Action Steps—Building Blocks of Success

Jack H. Shrawder
Publisher/Editor TFS
jack@teachingforsuccess.com

It's a fascinating yet sometimes frustrating experience to sit in a committee or board meeting and compare the typical idea discussion, evaluation and application process used between highly successful organizations and those that flounder. One key to organizations that succeed may be found in the number and quality of actions steps proposed and completed. Good action steps arise from a:

- Desire to improve.
- Willingness to experiment and learn from experience.
- Bias for doing it now.
- Commitment to results.
- Competent analysis of the context.
- Passion for excellence, for doing it right.
- Grasp of the system involved.
- Solid confidence in a better future.

Good action steps have the right:

- Scope.
- Complexity.
- Focus.
- Accountability.

The number one characteristic of a good action step is its suitability for moderately-rapid completion. The most perfectly constructed and thought-out action step is of no consequence if it never comes to fruition. What’s more, completing a series of related action steps is a precursor to great success. Therefore, creating a step with the right scope of action is crucial. If a step is trivial, it will seem unimportant and become buried under the crush of the rush to deal with daily emergencies. If the scope is too large, the action step will be put off under the perception that it will take too much time or effort to complete.

An action step that blocks rather than facilitates progress may be too complex, or it may require too many or too difficult-to-obtain resources to complete with modest effort in a reasonable time frame.

With the correct focus, the completed action step should provide the information, data and motivation to continue to the next action step in the series.

Most importantly, there needs to be the right accountability built into each action step. It must be absolutely clear who is responsible for the completion of the step and what is the deadline for completion.

A part of accountability is progress management. Step completion should be tracked. Do this by x-ing out an item on a simple checklist of steps, making entries in a project journal, log, sending an e-mail or traditional message or presenting an oral report to the person or persons with ultimate responsibility.

The use of action steps is also applicable to teaching and learning. You can achieve excellent course management by creating meeting-, chapter- and course-level action steps for improving the teaching and learning process.

Martin de Matt said, “You are pure potential.” To put this potential to use, you need a solid success strategy. Learning how to create, manage and complete a series of action steps is a precursor to great success in life, learning and business.

For example, if you have taught a course more than once, you should know the points that need improvement. List these points and then construct a series of action steps that will propel you toward the desired revisions.

If this is your first time teaching a course, use the action-step principle on a weekly and daily basis to better prepare for each class meeting.

Looking at learning applications, you could introduce action steps to your students. To grow as responsible, accountable independent learners, they should learn to create a set of action steps for each course. These steps could help them prepare for and complete major learning tasks such as term projects, or a series of chapter, midterm and final exams. Students could also build a set of action steps to manage their weekly class homework load.

You might even go so far as to relabel learning activities with the much more elegant and energetic term, “learning action steps.” This reinforces the idea that students are ultimately in charge of their learning and need good self-management strategies. Finally, when students are given the responsibility to create and complete a series of action steps, this leads to the internalization of a success strategy that will be useful for the rest of their lives.

TFS Action Step

Select one improvement you’d like to make, and create a series of action steps necessary to implement this change. Then, commit to complete each step.
Stick with It, and It Will Happen

William Ward
Plant Manager
Palo Verde County Water District
Palo Verde, CA
pwwaterworks@earthlink.net

A fter three-and-a-half years of teaching water technology training for Rio Salado College to inmates, I have come to realize that teaching, if successful, must be approached as more than a job. The word “job” as used here connotes a do-only-what’s-necessary, minimum-effort, minimum-time work approach. Teaching, successful teaching, is never an effortless endeavor. Teachers, good, teachers, are passionate about their work, and their passion has no limits. This is what makes “Teaching For Success” successful—passion, caring and extra effort.

In the pages of Teaching For Success, Teachers share their passions and indeed, their love of teaching. Good instructors—those who are dedicated and hardworking constantly seek ideas and ways to improve their teaching. They constantly search, research and apply different methods to enhance their performance level and the performance level of their students.

Feedback and evaluation are key ways to determine the effectiveness of these methods. A good instructor is opened-minded, critical of himself and his methods and able to accept criticism.

The pursuit of perfecting or at least of improving ourselves and our programs is never ending. But to what end should one strive for? What is the ultimate goal? Perfection? No! The goal is success.

