Creating a Structured Lesson

A few things to consider when creating a structured lesson...

Order of presentation:
Traditionally we think of presenting information in a “1, 2, 3,” or “A, B, C” manner. If we want to engage students and help them to construct meaning out of what we are teaching this method is not always the most successful. Keep in mind that we want students to “learn” by exploring new concepts and making connections in order to form new knowledge, or in other words – to “make meaning” out of it all.

An example of the “1, 2, 3” approach:
Let’s say we want to show someone how to bake bread. Traditionally we first give them a list of ingredients, then we show them the method for putting them together, and finally they have a finished loaf of bread. It might look something like this...

| Step 1 – Present a list of the ingredients or “parts” of what we are trying to accomplish or learn |
| IN OTHER WORDS: Memorize the parts |
| Step 2 – Distribute a description of how to put these things together to form the whole (the bread) |
| IN OTHER WORDS: Memorize how to connect the parts |
| Step 3 – View the whole; or possibly reconstruct the whole |
| IN OTHER WORDS: Identify or describe the finished product or concept |

This method puts the focus on teaching instead of on learning. We are merely presenting students with steps to memorize and replicate. It does not matter if the subject being taught is cooking, programming or world history – the teacher is giving information to the student. The student is memorizing the information and giving it back to the teacher either in the form of a product that is created solely by following memorized instructions or by taking a test to prove that they have memorized the steps. There is not much “meaning construction” happening here. Does the student understand why salt is needed or how to make the bread have a hard or a soft crust? Probably not. Is the student’s sole motivation to get a good grade? Probably. Wanting good grades is desirable,
but this should not be the student’s only motivation, nor should it be the only desired outcome for the lesson.

Let’s try a slightly different approach. We’ll call it the “4, 1, 2, 3” approach...

Here is the same lesson presented in this alternate manner...

Step 4 (Do this first) – Show the final product – the completed loaf of bread. Perhaps even slice it up and distribute it. Talk about what kind of bread it is and why it is needed for a particular event or meal. Point out the qualities of the bread – its lightness and its hard, flakey crust.

IN OTHER WORDS: Indentify the qualities of the whole. Recognize its uses and applications.

Step 1 – Talk about ingredient choices for breads. Identify the ingredients that will be used for this lesson (activity).

IN OTHER WORDS: Indentify and recognize the parts that comprise the whole.

Step 2 – Guide students to explore how the ingredients used in making bread interact in a scientific manner to create the type of bread desired.

IN OTHER WORDS: Analyze how the parts interact to create the whole.

Step 3 – Create the whole...this might entail baking the bread, tasting bread, or finding recipes that used different ingredients in different ways to produce different types of breads.

IN OTHER WORDS: Synthesize the parts to create the whole.

Step 5 (Do this first) – Show the final product – the completed loaf of bread. Perhaps even slice it up and distribute it. Talk about what kind of bread it is and why it is needed for a particular event or meal. Point out the qualities of the bread – its lightness and its hard, flakey crust.

IN OTHER WORDS: Indentify the qualities of the whole. Recognize its uses and applications.

This method puts the focus on learning instead of on teaching. We begin by helping students to recognize the need or purpose for understanding a process or concept. Students are asked to explore how the parts of a concept or process function and relate to each other in order to form a whole. Students begin by analyzing this process and end by synthesizing the parts into this newly known and understood whole. Students bring any prior knowledge they may have to this process. The teacher helps them to construct meaning out of what they are learning. The teacher also guides them to understand from the very start why the concept or process is needed or desired within a particular context or contexts. Once again, it does not matter if the subject being taught is cooking, programming or world history – the teacher is guiding the student to construct meaning, to have a working knowledge of a process or concept. Perhaps most importantly, the teacher is teaching the student how to learn and how to think critically.