

# Streamlined Lesson Planning for Learner Engagement - ASCD

11-14 minutes

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In design parlance, streamlining means *to modernize and simplify*: to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and visual appeal. Streamlining is not just paring back; it is making a process or product better. The pandemic cast a glaring spotlight on an education problem that has existed for years: Curriculum and lesson plans desperately need streamlining, both in terms of content and format. We can no longer be driven by a relentless instructional pace that values coverage over learner engagement. This problem is compounded by the demands on teachers to fill out planning templates that are often tedious and one step removed from writing for the desired audience: the students.

Many schools' current approach to lesson planning, whether synchronous or asynchronous, can be a roadblock to student motivation. Learners at every age should be able to decipher with ease the tasks and activities teachers plan for them. If the task isn't clear and compelling, it curbs engagement. At the secondary level, it is difficult to motivate students when they are overwhelmed with a tsunami of daily assignments written in multiple styles from seven different teachers, no matter how interesting the tasks themselves might be.

## The Jolt of COVID-19

As education consultants, we have been promoting a focus on what is essential in lesson planning for years. *Streamlining* emerged as the apt term during COVID-19. The impetus for our initial work in this area came in March of 2020, at the request of the New Haven Public School Magnet Division in Connecticut. The school was seeking a timely response to the abrupt shift to remote learning, and the program director asked a key question:

How will we be able to communicate with the kids and the parents who will struggle with following the list of tasks, activities, and resources in the curriculum? Our teachers are asking for a simplified curricular approach in *manageable chunks* for lesson planning.

Certainly, educators across the globe can identify with the director's concerns. From the early period of the pandemic through the constantly shifting demands of the 2020–21 school year, teacher and family efforts were remarkable, but the demands were incredibly challenging. Teachers with the best of intentions were sending home packed activity schedules written in a wide range of idiosyncratic styles that were difficult for families to decipher. In April 2020, we interviewed the primary and secondary principals of Hong Kong International School, who noted that when their school went into lockdown during the Hong Kong riots in November 2019, they immediately saw how important it was to write lesson plans that spoke directly to parents and students. They were right: It is crucial that our choice of language and approach in the communication of planned learning experiences shift directly to a student and family audience.

Before the pandemic, the goal of writing lesson plans and tasks—in teacher-facing language—was to communicate the general teaching approach to school personnel. These shorthand sketches were not intended for a broader audience. What crystallized for us this past year was that if we believe that students should be *stakeholders* and *partners* in learning, then they also must be the audience in our learning designs.

To better account for this, we developed a new planning approach that streamlines the format of curriculum and lesson design: *Learning sets*, which communicate directly with students and their families to capture the story of

the learning design.

**If we believe that students should be stakeholders and partners in learning, then they also must be the audience in our learning designs.**



## Learning Sets Streamline Curricula

Learning sets are an easy-to-follow series of connected learning experiences we call *episodes*, written in a narrative style. Learning sets consolidate critical elements of a unit plan, using a more granular daily approach, into a streamlined format. They are designed to be visually engaging and easy to navigate through their use of language, style, and iconography.

To create consistency and focus in learning sets, we use a grid organized around three student-facing action prompts: *engage*, *examine*, and *demonstrate*. These prompts direct learners to purposeful action. Learning sets can work in any planning approach, and educators can adapt them to a specific learner management system or Google Classroom. If school leaders encourage use of this format to provide ease of communication, students and their families will benefit.

A small team of teacher leaders from Vista High School in California were excited to test out our prototype. We shared the icons, learning set features, and visual format to support their curriculum design. Figure 1 illustrates an excerpt from an English learning set from Vista High School in California.

Jody, one of the English teachers who designed this set, reflected:

The previous lesson planning template we had used was time-consuming with lots of boxes to be checked (literally), which did not meet our needs. The new template's value is in its organizational structure, especially with the various progressions built into the unit plan. As we worked with the template, we were able to see clearly where our units needed more development or differentiation. The icons served to visualize where we were not providing enough personalization or differentiation and were helpful in guiding students through the lesson. Students appreciated the template's organization and the clear statement of essential questions, expected outcomes, and formative and summative assessments.

