Leading Change: Microplanning to Customize Student Learning

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Recommended Citation

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When we stop to look at the role of teachers in 21st century English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, we must ask: Are we, as educators, moving students forward—working with a laser focus to guide students to attain their greatest academic capital as future readers, writers, and leaders? Or are we subservient to past teaching practices that are outdated and formulaically stifling our students? Could these practices contribute to a culture of aliteracy, when people can read and write but choose not to do so? Our current world calls on designers, business gurus, builders, and educators to create customized experiences. The wave of customization for the user, whether it exists in Apple products tailored for each user, various food vendors who design your weekly meals, or recommendations for titles on Goodreads is based on your previous choices. Regardless of the area, an emphasis on customization for the user is a trademark of our society. Expectations of customization for the user in education, especially when we think of growing a new generation of readers and writers, calls upon all educators to respond.

There is a call to action across content areas to create a school culture where there is no recognizable barrier that separates ELA from any other content area in order for students to experience their greatest academic success. Heller and Greenleaf state that "Every content area has its own set of characteristic literacy practices. Students won't learn how to read and write and become comfortable in the field of biology, for example, unless they spend a lot of time reading, writing, and talking about biology" (7). Currently, ELA teachers *naturally* assume the role of teacher of reading and writing; as this is their primary focus. Yet, a student who majors in English and education does not typically receive coursework on how to teach reading and writing (Heller and Greenleaf, 19). To complicate matters, teachers of science, social studies and other various content areas are at a seemingly greater distance from the teaching of reading and writing. Non-ELA teachers tend to prioritize learning the content through differentiated instructional practices as a whole class. Such broad approaches lack the tailored level of instructional responsiveness to address the feedback teachers gain from students on a daily basis.

In the 21st century, teachers need to be highly focused on teaching the student sitting in front of them. To complicate this ideal, according to the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum User Manual, curriculum follows a "schedule that includes aligned concepts, topics and skills…to be addressed over a defined period of time. It is not a prescriptive, lock-step set of lesson plans that impede an educator's ability to exercise flexibility in meeting students' learning needs" (134).

Teachers respond to learners through differentiated instruction with lesson plans that align to the grade-level curriculum and the particular Standards with associated learning targets that are a focus for all students. Since lesson plans guide instruction for all students to attain the grade level Standard, we know "how learning targets guide our plan for instruction, much like knowing where we want to go and how to get there in our car. But even with a general road map, we still need to adapt and respond to how our students are doing in class. At any given moment, some students may be getting it, and others may not" (Sweeney and Harris 91).

Thus, the lesson plan delivers the curriculum to all learners. The limitation of the traditional lesson plan is that the teacher uses the lens of the curriculum to see the students, whereas the microplan sees the students relative to the continuum of the Standards to then customize instruction below or above their academic grade level. Therefore, the lesson plan aligned with the curriculum may remain similar from year to year, yet the microplan sees each student who has unique needs beyond the grade level curriculum and corresponding lesson. With changing societal demands, along with a wide range of student abilities and situations throughout the school year, we must respond differently than in the past. Teachers know that the curriculum and lesson plans are not enough; as Minor affirms, "any curriculum that does not see my students cannot possibly be good for them...No curriculum—no matter how good—is ever going to see my kids" (105).

Teachers must begin to redirect their focus away from time spent planning lengthy, one-size-fits-all lesson plans, as these lack student customization in an abundantly tailored world. Educators must hone their attention to the microplan—the off-shoot of the lesson, the most customizable portion of the students' learning—as this will yield the highest student success.

However, it is *not enough* for only ELA teachers to implement microplanning within their classrooms. Schoolwide content-specific literary microplanning, as Heller and Greenleaf reference, must be integrated as a crucial element necessary for student achievement. With this understanding, the next section will bring the practical application of microplanning to life.

The Microplan: Being Responsive to Student Learning

With hundreds of decisions made daily, teachers must regularly track individual student progress via formative assessment and measure social-emotional wellness to effectively strategize and microplan lessons. The microplan is defined as "a planning and implementing process which is people centred, relying on their decisions" (Coghlan, 537). For our purposes, a microplan details the specifics that teachers capture in their notebooks or active record-keeping systems. This distills student strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and growth mindset attributes as it pertains to learning. Combined with the lesson plan, teachers make decisions to re-teach, include students in small group learning, confer with students, or engage in reflective or metacognitive activities. The microplan is the life of the lesson. Students exist here. Responsive instruction exists here.

Minor discusses the messy work that accompanies working through learning with students. As he recalls the best way to help students is to "research quickly, try courageously, fall reflectively, stand up, and try again" (51). When we respond to the needs of students, a lesson plan is only the surface. Recording student responses throughout the learning process allows teachers to apply the feedback to make daily instructional decisions. Teachers maximize their active note-taking by refining their focus using the microplan. When this occurs, teachers ask the following: How will I best serve the students sitting in front of me? How can my pre-assessment inform my strategy groups? How will I push the learning of students who need an additional challenge?

Now, with many resources such as *Do It Yourself Literacy: Teaching Tools for Differentiation, Rigor, and Independence,* by Kate Roberts and Maggie Beattie Roberts

and Jennifer Serravallo's *Writing Strategies* book, both highlight ideas that support the concept of microplanning to respond to student learning. Knowing that the microplan is a prominent instructional method and is associated with good outcomes for students, what is a teacher to do now? This practice of microplanning asks for teachers to research, think and plan, then focus on improving on the area that is next as students approximate their learning and strive towards mastery of Standards.

