If students are
really not getting it, then go back to the start. Re-teaching may be a better strategy in this type of situation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

3. Evaluate

There are times when it is worth evaluating the quality or depth of the students’ thinking, and helping them with direction on how to delve deeper. For example:

“You have summarised the case well. Now to analyse this situation, you need to …”

4. Reformulating

Often students have interpreted experiences or readings from within a particular framework, viewpoint, or position. Reframe and reinterpret their ideas. For example:

“Yes, this is an example of the X principle in action …”

5. Prompt

Sometimes you can give students a clue or prompt that helps to improve their thinking or to come to the answer on their own. For example:

“Now use the next step in the X sequence … what do you get now?”

Take care not to overuse this technique as this can lead to frustration and disengagement.

6. Extend

Extend students’ ideas and build on them further. For example:

“You’re right. Now if we take that and … Then …”

In summary

Actively teaching, monitoring, and guiding student learning makes for a powerful learning experience. It develops a deeper understanding of your subject matter, and increases students’ competence. It also builds independence and confidence as students learn how to achieve in your subject. Plan for and train your teaching staff in these powerful active guided teaching strategies which can help make a difference to your students’ achievement.

Find out more