I taught inmates in a Rio Salado College program at Lewis Prison, Arizona. At the end of instructional sequence or program, I asked, “Was I successful? Was I instrumental in changing lives?” I ask because that’s my passion, my love.

Many of you may never be able to answer that question to your satisfaction. Because, sometimes to teach is to give and not be assured that you made a difference.

When times are tough and you need assurance, take a moment to list your students who have:

- Successfully completed college credits or a certificate or degree program.
- Found employment.
- Given you a special thank you for helping them.
- Discovered their motivation to continue in college.

However, to me, the burning questions to ask are: “Was I successful?” and “Did I have an influence on my students lives?” Fortunately, my answer to both questions is a resounding yes! I have confirmed that 16 inmates, as the direct result of the Rio Salado College program have taken jobs in water technology field upon their release from prison.

To further add to my feelings of great satisfaction, I have encountered two former inmates at a water technology conference. It’s my hope and desire that all of you may know the fruits of your labors too. I hope this article is an encouragement to you no matter how bleak or discouraging your situation seems; the rewards are heartwarming. To quote part of a letter received from a former student, “Stick with it guys; it will happen.”

Better Assignment Management—Quick Tip

Kathy Hogan
Developmental, Math Dept.
Clinton Community College
1000 Lincoln Blvd.
Clinton, IA 52732

T o assist my students, I hand out a special assignment sheet to my classes on the first day of a new chapter. It lists the assignments for the chapter as well as extra-credit options.

Students use this form as a cover sheet when they hand in their assignments at the end of the chapter. I check off the assignments that I receive giving the students proof of acceptance. I circle the ones that are missing.

This sheet helps in a couple ways. The students know ahead of time what the assignments will be, if they are absent form class, they know what the assignment was earned or lost.

The extra-credit options have been a benefit as well. These problems are more challenging at times and the cumulative review is of much benefit to them. My students have commented on how much they appreciate this chapter assignment sheet and how well it works for them.

TFS Action Step

Analyze your current assignment management process. Develop a job aid similar to Kathy Hogan’s assignment sheet and evaluate it with your class.
The Extraordinary Value of Formative Assessment

Brian R. Shmaefsky, Ph.D., TFS Partner Editor
Biology & Environmental Sciences
Kingwood College
Kingwood, TX
brian.shmaefsky@nhmccd.edu

It is all too common to hear science colleagues lamenting the low scores a class of students just achieved on a recent test. However, some of the plaintive mood is broken by the humorous replies students provide on exams. Many of these inaccurate, but entertaining, answers make their way into books and e-mails. Some may be fabricated. Yet, many are confirmed true because instructors regularly come across similar responses to their test questions.

Comical answers to test questions are a laughing matter only under two conditions. The first condition is if the student knows the answer and decides to write it accurately but with humor. A purposely incorrect answer with a witty twist is also acceptable. The student knows they do not have the information, but choose to add humor to the dismal situation. Below are sample humorous answers assembled from science tests:

- A liter is a nest of young puppies.
- For head colds use an agonizer to spray the nose until the unit drops in your throat.
- The tides are a fight between the Earth and the moon. All water tends towards the moon, because there is no water on the moon, and nature abhors a vacuum. I forgot where the sun joins in on this fight.
- A fossil is an extinct animal. The older it is, the more extinct it is.
- The pistol of a flower is its only protection against insects.
- A super saturated solution is one that holds more than it can hold.
- When you smell an odorless gas, it's probably carbon monoxide.

These answers are not funny if the students truly believe that their responses are correct. Science instructors must be alert to the consequences of these answers. Most obvious are the students who do not know the concept well enough to provide accurate information for answering a simple question. The long-term consequence is that the testing does not teach the student the correct answer. It penalizes them for getting it wrong. So, the student’s grasp of science becomes further diluted as they accumulate more misinformation about critical science concepts.

Adding various types of formative evaluation into the curriculum helps faculty catch student misinformation about critical science concepts. Remember, formative evaluation means testing solely for the purpose of monitoring student comprehension of a related set of concepts. It should not be used as a major factor in student grading. Formative evaluation is a learning tool for faculty and students. Faculty gauge the reach of their students’ understanding; students learn what they do and do not know about the concepts.

