

Blueprints for Social Studies

JANE E. POLLOCK

For many years teachers in Aurora Public Schools in Colorado designed curriculum guides by sharing our best guesses as to how much of the content we should cover in a semester. We struggled with goals, behavioral objectives, and scope and sequence. Our guides, resembling the table of contents in a book, directed content without addressing instruction. They lacked emphasis on student assessment. And they were not being used.

Our dream for a curriculum guide was one that was coffee-stained, circled and arrowed, and soiled with students' and teachers' fingerprints. Our new guides would be blueprints for student assessment. Because we could give them the guides in advance, students would be familiar with the content of the course and know what was expected of them.

Our dream is now becoming a reality. We are changing our curriculum guides to assessment guides. The high school social studies teachers have collaborated to design guides that are useful to teachers, challenging for students, and integrate content outcomes with the district's five learner outcomes. As we shift toward outcome-based education, we are designing curriculum guides to emphasize student performance and not content coverage.

Now we ask ourselves these questions as we begin the process of curriculum development:

- What concepts and principles are

essential to the student understanding the subject matter?

- What student products or performances are acceptable demonstrations of their knowledge of the subject?

• Which of our district's five learner outcomes can be incorporated into the assessments?

- Which complex thinking task is most appropriate for the assessment task?

Our Colorado History guide serves as an illustration. We decided that the critical information students should know about our home state extends beyond a chronology of dates and names. Students should understand how they, as individuals and citizens, fit into the "bigger picture," so we chose this Essential Question for the course:

Based on your study of Colorado history, what current issues in Colorado do you believe are the most important to address, what are your ideas about the resolution of those issues, and what contributions will you make toward the resolutions?

To demonstrate a thoughtful response to this question, students need to acquire information and apply knowledge. The students use multiple resources, do research on various topics, and exhibit their work.

In addition to the Essential Question, the guide includes a list of seven supporting questions:

- Why and how does a state form?
- How does geography affect the political, economic, and social development of a state?
- How do cultural groups affect and contribute to a region?

• How have lifestyles and social issues changed?

- Why have cyclical economic patterns dominated in Colorado history?

• How have political decisions evolved in this state?

- How does Colorado fit in the nation and the world today?

Alternative assessments were designed for each question to give students opportunities to demonstrate knowledge of content and progress toward learner outcomes. These assessments will eventually provide the exhibits students will use for performance-based graduation requirements. Here is an example of a task for the first question:

Working in teams, students write a position paper to request statehood to present to the United States Congress. The teams orally present their positions for approval. Given verbal feedback from the other student teams, the teams re-evaluate the strengths and limitations of their requests.

This assessment, like all others in the curriculum guide, is accompanied by the criteria for evaluation. Some of the criteria deal with course content and complex thinking process: Did the team provide a sufficient amount and appropriate types of evidence to justify its request for statehood? Did the team accurately describe the strengths and limitations of the requests? Other criteria address the five learner outcomes, such as Collaborative Worker: Did the individuals in teams demonstrate interactive communication skills while being considerate of individual differences? Students

receive a scoring rubric in advance so they know how the demonstration will be assessed.

Each assessment task is designed around one of the complex thinking tasks described in *Dimensions of Learning* (Marzano et al. 1992). Using this learning/planning framework, we match essential content with an appropriate thinking task. Included with the *Dimensions* framework are the assessment criteria and scoring rubrics for the complex thinking tasks. We customize each of these to the specific assessment task. In addition, *Dimensions* details numerous instructional strategies to support teacher thinking in the classroom, so staff development becomes integral to the curriculum development process.

In summary, the new curriculum guides:

- focus on student performance (authentic tasks),
- include the assessment criteria and rubrics,
- stimulate a change in instruction, and
- are useful to both teachers and students. □

Author's note: Dimensions of Learning (Marzano et al.) will be published by ASCD in 1992.

Much of the credit for the design comes from the writings of Ted Sizer, conversations with Grant Wiggins, the social studies teachers at Aurora Public Schools, and Nora Redding, High School Curriculum Coordinator.

Jane E. Pollock is High School Curriculum Coordinator, Division of Instruction, Aurora Public Schools, 1085 Peoria St., Aurora, CO 80011.

your participation in the role-playing reveal an accurate understanding of the essential facts, concepts, and principles of the civil rights movement?

- Did your group select appropriate and important alternatives to be considered?
- Did your group's final decision meet the decision criteria for the organization you represented, and was it true to the beliefs of that organization?
- As your group worked to collect information and come to a decision, did you personally assess and manage group functioning?
- As you participated in the role-playing discussion, did you achieve the purpose of being true to the organization you represented?

Like the photography teachers, Ray then developed grading rubrics for all five criteria so that students had clear descriptions of the performance levels they were expected to reach.

What Is Gained?

The changes in assessment procedures in Aurora Public Schools have produced significant benefits for both students and teachers.

Alignment with district goals. Classroom instruction and assessment are being precisely aligned with district goals. While teaching important information about photography or U.S. history, teachers also extend students' skills in such areas as inventing, decision making, and working collaboratively. At the same time, teachers collect reliable information about their individual students' abilities to reach the five district outcomes.

Improved instruction. Students are engaged in their own learning because the tasks they are given are meaningful and intriguing. Using the assessment criteria up front, they take responsibility for becoming prepared and use their teacher as resource and coach.

Knowing the assessment criteria up front, students take responsibility for becoming prepared and use their teacher as resource and coach.

Improved learning. More active student involvement in interesting tasks results in improved learning. For example, the students and teachers who filled Ray's doorway on the day of the civil rights role-playing can attest to the high level of knowledge students exhibited about the civil rights movement. Students themselves reported on the powerful insights they had gained.

Knowing What Is Expected

The assessment model is a good one. Having a framework of criteria and descriptive rubrics, all developed from stated district outcomes, provides focus for educators and students. Teachers have flexibility of choice within the framework but consistency of standards. Students know what is expected.

Learning to apply the model will take time. As more and more teachers are introduced to it, the model will surely be changed, but we feel we have taken solid steps toward solving the problem of assessing the "big" outcomes. The results will be improved planning, improved instruction, and improved student achievement, with graduates who are equipped to meet the complex problems of the 21st century. □

Nora Redding is High School Curriculum Coordinator, Aurora Public Schools, 1085 Peoria St., Aurora, CO 80011.

Copyright © 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.