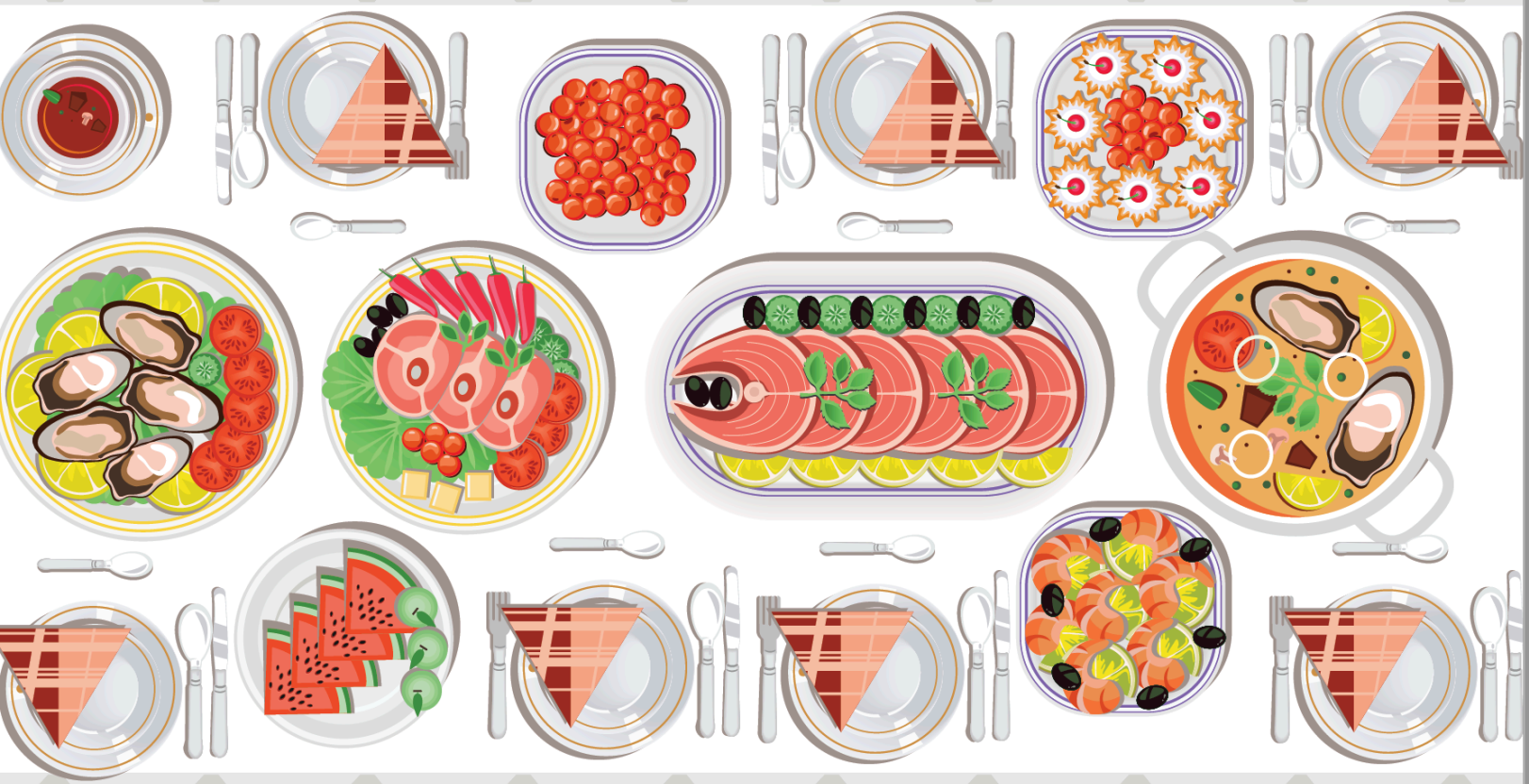
For School Leaders, Reviewing Isolated Lessons Isn't Enough

Evaluators need to consider lessons in the context of the overall curriculum unit, like the parts of a full-course meal.



Jay McTighe

In schools, a lesson functions as an individual building block to support the learning of new material. Experts have identified key elements in an effective lesson,[1] and education leaders—including school-based administrators, instructional coaches, department and grade-level chairs—usually look for these elements when reviewing lesson plans and observing lessons being implemented in classrooms. While there is certainly value in examining individual lessons, I offer a cautionary note: Don't miss the forest for the

trees. Specifically, I contend that school and district leaders need to consider lessons in the context of the overall curriculum unit those lessons are part of.

In developing Understanding by Design (UbD), our well-known curriculum planning framework, Grant Wiggins and I chose the unit as a focus for instructional design because the key elements of UbD—"big ideas," enduring understandings, essential questions, and performance assessment tasks—are too complex and multifaceted to be satisfactorily addressed within a single lesson.[2] For instance, essential questions are intended be explored over time, not fully "answered" by the end of one lesson. Similarly, authentic performance tasks and projects (as in project-based learning) cannot be fully accomplished within a 45- or 52-minute lesson period.

How Is a Unit Like a Full-Course Dinner?