Successful formative evaluation requires that:

- It’s given frequently, at the end of a complex topic or at least every other week.
- It’s given unannounced or immediately before the next class session.
- The questions must be consistent with the lecture and any graded testing.
- The questions measure higher-level thinking as well as factual recall.
- Various formats are used such as multiple-choice question, short answers and problem-solving essays.
- Correct answers are provided immediately after the evaluation.
- Students are encouraged to use the assessment as a study guide.
- It’s not a factor in grading.

So, what should a formative evaluation strategy look like? First, you provide a presentation about a topic that covers two or three major concepts. For example, a physics lecture covers the principles of circular and linear motion.

Note: This topic requires rules and mathematical equations that must be memorized and applied to solve problems. Concepts such as force, friction, gravity, inertia, kinetic energy, potential energy and vectors are involved in understanding this topic.

Next, assign the students any traditional study aids or homework for reinforcing the concepts. Then, at a later session, present students with a short test or a brief hand-in assignment. Continue by asking your students to go over the answers while providing constructive feedback.
Information Overload—How to Cage the Tiger

Cara E. Taylor, TFS Partner Author
Baker College of Muskegon
Muskegon, MI
carataylor@aol.com

Too often, students are overwhelmed with a surplus of course information; this causes missed deadlines and misunderstood requirements. To some students, it may seem impossible to keep it all organized. Keeping the lines of communication open between the instructor and student is essential; moments of frustration or ambiguity often arise when issues aren’t discussed with clarity and creativity. It may take some innovation on the part of the instructor to cope with the effects of information overload.

Ideally, students should be aware of the long-term requirements for the course, which are listed in the class syllabus. However, frequent reminders of assignments due, chapters to be read, discussion topics, etc., must be issued to keep students on track. Here are several ways that I use to cage this paper tiger.

Daily agenda

First, at the outset of each class session, post the day’s agenda on the board. To eliminate any confusion, title the agenda with the date. Alternating with vibrant colors, list all activities that will be accomplished during the class session. Think of captivating titles that will spark interest and curiosity among the students about each planned activity. For example, reviewing Chapter 7 for a geography class could be better listed as “Chatting About China.” Highlight the break time, and note when students are to return to class. End the daily agenda with a positive comment, such as “Head for Home” or “See You Next Wednesday.” Students will appreciate knowing what to expect for the next class session.

Course newsletter

Another organizational technique is to create a course newsletter [paper or electronic]. Headline the newsletter with a catchy title, such as “The Calculus Connection” or “History 101 Highlights.” To energize the document, include an inspirational quote at the top. Next, in a table format, list assignments and readings that are due for that week and the following week. The remainder of the newsletter can be used to highlight important information that may include specific assignment requirements, changes in the syllabus, answers to student questions, or clarification of course issues.

Student mailboxes

To reduce the time consuming task of delivering handouts and returning assignments, provide students with their own mailboxes. This can easily be done with a plastic crate and file folders. Label each file folder with the student’s name and place it in the crate alphabetically. Before each class, fill the student’s mailboxes with handouts they will be using for that session. Include chapter outlines, activities to be done that day, or graded assignments. Place the crate in a location near the door, so students can get their mail when they enter class.

Refining course communications and adding channels means more valuable class time will be available for learning tasks. This is a double win.

TFS Action Step

Identify your classes communication’s bottlenecks. Select or create your own method to improve student communications. Test it this week.

Formative Assessment continued from page 4

References


Art and the Frustrated English Student

Muriel Ryan
IVY Tech College
Terra Haute, IN 47802
mollysweet@hotmail.com

Enthusiastic chatter fills the room as materials are distributed. Students hunt for favorite colors and lay their tools before them. This picture seems very atypical for a classroom of freshman English students.

These students taking English 031 and 032 have fallen under the reading comprehension standard set for incoming freshmen. These are my students. Their academic histories vary. Some did reasonably well in school, but it required many hours of studying to overcome a difficulty in remembering what they read. Some can read and pronounce each word, but find it a challenge to glean the meaning from the text. A few found high school a never ending frustration with few occasions to ever feel successful.

My job is to increase their skill and confidence when reading new material, increase their comprehension by developing their study habits and challenge them to become more analytical readers.

