An Online Resource for Improving Instructional Practice

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Abstract

Effective teachers are continually looking for engaging teaching strategies, but both new and experienced teachers can feel overwhelmed by the plethora of theories and strategies available to them. The website, K-12Toolbox.org, contains a series of research-based guiding questions coupled with targeted videos, articles, and resources for improving instructional practice. The K-12toolbox.org site will provide easily accessible support for teachers and administrators as they work together to provide classroom lessons that mirror best practice and engage students.

Introduction/Background

When a district hires a teacher, one of its many responsibilities is to provide resources, professional learning opportunities, and peer support to ensure that the teacher will be fully prepared to engage and inspire students in the classroom (Liesveld, 2005). New and experienced teachers, alike, need the tools to create engaging lessons, a grasp of the best teaching strategies common to all successful teachers, and the ability to understand what separates good teaching from bad (Robinson, 2009).

In 2010, state funding cuts to Kansas schools began to coincide with the advent of the College and Career Ready Standards (the Kansas version of the national Common Core Standards). These new standards were going to change instructional practice, not just in Kansas, but across the nation. The new standards brought increased instructional demands for classroom teachers and contributed to the call for change in instructional practice.

Over a period of several months, determined educators collaborated to create a research-based set of strategies, a K-12 Toolbox, providing teachers with replicable and evidence-based approaches for improving instruction (SASS, 2008). With an assortment of guiding questions, teachers could have at their fingertips a Toolbox of best practice approaches designed to showcase their students' untapped learning potential. The guiding questions encouraged rich conversations for professional learning

communities as well as for one-on-one teacher dialogue, inspiring both new and seasoned teachers to reflect on lessons and activities that lead students to higher order thinking and meaningful learning.

Process

The procedure for creating the K-12 Toolbox started with a vision for improving instruction even in times of financial stress. This work coincided with the adoption of the Kansas College and Career Standards, which provided educators with a rich opportunity to re-examine instructional practices across grade levels and content areas.

The Toolbox designers reviewed Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Professional Practice ("Danielson >> The Framework", 2011), Robert Marzano's Framework of Effective Instruction (Marzano, 2007), the Insight Core Framework from Insight Education Group (Group, 2016), and the Baltimore City Public Schools' Instructional Framework (2011). After lengthy dialogue about each model or component, the brainstorming and creation of initial drafts of the Toolbox began.

The guiding questions were placed within one of the following three categories: Planning, Teaching, and Reflecting (Baltimore City Framework, 2011). Within these three categories, each individual question was subsequently placed with one of the Five Rs: Relationships, Relevance, Responsive Culture, Rigor, and Results, which constitute the new Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) (KESA Educational Framework, 2016) framework for the five-year accreditation process. Classification of the guiding questions into three categories and further alignment of the questions with the KESA Five Rs (KESA Educational Framework, 2016), allows a teacher or instructional support facilitator to hone in on a specific area for improvement. By simply clicking on one of the website's guiding questions, educators can instantly access targeted videos, articles, and resources for each of the Toolbox's guiding questions.

The K-12 Toolbox

Effective teachers are continually looking for engaging teaching strategies, but both new and experienced teachers can feel overwhelmed by the plethora of theories and strategies available to them. First attempts to use a new teaching strategy require support if there is to be a chance for the new strategy to become a part of a teacher's repertoire (Green, 2014).

K-12Toolbox.org provides the critical support that can allow teachers to continue their professional learning over time. It is an aid to help an individual teacher, but is also designed to serve as a catalyst for collaboration and the sharing of proven strategies.

The three components of the K-12 Toolbox (Appendix A) are Planning, Teaching, and Reflecting. A spiral approach is intended. A thorough and thoughtful reflection about the classroom instruction leads back to careful planning and the spiraling continues with the next lesson taught. When a visitor to the site clicks on one of the guiding questions, relevant videos, articles, or other resources are immediately accessible.

Planning

What do I expect my students to learn?