Consider an analogy to dining: Think of a curriculum unit as a full-course meal, with individual lessons representing the various parts of the meal–aperitif, appetizer, entrée, side dishes, bread, dessert, and digestif. While a school leader can review discrete lesson plans (just as a diner can take a few bites of an appetizer), it's important to recognize that a single lesson is a necessary but not sufficient part of an overall, in-depth learning experience (just as an appetizer is a key but insufficient element of an entire meal).

Reviewing lesson plans or viewing lessons in the context of a larger unit underscores another key point: Lessons vary across the scope of a unit. Like an appetizer served at the beginning of a meal, initial lessons will have certain features that differ from later ones, and in reviewing all the lessons in a unit plan, a leader should expect to see different kinds of lessons containing different elements at the beginning, middle, and end of the unit. For example, we would expect the opening lesson(s) of a unit to begin with some "hook" to engage and focus learners on the new material; provide an advance organizer of the new content to be learned; present essential questions for the unit that focus on its "big ideas;" introduce key academic vocabulary (such as through a word wall); forecast summative assessments so that students know how their learning will be gauged; and present (or codevelop with students) the "success criteria" by which their learning will be evaluated. Beginning lessons should also include a pre-assessment to check on students' prior knowledge and skill levels, as well as check for potential misconceptions prior to introducing a new topic or skill.

While there is value in examining individual lessons, don't miss the forest for the trees.

By contrast, the lessons that comprise the bulk of the unit (the meal's entrée) should systematically build targeted knowledge and skills over time. Like the carefully selected spices in a main course, the particular instructional technique(s) used in a given lesson should align closely with the targeted learning outcomes. For example, there are times for

General "Look-fors" in Unit Plans

When reviewing unit plans, leaders should consider to what extent:

- The unit and the associated lessons are focused on priority standards, "big ideas," and transferrable skills.
- Students are helped to understand a unit's overall goals, how they will be assessed, and the "success criteria" by which their learning will be judged.
- The targeted instruction in lessons is well aligned to these unit goals.
- Lessons include opportunities for students to actively make meaning of, and apply, the content and skills of the unit (such as through Socratic questioning, thinking frames, etc.).
- Opportunities for students to receive specific, timely feedback, and opportunities to use it, are built-in.
- The unit's summative assessments collect appropriate evidence for the targeted learning goals.

A leader should be able to see, in reviewing the progression of lessons in a unit, that students are moving from guided practice to increasingly independent applications.

direct instruction and modeling by the teacher and times when Socratic questioning or cooperative learning will be most appropriate for engaging students in active meaning making.

Main-meal lessons should also include formative assessments whose results give teachers insight about whether some reteaching or differentiated instruction may be needed. Information from ongoing formative assessments also enables teachers to provide timely and helpful feedback to students, along with opportunities for learners to use that feedback (such as focused practice, revision of drafts, revisiting key concepts).

Another reason for viewing a series of lessons, rather than only one, is to enable leaders to observe whether the lesson sequence shows a "gradual release of responsibility" over time. A leader should be able to see that students are moving from guided practice to increasingly independent applications as they develop their skills.

Toward the latter part of the unit, we would expect to see lessons designed to prepare learners for culminating assessments. Just as athletic coaches employ scrimmages and theater directors use dress rehearsals to prepare for the opening-night performance, so should teachers include experiences in final lessons that prepare students for summative assessments. These could include "practice" tests, mini tasks, or tasks guided by the teacher.

The Unique Flavors of Unit Endings

And just as a dessert differs in size and taste from the main meal, the concluding lesson in a unit will likely include unique elements, such as opportunities for students to self-assess and reflect upon their experience. Teachers might pose questions like:

- What do you now really understand about [key concept(s) or process]?
- What are you most proud of in what you [learned, accomplished, or produced]?
- What would you do differently next time?
- How does what you've learned connect to other learnings?

A final lesson might also include a celebration of worthy achievements and preview of the next unit.

Enjoy Your Meal

In sum, just as I encourage teachers to frame out an entire unit before focusing on developing the discrete lessons, I recommend that leaders look at a teacher's overall unit plan, to see where individual lessons fit in, *before* reviewing any specific lesson plan or observing a lesson being taught. In the spirit of "backward design," leaders need to clearly have the end in mind—the overall goals of a unit—before they analyze and evaluate individual lessons—the *means* to those ends.

So, think of your role in reviewing lesson plans like being a restaurant reviewer. You need to sample the entire meal (a full unit) in order to better understand and appreciate the qualities of a single course (lesson). Bon appétit! EL

REFLECT & DISCUSS

For principals: Do you generally review teachers' lesson plans in the context of the overall unit the lesson is part of? How might it change your review of a lesson if you did so?

Does it resonate with you the way McTighe describes how lessons in the early, middle, and later part of a unit differ? What would need to change in your school or district for the lesson-planning process to include more emphasis on the different parts and functions of a unit?

[1]Silver Strong & Associates. (2013). *The thoughtful classroom teacher effectiveness framework* (Resource guide). Franklin Lakes, NJ: Author.

[2]Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design, expanded 2nd edition*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Jay McTighe (jay@mctighe-associates.com) is an education writer and consultant, and coauthor with Grant Wiggins of *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* (ASCD, 2011) and other books in the UbD series.