
Direct Instruction and Experiential Approaches: Are They Really Mutually Exclusive?

JANET KIERSTEAD

Successfully merged, direct instruction and experiential approaches can complement each other, allowing students and teachers to have more freedom and to share control of learning.

The debate over classroom practices rages on. On one side stand proponents of direct instruction; on the other are those who argue for an experiential approach. Just when the challenge to education is the greatest, we are mired in this seemingly endless debate. Teachers are pulled in two directions, and students suffer from the confusion. Must we really aim for the mastery of basic skills *or* for the development of higher-level thinking processes along with the more affective outcomes? Or can we have both?

My experience suggests that direct instruction and experiential approaches are not mutually exclusive; that in the hands of teachers who have discovered how to synthesize them, they are actually complementary. We should be pooling our collective talents in search of ways to help teachers merge the two rather than debating which is more effective.

Definition of Terms

Direct instruction refers here to the approach Rosenshine (1979) describes as having an academic, teacher-centered focus with little student choice of activity and the use of large groups, factual questions, and controlled practice. With the intention of *directly transmitting* skills and concepts, the teacher presents what are commonly known as "directed lessons." Such lessons usually include an introduction, input, modeling, guided practice, check for understanding, and independent practice. The order of

presentation may vary, but what remains constant is that *the teacher directly controls* the pace, sequence, and content of instruction.

An experiential approach, as described by Horowitz (1979), is characterized by flexible use of space, student choice of activity, richness of learning materials, integration of curriculum areas, and more individual or small-group than large-group instruction. Central to this approach are what Bossert (1977) has termed "multi-task activities": numerous individual or small-group projects in which students are encouraged to select and organize their own tasks. Here the teacher intends to *indirectly promote* skills and concepts through experience that captures students' interest and imagination. Such activities are purposeful in that they require students to go beyond the independent practice of skills (for the sake of skill acquisition alone) to create real-life products that could be used or shared with others (opinion surveys, recommendations, advertisements, scrapbooks, diaries, skits and plays, court trials, models, murals, sculptures, and so on). While carrying out such activities, *the student controls* most of the minute-by-minute decisions regarding the pace, sequence, and content of activities.

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Author's Note: I wish to thank Georgea Mohlman Sparks, who insisted that I write this article and so generously gave of her advice and support.

“[With] the exclusive use of direct instruction, we prevent ourselves from getting the full range of desired student outcomes.”

Background

I began to wrestle with the apparent conflict between direct instruction and experiential approaches three years ago when I co-authored a staff development program for the California State Department of Education (Mohlman, Kierstead, and Gundlack, 1982). This series of workshops for teachers and administrators—known as The Effective Classrooms Training—includes such topics as the quantitative use of class time, classroom management, teacher expectations and attitudes, direct instruction, and single- and multi-task instructional activities.

Originally, the training began with direct instruction and then added multi-task activities. During one session, participants learned how to design directed lessons and, in the next, how to have students apply their newly acquired skills to multi-task activities.

As I participated in training sessions throughout the state, however, I began to alter the original design. Influenced by the experiential approach I had taken with students as a classroom teacher, I found myself showing participants *first* how to design the framework of multi-task activities for an entire semester or year. Only after the experiential framework was in place did I have trainees design lessons to prepare students to carry out those activities. Beginning with the sequence of increasingly complex purposeful activities and using directed lessons to serve that sequence brought a critical change: the development of basic skills, rather than an end in itself, became a means to an end, specifically, the ability to *use* skills and concepts for real-life purposes. I have seen many teachers merge the two approaches in that fashion and think of such a synthesis as a “structured multi-task” approach.

Designing a Structured Multi-Task Approach

To highlight the planning process, let’s consider an example from a sewing class, where the process is fairly straightforward, before looking at an example from an academic subject. Figure 1 outlines the initial steps in the process. Of course, the teacher may

not actually write out much, if any, of the plan.

Having designed the broad-stroke plan of steps (or stages), the teacher proceeds through the year by taking each step in turn, first sequencing the skills in order of difficulty, and then *providing the directed lessons necessary to enable students to create the real-life product at that step.*

Teachers of academic subjects can use the same process. For example, suppose a teacher of a government class wants her students to understand the relationship between physical and cultural geography. The final product is a “perfect country” created and governed by students and illustrated through skits, maps, murals, models of transportation systems, written alliances, and so on—all related to the country’s geography. At the first step, students produce maps showing how land forms affect climate and vegetation. (Several directed lessons precede the mapmaking session.) The second step is to create a visual display, including a time line, a collage depicting events, and so on, to illustrate how the mythical country’s physical attributes affect population distribution and cultural history. (Again, creation of the visual display will follow several directed lessons.) Students proceed through several more steps until they acquire the skills and concepts needed to produce the final product—the “perfect country.”