## Key Components of a Learning Set

Each learning set follows the same format but can be modified for individual situations, with targeted actions to

engage, examine, and demonstrate learning with corresponding tools, tasks, and resources. The following components are ones we believe to be essential:

**A compelling storyline.** *What am I inviting the student to engage in? How am I clarifying that upfront? Am I writing directly to students and parents as my audience?*

Unit and lesson planning provides an organizational frame for teachers. With the relentless demand of laying out sequences and supporting resources, a teacher's energy can be sapped and they can lose the focus on framing learning directly and deliberately for their target audience—students and their families. A basic writing tenet is that the author needs to "hook and hold" a target audience; to do this, the deliberate use of language, tone, and context matters. Modeling classic backwards design, start with an essential question, overarching goal, and overview to frame the learning experience and help keep the bigger picture in mind. The narrative style, paired with the essential questions and an overview, must be designed to pique students' interest with an inquiry, design challenge, or creation that is worth pursuing.

| FIGURE 1. Learning Set Example   |  |   |  |            |         |             |  |
|--|--|---|--|------------|---------|-------------|--|
| Unit Title   |  | The Human Condition: Social Justice   |  |            |         |             |  |
| Developed by   |  | Emilie Vancelette & Jody Ordonez  |  | Time Frame | 4 Weeks |             |  |
|  |  | Course  | IB Language & Literature - 12th Grade  |            |         |             |  |
| Essential Question(s)  |  | Overarching Goal(s)   |  |            |         |             |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is social justice?</li> <li>How can literature and art serve as a vehicle for social change?</li> <li>What are the responsibilities of the individual in regard to issues of social justice?</li> <li>When should an individual take a stand against what they believe to be an injustice? What are the most effective ways to do this?</li> <li>How can the UN Sustainable Development Goals and UN Declaration of Human Rights contribute to social justice?</li> <li>What are the benefits and consequences of questioning / challenging social order?</li> </ul> |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key concepts: Social Justice and the Human Condition                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that as global citizens, we are responsible to develop empathy through exposure to experiences different from our own (Mirrors vs. Windows).</li> <li>Understand the effects of the author's choices on an audience.</li> <li>Understand that individual readers bring their own knowledge and experience to a text.</li> <li>Understand memoir has power to influence the reader and prompt them to reevaluate their worldview.</li> <li>Understand the concept of art as activism, reflective of the author's purpose</li> </ul> </li> <li>Related concepts for this unit include: Application of UN Sustainable Development Goals and Declaration of Human Rights to world issues.</li> <li>Develop an appreciation for other cultures and life experiences.</li> <li>The purpose of this unit is:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploration of the genre of graphic novel and BOW in context of a historical/ socio-political memoir</li> <li>Exploration social justice issues in context of literary and nonliterary texts</li> <li>Develop a social justice campaign utilizing art as activism</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |  |            |         |             |  |
| Learning Target  |  | Engage  |  | Examine    |         | Demonstrate |  |
|  I can research and present background information on pre- and post-Islamic Revolution Iran.  |  I will watch and discuss Crash Course: Iran's Revolutions to gain background knowledge about Iran. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crash Course: Iran's Revolutions</li> <li>I will discuss the video in a small group.</li> </ul>  |  In groups, through a class jigsaw activity, my group will research and prepare a presentation on an assigned aspect of Iranian culture. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persepolis Introductory Jigsaw Activity</li> </ul>   |  My group will present our Persepolis Introductory Jigsaw Activity to the class. My classmates and I will take notes on the presentations to document our understanding.  |            |         |             |  |
| Learning Target  |  | Engage  |  | Examine    |         | Demonstrate |  |
|  I will read, analyze and discuss the graphic novel <i>Persepolis: Story of a Childhood</i> using the <i>Persepolis Dialectical Journal and Reading Guide (DJ)</i> .  |  I will examine the teacher sample DJ entry and discuss qualities of an effective DJ analysis.  |  I will read, analyze and discuss the content of the graphic novel, <i>Persepolis: Story of a Childhood</i> . "What Is a Graphic Novel? (Part II)"   |  I will document and discuss my analysis of the graphic novel using my copy of the DJ.  |            |         |             |  |
| Learning Target  |  | Engage  |  | Examine    |         | Demonstrate |  |
|  I will analyze the elements of a graphic novel and its visual rhetoric.  |  I will watch YouTube videos on elements of visual rhetoric pertaining to graphic novels. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"What Is a Graphic Novel? (Part I)": A Literary Guide for English Students and Teachers</li> <li>"What Is a Graphic Novel? (Part II)": A Literary Guide for English Students and Teachers</li> </ul> |  Students will review and discuss elements of visual rhetoric using the Visual Rhetoric Slideshow.   |  In groups, students will annotate an image from chapters 1-5 of the graphic novel. They will write a thesis statement addressing the speaker, purpose, audience and details of the rhetorical analysis. Groups will present their slideshow analysis to the class. |            |         |             |  |
| Learning Target  |  | Engage  |  | Examine    |         | Demonstrate |  |
|  I will prepare a Social Justice Campaign utilizing art as  |  I will watch introductory videos on art as activism and  |  Alone or with a partner, students will select a social  |  Alone or with a partner, students will design a social   |            |         |             |  |