Planning ensures greater success of the lesson. Planning clarifies goals and provides steps to achieve the goals. Careful lesson design and structured planning are absolutely necessary to meet the individual needs of students.

Relationships
    P1. Have I chosen instructional strategies according to how each student learns?
    P2. Am I reaching out to my colleagues for ideas?
Relevance
    P3. Is the lesson content relevant?
    P4. How will I use technology to engage students and help them learn?
Responsive Culture
    P5. Does my classroom environment promote curiosity and creativity?
    P6. Does the classroom environment promote independence and self-directed learning?
    P7. How have I planned for active learning?
    P8. How will I establish classroom routines and smooth transitions to maximize learning time?
Rigor
    P9. Is the lesson challenging and engaging?
    P10. How will the lesson connect different subject areas?
Results
    P11. Have I built flexibility into the lesson so I meet the needs of a variety of learners?
    P12. How can I help students set personal learning goals?

Teaching

How will I know they are learning?

Quality teaching requires knowledge of the subjects to be taught, of the skills to be developed, and of the curriculum and materials that organize and embody that content. Teachers must possess the skills, capacities and dispositions to employ such knowledge wisely in the interest of students.

<u>Relationships</u>
    T1. Do I create a positive, caring classroom environment for my students?
    T2. Do my students feel respected even when redirected or disciplined?

<u>Relevance</u>
    T3. Do my students understand how the lesson relates to everyday life?
    T4. Do my instructional strategies, tools, tasks, and activities engage my students?

<u>Responsive Culture</u>
    T5. Do my students know that taking risks or making mistakes is an important part of learning?
    T6. Do my students take ownership for their own progress by setting and tracking learning goals?
    T7. Do I have my students work in pairs, groups, teams, and individually?
    T8. Do my students have ample opportunities to explore their creativity?

<u>Rigor</u>
    T9. Do my students support their answers with evidence?
   T10. Do my students have the tools and building blocks to be successful as they move to more challenging content?

<u>Results</u>
   T11. Are my students understanding the lesson content?

REFLECTING
How will I respond if they don't learn?
How will I respond if they already know it?

John Dewey said, "We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience." The questions below allow teachers to think critically about how to change future classes for the better.

Relationships
R1. Am I conferencing with each student regularly?
R2. Am I keeping parents informed?

Relevance
R3. Was the lesson relevant?

Responsive Culture
R4. How can I regularly celebrate student learning?
R5. Do my questions and assignments inspire my students to be curious learners?

Rigor
R6. Was I prepared with resources and supporting materials when presenting the lesson?
R7. Am I creating a culture of learning?

Results
R8. What data do I have to indicate whether or not the students understood the lesson content?
R9. Are there skills or concepts that need to be retaught?
R10. Did I give students immediate feedback on their progress?
R11. How do the students feel they are doing?

Application

The K-12 Toolbox was not created for the purpose of evaluating teachers. The Toolbox is designed to be formative in nature, providing teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators with a non-threatening and user-friendly instrument for the improvement of classroom instruction. Teachers, instructional coaches, and principals can use the guiding questions to focus on areas in need of improvement.

Since the launch of the K-12Toolbox.org website last October, feedback from teachers and administrators has been very positive. The K-12Toolbox.org website was designed with input from a range of teachers, principals, instructional designers, and educational consultants. The K-12toolbox.org site provides easily accessible support for teachers and administrators as they work together to provide classroom lessons that mirror best practice and engage students.

Summary

Designed as a practical and user-friendly website for instructional best practice, K-12Toolbox.org is a user-friendly guide for instructional delivery in the classroom. By simply clicking on a question, educators can instantly access targeted videos, articles, and resources for each of the Toolbox's guiding questions. This innovation provides easily accessible support for teachers seeking proven instructional strategies.

Nothing we do as educators is more important than having a quality teacher, armed with best practice instructional strategies, standing in front of every classroom. Donald O. Clifton, former Gallup Chairman, may have said it best, "Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being" (Clifton, 2014).

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