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Lesson Plans: Learning From Our Mistakes

Arnold Pulda

Doherty Memorial High School & Middle School Worcester, Massachusetts



Don't you hate it when someone comes up with a cute acronym for something when a word-by-word description of the idea would be much more effective? Well, sorry, but I have three acronyms for you that apply to the theme of "What Not to Do When Creating a Lesson Plan." These are: KISS (an oldie but goodie), ONES, and DRUDGE. No, these are not meant to be put together in sentence form to suggest something improper; each represents, rather, a basic principle that I have learned and advocate in regard to this process of lesson-plan "Don'ts." KISS means, of course, Keep It Simple, Stupid - but we alter it slightly to end it with Sweetheart, instead. ONES tells us: Only Not Excessively Simple. DRUDGE reminds us: Don't Ruin it Under Dreary Garbage, Either.

"...it seems to me that there is no One Way to design, write, and execute a lesson plan for students using the internet for research and reporting."

This article is not meant to be a comprehensive how-to on How to Create a Lesson Plan for the computer room. I doubt that such an authoritative tutorial exists, or if there is one, I would appreciate it if someone would point me to it. I have even stronger doubts, however, if such an article (or book, or encyclopedia, even) could exist, for the subject matter is still so new, not much more than five years old, yet at the same time so broad. It would be like writing an article on How To Teach (Electronically). What teacher or educational theorist would even presume to tackle such a subject? Any teacher knows that there is no One Way to teach. Likewise, it seems to me that there is no One Way to design, write, and execute a lesson plan for students using the internet for research and reporting. Moreover, creating and using these things is a learning process: the good teacher learns from his/her mistakes, and gets better at it as he/she goes along. Finally, I will concentrate mainly on the structure of the lesson plan here, the bigger picture: egregious errors, important features left out or poorly utilized, and the like. This is not to imply that the core content of the activity - the questions, listed under Activities/Procedure, considered both individually and collectively -- is beyond analysis or criticism. But the step-by-step building of a lesson plan is the subject for another article. What I want to show here, instead, is one piece of the larger puzzle, an online lesson that did not work. I will analyze that lesson plan and draw some conclusions as to why it failed in its objectives; by doing this I hope to help other teachers avoid some of the same mistakes.

Let's take a look at the lesson plan in question. It is at <http://www.doctorgus.net/lessons/alexander.htm>. It is probably best here to open it in a new window so we can look at the poor thing while referring back to my comments on it: first copy the url above, then go to File, New, and Window, then Paste the url in the Address box of that new window. Now let's look at it and number its major defects:

1. The first thing that stands out, as I look at it now - and as my victim-students looked at it -- is the long list of vocabulary words that the students were required to look up. Thirty-one words. I teach in both high school and middle school, and this lesson plan was designed for students at both levels; I felt that most students were unlikely to be familiar with these terms used in the source site at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/7545/Alexander.html>. So I asked them to look them up, using the reference-dictionary sites shown. Doing so violates the KISS rule, adding unnecessary complication and complexity to something

that did not require either; it also violates the DRUDGE rule: the list of vocabulary words is certainly Dreary Garbage. Let's be specific:



image: <http://www.allfree-clipart.com/>

I drew the focus of the lesson immediately from its content and supposed objectives (more about those in a minute) to vocabulary. What was intended to be a teaching and learning exercise about a significant historical figure quickly became an exercise in looking up words.

It was boring, plain and simple, to walk through the process of defining 31 words. I had chosen a fine web site, vibrant and informative, but had managed to make it leaden and lifeless by requiring students to define a bunch of terms.

If I had deemed the site to be overly laden with words that students needed to look up, then I should have chosen another source; there is no dearth of information about the subject out on the web. You can't really have it both ways here: either the web site is good or it isn't. In this case, I think it's a good source, if a bit challenging. But my rule (then, as now) is: better challenging than a pushover; better to make the students reach out for understanding, and that includes vocabulary as well as concepts. This recalls ONES, above.

The KISS and ONES rules seem to conflict, to want to stake out both ends of the idea of simplicity, and, as we've seen already above, you can't have it both ways. But you can here, because Keeping It Simple applies to the teacher, and ONES is for the students. Writing lesson plans is a difficult enough task for the teacher even at its most basic level - one idea, one resource (web site), one document, one assignment, one set of related questions. Why make it more difficult, more complex? My advice here is to keep it at that level and write your lesson plans just so. Don't go mixing in multiple resources, several web sites, and dozens of questions. This is like the old saw about trying to teach a pig how to sing: don't do it, because the pig won't like it, and it won't work, anyway. If I may be kind of fast and loose with my imagery here, likewise the students won't like the complex lesson plan, they won't perform well using it, and they won't learn much, if anything, from it. So the teacher will be unhappy, too.

"They were bored by it - especially burdened with the vocabulary part - and they were not challenged by it."