|   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
|  <p>campaign utilizing art as activism.</p> |  <p>write a brief reflection.</p> |  <p>justice cause. They will research an artist who addresses that cause in their artwork. They will prepare a rhetorical analysis of the artwork and present it in small groups.</p> |  <p>justice campaign using the previously selected artist utilizing the Art as Activism slideshow criteria.</p> <p>I will record a screencast of their social justice campaign and post the presentation and screencast on their portfolios.</p> |
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Source: Jacobs, H. H., & Zmuda, A. (2021). Learning Sets.

**Episodes framed by learning targets.** *What are the manageable chunks in this unit? How might I frame and organize them into episodes that naturally build one upon another? What is the short-term goal that is the driving purpose for the learning experience?*

Learning sets provide clarity of purpose—the student knows what actions are expected and how that connects to the learning target. The word *episode* denotes a playful and deliberate frame for the narrative that students are experiencing. A learning target is a clear statement derived from standards and/or mission-driven goals of what a learner needs to know or be able to do, written in accessible, invitational, and actionable language (*I can ...*). These targets are broken down into more manageable goals in service to the overarching goal. The key for engagement is how to *play out* the target through the three action verbs: engage, examine, demonstrate.

**Action verbs.** *What are my students doing as they engage with the content?*

Instead of outlining topics teachers will cover, action verb prompts directly engage students and align to the learning targets. The three verbs used in the learning set in Figure 1 connect to key actions students will take (or things *teachers* will do to set students up for those actions):

- *Engage*: Generates curiosity and connections, sets parameters for the episode
- *Examine*: Provides an investigation or exploration to probe thinking
- *Demonstrate*: Applies learning to a new or complex situation that provides evidence for the learning target

Embedded in each action prompt are links to tools, apps, assignments, readings, or other resources to assist the learner. Strategic placement of these links within each action prompt ensures resources are immediately relevant (versus listing them at the end of a lesson plan).

According to Craig, Vista High School's lead instructional coach:

In the past, the overwhelming response from teachers was that they spent hours and even days creating curriculum documents but were still no closer to having the lessons, activities, and projects. Leading students to reflect throughout their learning experience could help all students to recognize the strategies, Habits of Mind, [and] actions that they use when asked to analyze, design, [and] evaluate. Students could increase their control over their learning as they could directly see what efforts, activities, prompts, and learning were related to course learning expectations.

### Learning Targets

A learning target is a clear statement derived from standards and/or mission-driven goals of what a learner needs to know or be able to do written in accessible, invitational, and actionable language.

