Beginning With the End in Mind

Katrina Zimmerman is a science and technology teacher at Turrentine Middle School in Burlington, North Carolina. Zimmerman spearheads STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) at her school and is creating a whole new curriculum for it. She began using the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) strategies in February 2015, adding it as a curriculum tool for her classroom.

Right from the start, LDC had a profound effect on how Zimmerman planned her classes. She recognized this when planning which skills her students would need to master her course. “LDC has helped me to be more thorough in breaking down teaching skills for my students. I break lesson plans into more digestible parts, and I am more cognizant about teaching my students the skills required to do what I’m asking them to do,” says Zimmerman.

“For example, even though my sixth-grade students, during the first nine weeks, were academically behind my last class of sixth-graders, they were able to construct the more efficient solar ovens,” Zimmerman says. “I believe this was because I scaffolded more in-depth and intentionally took more time to help them with their synthesizing skills.”

During LDC training, Zimmerman collaborated with peers across her district of Alamance-Burlington and in Rowan-Salisbury. “Having so many teachers learning the same process has been very helpful. Plus, the online interface is so easy to handle, so I can easily see what other teachers have done and use what they’ve already created. Not only that, I’m able to get feedback to help me improve my modules. It’s the next best thing to having a peer in the classroom with you!” After she began teaching her first module, she saw an immediate reaction in both student engagement and how the students learned.

Envisioning the End Product

Zimmerman immediately saw the impact of LDC on student engagement when teaching her first LDC module, particularly the importance of beginning with the end in mind. “It is truly helpful for them to know the end product and the goal they are working toward. I love problem-driven instruction because it gives students a purpose. When they know why they’re doing something, they are much more likely to be engaged.

“Students find it disheartening when they are taught information with no idea of why they are learning it. Give them a goal, however, and you get to watch everything click into place,” she says. Once they understand where the learning process is going and why certain skills are necessary, Zimmerman’s students become immediately invested in the course content.
These strategies also accent student learning in her STEM class. Given the hands-on nature of STEM, it is always more student centered than most other classes. Zimmerman believes that LDC takes this even farther “…because they are beginning with the end in mind, they know the information they have to collect to achieve their goal. Then, once they find the information, they have a way to immediately apply it.” She says LDC helps students not only be student-centered but also takes their knowledge to a higher level. This fundamentally changes how students learn by putting the work in their hands and giving them that responsibility. LDC training and strategies give her access to myriad instructional strategies that she uses to support students while they work.

**Instant gratification**

Turrentine Middle School has adopted a school literacy plan that encourages teachers to use the same strategies in all classes to promote consistent analysis of student skills. Close reading and Cornell Notes are the two major strategies used, and both pair effectively with LDC. Zimmerman finds these effective because, “…these strategies help students break texts down into easy-to-digest chunks ... and then they immediately use them on all of the products we create throughout the module. Instant gratification is something that definitely helps students see the benefit of using strategies they are inclined to dislike.”

With students’ buy in, the LDC module helped Zimmerman’s class produce quality work.

After going through the process of reading and writing with effective instructional strategies, “Students produce better writing. The instructions they write for projects has become more cohesive, as well.”

LDC is a success story in Zimmerman’s STEM class. Effective planning that identifies key skills, combined with in-depth student engagement and student-centered learning, results in writing that surpasses past efforts. She continues to utilize LDC in her classroom because she sees the impact it has, especially in students’ content knowledge. “I can tell that LDC is effective because my students remember the information better. After having to slog through all the research and pre-planning and organizing and the actual writing, they know their content backward and forward,” she says.

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