A similar procedure guides young students through the developmental process of learning to write. For example, a primary teacher may have students author simple books to show that they have reached the long-term goal—the ability to communicate independently through writing. At the first step, students produce books of several one-sentence “stories.” Each day they draw a picture, dictate a caption to an adult, and then trace over what the adult has written. At the next stage, they dictate and then copy the caption of their illustrations. Through repeated daily exposure, they learn to spell several words. This propels them into the next stage, where they create their own sentences and receive help with spelling on request. From then on they simply expand their writing until they reach the long-term goal—a lengthy story, edited for spelling and punctuation. (After

achieving independence, students begin another step-by-step process—first producing simple, then complex, research projects, integrating literacy skills with science and social studies.)

Directed lessons would be given throughout the lengthy process of learning to write. For instance, while recording a dictated story with the whole class, the teacher might take the

time to explain, demonstrate, and give guided practice on using commas in a series. For some students this large-group, directed lesson would suffice, but others would need a similar lesson

Figure 1. Procedure for Designing A Structured Multi-Task Approach.

1. The teacher establishes the long-term goal and corresponding real-life product by answering the questions:

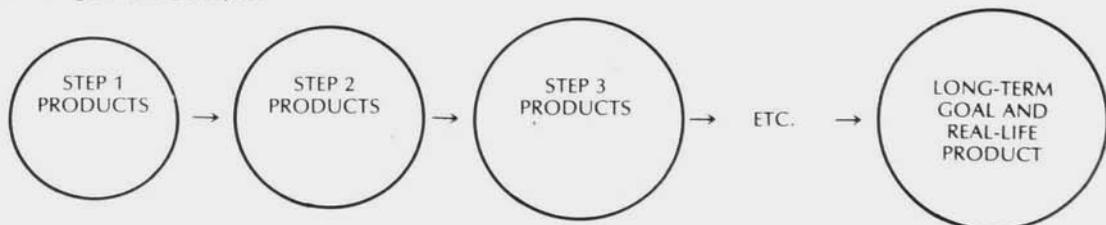
"What do I want my students to be able to do/understand by the end of this semester?"

"How will I know (other than by a paper/pencil test) that they have achieved this goal—what final product would serve as evidence?"



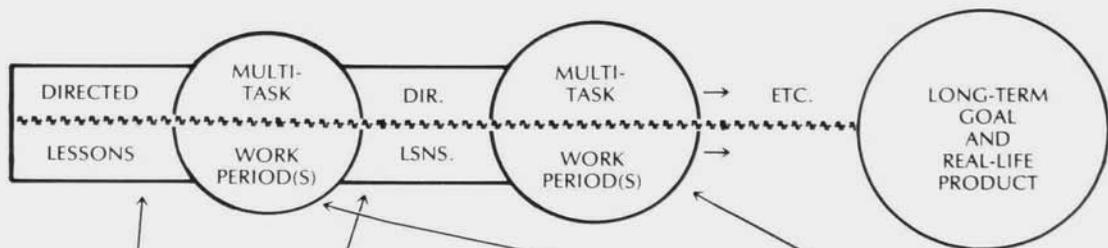
2. The teacher considers what skills and concepts will be needed to create the final product and begins to outline a series of increasingly complex "steps" by deciding:

"What is the simplest product students could make, using a few of the basic skills I have listed here? And then, what would be something a bit more complex?"



Each step consists of one or several choices of multi-tasks (art or construction projects, experiments, investigations, and so forth) through which the students create the real-life products. These are the basis for multi-task work periods.

3. The teacher proceeds through the year by taking each step in turn, first sequencing the skills in order of difficulty, and then providing the direct instruction necessary to enable students to create the products as they work on them during multi-task work periods:



Some direct instruction (represented here by ---) is given by bringing students together between work periods, for directed lessons in large or small groups.

Direct instruction is also given to individuals or spontaneously formed small groups as the need arises during the multi-task work periods.

Note: The time spent on directed lessons relative to the multi-task work period varies with the subject. Generally, the work periods increase as the steps become more complex. Also, during the multi-task periods, the teacher maintains indirect ("remote") control over students through rules, routines, and procedures established early in the school year.

Figure 1. Designing a Structured Multi-Task Approach.

Questions:

What do I want my students to do or understand by the end of the year?

Other than by a paper-and-pencil test, how will I know they have achieved this goal?

Answer:

Students should be able to create a garment of complex design and high quality—either a fitted evening dress or a tuxedo shirt to wear to the prom (Final Product).

Basic Skills Needed to Complete the Final Product:

How to hem, make buttonholes, set in sleeves, follow pattern instructions, press fabric, thread and operate a sewing machine, sew a straight line, gather fabric, and sew seams.



Step 1

Question:

What is the simplest product students can make using a few of these basic skills?

Answer:

A placemat with matching napkins (Step 1 Product).



Basic Skills Needed to Complete Step 1 Product:

How to cut fabric, thread and operate a sewing machine, sew a straight line.