An example to highlight this understanding as it applies to the practical work of a teacher is necessary. Imagine a sixth-grade student is writing a response to reading on a published nonfiction article. The student lacks a structure for their response, which first asks for a summary. In this writing, the student references one heading in their summary. In microplanning, the teacher looks to reinforce the use of the structure of nonfiction articles to guide reading and promote recall. Therefore, the teacher constructs a microplan with attention to the headings, pictures, and captions to build on concepts that are already conceptually rooted for the student. The teacher slows down the learning, microplans to lean on current student understanding, and strives towards mastery. At this point, the teacher would also reference their instructional notes to determine if this microplan meets the needs of other students as well. If students share similar needs, small groups are utilized to maximize instructional time. View Table 1 to get a glimpse into how the teacher may quickly chart student progress.

Table 1

Microplan Model

Current Skill:	Microplan: *(Teach)*	Next Steps/Notes:
Uses only one heading in summary.	Create a timeline of headings.	What was the result?
Next Skill to Teach: Use additional nonfiction text features to summarize.	Make a list of important Pictures/Captions to mention in summary.	What is the next skill the student is most closely approaching?

The microplan responds to the needs of the learners and provides the flexibility to lead each student to exert more control over their skills. As teachers become more practiced with microplanning, to expand on this technique instructional tools can be incorporated. Kate Roberts and Maggie Beattie Roberts write "Sometimes we—teachers and kids—need teaching tools to help us to reach these goals. . . tools have always helped us reach farther than our bodies and minds allow us to alone." (2) In *Do It Yourself Literacy: Teaching Tools for Differentiation, Rigor, and Independence*, the authors include tools to support instruction; in turn, these tools enrich the microplan. Thereby, instruction is strengthened, and students achieve at a higher level as teachers take into account constant feedback and adjust microplans accordingly. With patience and persistence, ELA teachers become the schoolwide experts at customizing instruction.

Consider a related task of grading papers. Today, students obtain routine feedback through conferences and small

group work—the microplan at work. The students' writing is no longer left to read at the end for a grade; it has already been read multiple times during the writing process. Thus, at the end of a student's process paper, the teacher already has a sound understanding of the student's writing through the implementation of several microplans. The microplan responds to the writer in the moment, to mentor and guide the writer. The use of microplanning is a vehicle to provide *feedforward* as Joe Hirsch explains:

> [feedforward] can help us stop seeing ourselves as who we are, but who we are becoming…When we give feedforward, instead of rating and judging a person's performance in the past, we focus on their development in the future… Suppose my student is writing an essay. Instead of waiting until she is finished, then marking up all the errors and giving it a grade, I would read parts of the essay while she is writing it, point out things I'm noticing, and ask her questions to get her thinking about how she might improve it. ("Moving from Feedback to Feedforward")

When teachers are alongside the student in the trenches of their pieces, the potential for growth is boundless. This is where the work of the microplan is of the utmost importance.

Interdisciplinary Literacy Coherence

We now know the dire need to customize student learning through microplanning; it is not enough to place these demands solely on the ELA department. Heller and Greenleaf explain, "In the early grades, nobody asks whose job it is to teach literacy skills. Most primary school teachers are generalists, and they must be knowledgeable about literacy instruction, among other subjects" (15). But once you arrive at the middle and high school level, "Ask math, science, and history teachers where students receive literacy instruction, and they might shrug, or maybe they'll point to the English department. English teachers tend to regard themselves as content area specialists too, with literature as their subject matter, and only partly as reading and writing instructors" (Heller and Greenleaf 15).

ELA is a subject where teachers must individualize daily instruction in both reading and writing while also teaching the content of the subject. In the classroom, this may look like the following: reading a short story to determine the theme (content), having students complete a written response (evaluation), conducting a small group on a reading (microplan) lesson, and pulling another small group struggling with textual evidence (microplan) for the written portion of the lesson. Imagine this level of activity on a daily basis. Yet, only a small portion of the daily activity focused on the actual content.

Minor predicates that "systems don't change just because we identify them; they change because we disrupt them. This is a choice. Change is intentional. Allowing the system to run as it always has is also a choice—one that denies many students access to the opportunities that we have pledged our careers to creating" (31). The future of ELA is one in which students identify themselves as readers and writers in every classroom and the customization that has engulfed our society is practiced across all subject areas.

When this happens, ELA transforms into a class in which students develop their identities as readers and writers and in which they study and analyze literature. They try writing styles and techniques and they read various genres. In science, they are writing and reading as researchers and in social studies they are writing and reading as historians. Partnering with science, social

studies, and other content area teachers, within the concept of microplanning, as well as literacy, is urgent and necessary. Enlisting the help of highly skilled literacy coaches serves as the cornerstone to provide training and support for such revolutionary work.

The customized learning that occurs daily when microplanning is practiced far outreaches the learning of the differentiated whole class content lesson. The time to change is now. We must embrace a culture of interdisciplinary literacy coherence and move beyond outdated teaching practices. We need to see each student in front of us and respond daily with microplans.

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