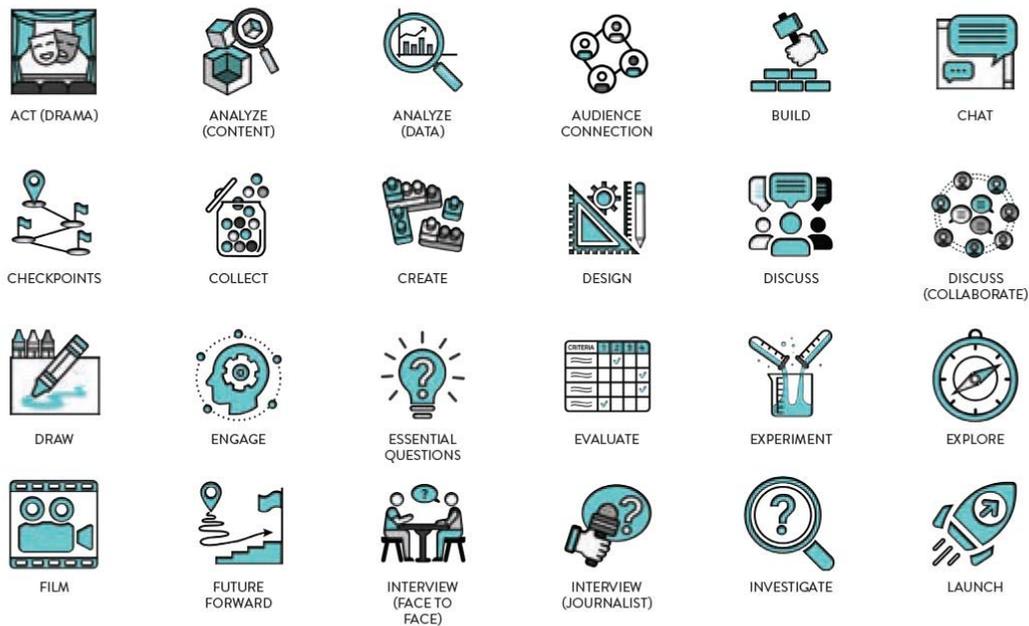
**Iconography.** *How can I capture these engagement actions with visuals to strengthen communication?*

Using icons lessens the need for written text. When we have explored the use of iconography with teachers, the most common "aha" moment for them was that they spotted their patterns of practice. The use of the same few icons representing types of tasks (for example, read, write, test) reveals the range of learning experiences and prompt us to consider what other ways we can design the lesson to meet the learning target. Some learning-management platforms have icons built into their infrastructure, and there are ample free sources for education

icons, but they don't always capture the higher-order thinking skills, dispositions, and behaviors that schools are committed to developing in their students. For example, when we are considering authentic assessments that we want students to engage in, what are the words or phrases that come to mind? Figure 2 shows some examples of icons we have developed and used in learning sets.

Your students can also sketch and upload icons for learning sets that represent their level of thinking and the actions they will take in their inquiries. This helps them to see the benefits of iconography to streamline written text.

## FIGURE 2. Learning Sets Icons



### Moving Forward

When we take on the challenge of streamlining lessons, we must prepare to sift through a bloated, inconsistent curriculum. In any field, the goal of streamlining is to make performance better and to shed antiquated features of a design or process. As Matt, another Vista High School teacher who piloted learning sets reflected, "In my experience, unit planners were for teachers and administrators. I saw learning sets, however, as an opportunity to invite students into the process and an effective reflection tool for already established units."

Learning sets lighten the bureaucratic burden on teachers' backs by shifting to a student-facing curricular narrative, using accessible language, appealing visuals, and diverse experiences that invite engagement.

*Note: To learn more about the design of learning sets, including icons, template, and key components, go to [www.learningsets.com](http://www.learningsets.com).*

### Reflect and Discuss

Who is the primary audience for lesson and unit planning documents in your school? How could these materials be more student-facing?

How have remote and digital shifts during the pandemic changed your lesson planning process?

Could a model like learning sets help you create a more compelling curricular narrative? Why or why not?