Step 2

Question:

What is a more complex product students can make using more of the basic skills needed to complete the Final Product?

Answer:

A laundry bag or pillow case (Step 2 Product).



Basic Skills Needed to Complete Step 2 Product:

How to sew seams, press fabric, overcast seams, cut fabric, hem.



Additional Steps

Planning continues until several cumulative steps have been similarly outlined with corresponding skills and products.

Final Product: Tuxedo Shirt



when they first encounter the need to use commas in their work. Should several students reach that need at the same time, they would be called together to receive a second lesson. Or the teacher might give a directed lesson to one student individually. Since students readily share such new information as they work side by side, that one student could pass on to other class members what she or he learned. So, students *may* receive all or part of a directed lesson before they launch into their multi-task activities, and *will* continue to receive such lessons from the teacher and from each other as they work.

Directed Lessons and Group Size

In the examples just given, the teaching strategies commonly associated with the direct instruction and experiential approaches have been synthesized to create a structured multi-task approach. Directed lessons—the foundation of direct instruction—serve as a framework for connecting multi-tasks—the cornerstone of the experiential approach. The multi-tasks at each step within the framework require the students to apply and extend the skills they acquire through directed lessons.

Confusion over the issue of group size clouds the question of how or even whether direct instruction and experiential approaches can be synthesized. Group size should not be used to define direct instruction. In a structured multi-task approach, directed lessons are given to the whole class, to small groups, and to individual students. Such lessons are given almost continuously during the multi-task work as the teacher circulates, pausing to assist individuals or “im-

promptu” small groups (formed on the spot as the need arises in the students’ work and dissolved when the need is met).

Often, teachers who are concerned with “covering” the material decide to teach to groups to save time. Too often, however, such instruction is closely matched to the needs of only a few students. Instruction that is inappropriate for many of the students hardly saves time; it becomes, instead, a means of control.

The content of instruction—not the desire to maintain control over students—should determine group size. Generally speaking, in the case of skills such as reading, writing, and sewing, most of the directed lessons should be given to individuals or to impromptu small groups. Conversely, large-group instruction given prior to the multi-task activity is probably the most efficient and time-saving means of introducing concepts and establishing a common set of terms, as in social studies and science.

Direct and Indirect Teacher Control

The issue of control lies at the heart of the difference between “pure” direct instruction and a structured multi-task approach. In the former, the teacher maintains *direct* control most of the time, allowing little student choice of activity; in the latter, the teacher shifts control to students for large portions of time, allowing them to make the minute-by-minute decisions regarding pace, sequence, and content of their work. It is critical to recognize that when that shift takes place, the teacher never completely relinquishes control, but maintains *indirect* control through strategies built into the environment. Those strategies create a system of remote control.

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Maintaining indirect control over students so that they can assume some of the responsibility and control over their learning in the active setting is the critical issue—and the stumbling block—in practice. (See Kierstead, 1984, and in press for the features of such a management system.) Not only must the multi-task curriculum be in place, but it must be supported by strategies for ensuring student accountability, for monitoring and guiding growth, and for providing human and material resources for students.

Summary and Conclusion

Our charge as educators is to socialize our young—to guide them in a desired direction—so we *are* trying to control students. But when we exercise that control through the exclusive

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use of direct instruction, we prevent ourselves from getting the full range of desired student outcomes. *Sharing* control with students in a structured multi-task fashion gives us the best of both worlds, not only freeing students but also freeing the teacher to work with students individually. Thus, students are free to develop responsibility, independence, and the higher-level thinking skills. Teachers are free to assess student needs, strengths, and interests at close hand and to immediately respond accordingly, often by giving immediate, personalized direct instruction.¹

A great deal of valuable work has been done to describe how to directly convey information to students and help them practice skills—how to conduct effective direct lessons. Now the challenge is to understand how to *indirectly* promote skills and concepts in active settings. We need to know how to share control with students so that they are free to apply their skills and concepts to real-life purposes.

Because so few teachers have worked out a means for sharing control, we tend to assume that only few *can* do so. As I work with teachers, I am increasingly convinced that their greatest obstacle comes from outside the classroom. We send mixed messages: we say that we value student enthusiasm, responsibility, independence, and the willingness and ability to use skills for real-life purposes, but we measure student (and thus teacher) success by scores on standardized tests. By overemphasizing test scores and continuing to suggest that good scores result only from large-group direct instruction, we paralyze teachers so that they are afraid to move toward a more experiential approach.

The teachers I know who have worked out a structured multi-task ap-

proach have done so with little outside support, and often in the face of tremendous outside pressure. We must begin to support and assist such teachers. Or, at the very least, we must not stand in the way of teachers who are struggling to do so on their own. □

¹I suspect the percentage of teachers who know how to share control with students is presently so small that such teachers are outliers in the effective teaching studies. Thus, from that research it *appears* that large-group, direct teacher control is the more effective approach.

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