How did I know that the lesson plan was a failure? Easy: the students told me so, in no uncertain terms. They were bored by it - especially burdened with the vocabulary part - and they were not challenged by it. As a matter of course I solicit student feedback, both oral and written, on the activity, but I did not need to listen to or read those reactions to realize that the lesson plan was a failure: it was clear from the written responses to the questions. These answers were relatively flat and unimaginative; students showed little interest, due in part to the drudgery of the vocabulary section, in a subject that should have been fascinating and engaging.

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Let's move on. We're not done with this lesson plan yet.

2. The next obvious problem here is the lack of important elements. There are many good templates out there for a teacher to use; keeping with the KISS rule, she should find a suitable one and use it. For instance, the New York Times publishes a lesson plan every day, and uses a good format; take a look at any one at the Lesson Plan Archive there: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/archive.html>. The teacher will find dozens of excellent lesson plans there, each following the same design, which includes grade level, subject, overview, suggested time allowance, objectives, resources/materials, activities/procedures, wrap-up, further questions for discussion, evaluation/assessment, vocabulary, extension activities, interdisciplinary connections, related articles, additional online information, and connections to national and state standards. This may seem like a long and burdensome list, but look it over and you will see that there is nothing that can be deleted. A thorough lesson plan using conventional sources will include the same features; why should an online learning activity be any less thorough or challenging?

"There are many good templates out there for a teacher to use; keeping with the KISS rule..."

The lesson plan that we are analyzing includes some of the requisite features of a complete activity but leaves out many, as well. Well, here's the new lesson plan; take a look at it and see if you like the changes:http://www.doctorgus.net/lessons/alexandernew_and_improved.htm. I know that I am prejudiced, but I like the new version. It has both learning power and lasting power. It is a complete lesson plan now. It seems to me that the revised version complies with the Don'ts that I have discussed: it is not unnecessarily complicated, it is not boring or tendentious, and most importantly, it seems to me that it challenges students to do critical thinking, to reach out for not only the information contained in the sites provided, but for information that they will find and analyze on their own, also, posing their own questions. I think that the new version reflects good changes that are the result of learning from my own mistakes.

"I intend to use the new version in the fall with next year's classes."

I intend to use the new version in the fall with next year's classes. I encourage other teachers to give it a try, also, and to let me know how it goes with their students. Sometimes we tend to forget who the ultimate consumers of this work are: it is the students, of course. These lesson plans do not exist in some kind of vacuum, like artwork hanging on the walls of a museum. This stuff is meant to be used - and abused, and critiqued, and improved. In this article I have demonstrated one instance of one failure of one teacher with his classes; I would appreciate sharing with and hearing from other teachers - successes, hopefully.

About the Author:

Arnold Pulda has taught Social Studies at Doherty Memorial High School and Middle School in Worcester, MA, for eight years. Currently he is the Director of Gifted and Talented student programs for the Worcester Public Schools. He received his Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1977. He has been using the Internet in his classroom since 1993. He has led many workshops and made many presentations on how to use the Internet in education. He is a Fellow of the Library of Congress and served as a Facilitator for the Library's Institute for Educators this summer. His website is www.doctorgus.net. He can be reached at doctrigus@massed.net and would welcome comments on this article from other teachers.

Resources and notes:

There are many places to go to start building your own lesson plans. I have cited the New York Times format above; it is as good as any. For a different approach, get your students acclimated to analyzing primary sources of all types; document analysis worksheets are at the excellent site of the National

Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/analysis/analysis.html>. American Memory, at the Library of Congress site (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/media.html>) also offers media analysis tools that will help your students use and create their own document-based questions. There is also a "Lesson Framework" on the site (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/media.html>), but it is not for beginners. Filamentality (<http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/>) offers yet another approach: a step-by-step guide to building a lesson plan from scratch. As it says on the web site, "Is Filamentality Easy to Use? Does cream cheese come from Philadelphia?" A good example of lesson-plan structure can be seen at E-Tutor, <http://www.e-tutor.com/demo/lessons/1/index.htm>; for a fee the site will provide you with tools to build lesson plans. PBS is also a wonderful classroom online resource, with many ready-to-go lesson plans at <http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/teachtech/ideaswebbased.shtm>; there is no how-to tutorial there, however. The same is true for "Education World" (http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/archives/), TeachersFirst (<http://www.teachersfirst.com/matrix.htm>), The Lesson Bank (<http://www.teachersfirst.com/matrix.htm>) at \$18.00 per, "A to Z Teacher Stuff" (<http://atozteacherstuff.com/lessonplans/>), Microsoft's Encarta site (<http://encarta.msn.com/schoolhouse/default.asp>), and TeacherVision (<http://www.teacher-vision.com/tv/curriculum/lessonplans/index.html>). My advice again is KISS: find a couple of lesson plan indexes that you like, bookmark them on your browser, and use a few of them as you go through the school year. You will find, however, that you will want to customize even the best of the "canned" lesson plans to suit your students and your curriculum, and that's where my advice of how to avoid mistakes in that process might come in handy.

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