3 What makes an effective plenary?

Plenaries, whether they happen during the lesson or at the end, should:

- occur at a strategic moment in the teaching sequence;
- draw together the learning of the whole group and the individual;
- summarise and take stock of learning so far;
- consolidate and extend learning;
- direct pupils to the next phase of learning;
- highlight not only what has been learned but also how it has been learned;
- help determine the next steps in learning.

Plenaries need to be planned as part of the planned learning episodes (spontaneous plenaries tend to be less effective). They should link carefully to the objectives, outcomes and success criteria of the lesson as a whole.

As with starters, active, engaging, challenging and well-paced learning can be achieved in plenaries through:

- carefully planned tasks;
- planned management and organisation of the classroom;
- use of appropriate interactive teaching skills.

Again, the tasks in this section follow this sequence of development for planning and teaching plenary activities.

Planning the plenary activity

When planning the plenary activity, first consider its purposes – there are likely to be several in any one lesson. Then choose a task that will involve all pupils in actively processing any relevant information from the lesson. Finally, consider the interactive teaching skills you need ‘at your fingertips’ in order to shape and develop a successful plenary.

As with starters, plenaries can be used for a range of different purposes. They can enable you to:

- review the lesson’s objectives – taking stock of what the class has covered in a task or a sequence;
- be diagnostic – assessing both individual and collective learning as well as progress, in order to plan accordingly;
- recognise and value the achievements of individuals and the class;
- stimulate interest, curiosity and anticipation about the next phase of learning.

They can enable your pupils to:

- remember what has been learned;
- crystallise their thoughts about what has been learned;
• deepen and extend their learning;
• see the 'big picture', putting what has been learned in the context of past and future learning;
• articulate and communicate their learning;
• gain a sense of achievement in the successful completion of a task(s);
• understand the progress made and revise or set new personal targets;
• consider how they have learned and the learning strategies they used – in terms of both individual and group thinking processes;
• develop a language for discussing thinking and learning and form a habit of reflection about learning;
• consider how thinking and learning can be 'transferred' to other contexts;
• perceive themselves as learners.

Although many of these purposes are concerned with what pupils do, their achievement depends on your planning and orchestration of the plenary.

**Task 8**

**Observe and analyse effective plenaries 1**

**30 minutes**

Video sequences 5f, 5g and 5h show three plenaries from different subject areas, including an art teacher reflecting on her use of plenaries. First there is a Year 7 art lesson, then a Year 9 history lesson, and finally a Year 7 science lesson showing two plenaries.

Before watching the video sequences, you may find it helpful to revisit your work on starters and recap on the ideas about task design, management and organisation and whole-class interactive teaching skills.

Watch the video sequences and for each plenary identify the purposes, for both the teacher and the pupils, using the list above to help. In each case, ask yourself: Why did this teacher plan this plenary, for this lesson and for this class? In the first example, the teacher discusses her use of the plenary and, in doing so, models how a teacher might reflect on their practice.

Now watch the video sequences again. This time:

• note what strategies each teacher uses to fulfil the identified purposes for the plenary – be clear about whether they relate to task design, to the management and organisation of the classroom, resources and pupils or to the teaching approaches used;
• analyse how each teacher gains evidence of the effect of the lesson on pupils’ learning.
Starters and plenaries

Starters

Research findings and practical experience tell us about the importance of lesson starts. They are recognised as having significant and direct impact on the quality of the learning both within the starter itself and in the rest of the lesson.

The use of the start of the lesson to ‘hook the learner’ is developed in Phillips (2001). He explores the ‘tight’ relationship between the initial activity and the ensuing lesson and enquiry. Phillips describes the use of a wide range of initial stimulus materials (ISMs) such as visual sources, text and stories, and music. The initial activity can not only arouse pupils’ interest at the start of the lesson but can also act as a ‘connector’ with other episodes and lessons.

Starters also play a very important role in ‘connecting the learning’. This is an essential aspect of planning since, in simple terms, we learn largely, though not exclusively, through what we already know. This is summarised by Alistair Smith (1998).

Finally, Muijs and Reynolds (2001) comment on the importance of management techniques for lesson starts: ‘Research suggests that teachers can keep disruption to a minimum by instituting a number of set procedures for dealing with lesson starts. For example, write instructions on the board before the pupils come in so they can get started with the lesson immediately, train pupils to take the roll and read instructions, have certain activities that students can start doing as soon as they come into the classroom.’

Plenaries

Plenaries provide an opportunity to draw together, summarise and direct learning, so that pupils focus on what is important, what they have learned, the progress they have made and their next steps. Plenaries can occur part-way through a lesson but should always feature at the end of a lesson. Debriefing is a very important part of a plenary as it encourages pupils to explore and extend their learning. It is where what has been learned is embedded.

Fisher (2002) identifies three main intentions for the debrief:

- pupils are asked to give answers and explain how they arrived at them and the skills they needed to use;
- in the process of explaining, pupils have to develop and use appropriate language;
- they can then be encouraged to see how these processes can be used in other areas.


One important aspect of the plenary is ‘bridging’, when the teacher makes a link between the learning in that lesson and learning in another or to the everyday real world. Mayer and Wittrock (1996) refer to the process by which pupils apply what they have learned and the way they learned it to a new situation: in short, teachers plan for bridging so that pupils may transfer what they have learned. Fisher (2002) develops the link between discussion, language and transfer seeing the
opportunity for pupil discussion, from planning through strategy to evaluation, as crucial for pupils’ development of the appropriate language.

Planning for the plenary is very important, but not to the point where it becomes inflexible and thus limits the opportunities for the pupils to identify what they learned and, where applicable, how they learned it.

It is useful to note the comment of Muijs and Reynolds (2001) about planning and pupil behaviour: ‘Effective teachers experience fewer problems with ending the lesson than less effective teachers, through methods such as planning and pacing the lesson to leave sufficient time for activities at the end.’

References


