

Streamline your lesson planning: ideas for saving time and effort

Peter Smith suggests ways to make sure lesson planning doesn't take up all your time

Lesson planning: is being a teacher like being a Golden Gate Bridge painter? Peter Smith can see a similarity when it comes to marking. Photograph: Alamy

Do they really start repainting the Golden Gate Bridge once they've got to one end of it? Or is it an urban myth, up there with the fact that ducks' quacks don't echo and that your eyes pop out if you keep them open when you sneeze?

I'm not sure, but being a teacher sometimes feels like being one of the alleged decorators of the aforementioned bridge. As soon as one set of books are marked, there's that other set that need doing. And then there's the lessons, the duties, the parents' evenings. What most teachers manage to do is to find a way of balancing it. But what about the crunch points, the times when it's moderation/GCSE exams/your wife's birthday? How can you still plan lessons effectively without cutting down on quality? Here are a few bits of advice I've gathered.

Quick fixes

Repeat the activity. Get one starter/plenary and repeat the activity with different year groups. Keep the activity, change the level you pitch it at. Years 7 to 13 will all get something from some quickly thought up (or web generated) anagrams of what they learnt last time (and then make them write the definition) to start your lesson. It means you don't need to plan seven different tasks.

Make creating resources part of the learning. Use your students as ways to create the learning activity. Can you set the task of designing a three minute starter for the next lesson as a homework? Saves your marking load and also gives a more creative end to the lesson.

Cultural changes

The quick fixes will get you through those difficult moments. But some teachers are getting it wrong regularly. There's lots to do, and the marking/planning can seem never ending, but if you're staying up until midnight every night you're getting something wrong – and the negative impact of all this will build up. School and students will have unreal expectations of what you can be relied upon to do, you are likely to burnout/fall ill and I pity your other half who you neglect every evening. Is that the sort of life you want? Consider the following:

- Be a department that shares resources. I've never understood teachers who are precious over lessons. Surely if someone else can benefit from what you've produced, who are your colleagues, it's going to help someone to pass it on. If you start doing it for others, they'll reciprocate. Word of warning here though; don't teach someone else's lesson. Use the idea or resource, but make it your own in some way.
- Vary how you assess in lessons. If marking is taking up your time, generate something that doesn't need marking. Bring in an element of self-assessment or peer-assessment, allowing others to pick up some of the initial marking workload and giving you chance to set them targets to improve.

- Use your helpers. Use willing volunteers to sort the tasks that take up your time but needn't be done by you. Cutting up cards, laminating, governors reports and so on.
- Use worthwhile resources that can be repeated. As a rule of thumb, resources should take a maximum of half the time to create that they'll be used for. And generate stuff that's easily reused, saved and kept for next year. Quick tip: save computer documents with a name that makes them easy to find. For example 'consequences of the gunpowder plot' and save it in a folder called 'The Stuarts' in another folder called year 8. It'll be easy to find next year.

Above all else though be realistic in your expectations of what's needed. Dynamic [teaching](#) and learning isn't about mass fact hunts or complicated marketplace activities. It can't all be [Oh Captain, My Captain and Dead Poets Society](#).

Good teaching and learning comes from solid subject knowledge, a healthy rapport with students and effective questioning. So spend the one precious commodity we have little of, time, wisely. And sometimes rather than redesigning that worksheet or developing that resource, you should have a glass of wine and go to bed. A stressed, worn out teacher can have all the gimmicks possible, but if they snap every time someone doesn't do what they're meant to because they're overtired then all the work was for nothing anyway.

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