Probably the most formidable part of this teaching is helping them to integrate all the skills taught in this class. Much of the time is spent learning new vocabulary, practicing study skills related to annotation and completing rather dull comprehension drills.

Therefore, I find visualization learning activities lift their spirits and confidence as they do something creative and fun. So I bring on the markers and the construction paper and put a bit of color and punch into the classroom.

In this learning mode, students are expected to demonstrate their learning by completing a visual project to demonstrate their level of understanding. When they express abstract concepts in concrete terms, their creations are a good indicator of their comprehension level. Art allows them to process the information given in lecture and practice in a new mode. By the use of color and their imagination, they can express learned English concepts in their own constructs.

Using this method, the products will be as varied as the individual students. Employing visual methods the students are instructed to communicate concepts to each other using the skills used by good readers.

For example, one drew a car engine and labeled the parts that drive the reader. The spark plugs were labeled vocabulary indicating the importance of knowing words and their meaning. The pistons represented the author’s organizational methods that generate the power behind the way the author selects words and places them in a specific order to logically present ideas.

Another student organized reading skills on neat book shelves. Each shelf had a different resource for the student to use in understanding challenging texts.

Another student took the same information and placed each resource on the pedals of a daisy with the center labeled “Critical Reader.”

Using this teaching method, the products will be as varied as the individual students.

Another advantage to this method is that it requires students to review previously presented material. This allows practice to be stimulating and not as rote. It also sets a stage for the natural transference to a more sophisticated method of imagining facts and concepts in alternative forms.

For example, this can naturally lead to the use of Venn diagrams that show the relationships of characters in a narrative or the supporting details of a main idea. Flow charts become a logical outgrowth of this technique. Lastly, this method clarifies and increases the visual images used in learning thereby aiding students who are visual learners to be successful. This activity is a sensible complement to the often used lecture which favors students who are strong auditory learners.

By encouraging students to see, create, select and organize images, it places information in a familiar and comfortable context. As an instructional method, it’s amazing how colored markers and paper can combine to create a successful alternative learning mode.

When seeking student feedback on my courses as a whole, the markers and construction paper activities is often cited. These sessions are perceived as memorable, fun and interesting. Each student looks forward to doing it again and again.
It Takes Only Sixty Seconds to Improve—Here's How

Donald A. Petkus, TFS Partner Author
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN
petkus@indiana.edu

The one-minute paper has been around for some time, but it’s well worth revisiting because of what it can do for you and your students. It provides you with a chance for obtaining quick feedback on how your students feel their progress is going. It gives students a chance to say, “I don’t understand” without having to draw attention to themselves in class.

It also gives them a chance to say, “I get it, already!” when you spend too much time on a concept or skill that they feel they have mastered. Also, it produces important information needed to customize your next class lecture notes or plan a carefully targeted review session.

Although the one-minute paper calls for informal, spontaneous writing, it also offers another way to assess our students’ writing skills, learning styles, critical thinking skills and content mastery. Most importantly, it helps us to improve our teaching.

What is a one-minute paper?

The format for a one-minute paper is simple and concise for students. Here is the variation that I recommend. Toward the end of a class session, ask your students to pull out a sheet of paper. Sometimes there may be groans and expectations of a pop quiz.

But just proceed and direct them NOT to put their names on these papers. This is going to be anonymous exercise. That usually lowers their stress level immediately and piques some interest. Anonymity allows them to be more candid about your teaching style and practices.

Now explain to them you want frank answers to two general questions:

- What did you learn best in today’s class? Anything new or interesting?
  Do you feel that you mastered this concept or skill?

- Second question, what concept or idea do you think you understand the least? In other words, what do wish that your instructor would go over again or explain more clearly?

Next, a bell may ring or your students may start packing up to leave. You soon accumulate a pile of one minute papers as your students go out the door. What do you do with these papers now? Analyze the valuable data your students just gave you. Students may think that they have mastered a topic or concept, but look carefully at what they say. Does it appear that they understand in depth or just think that they have achieved mastery?

The second question is more focused and revealing. Students will tell you that they don’t feel comfortable with their level of mastery, and that you need to add more time or try a different approach. Look for themes. Look for frequencies. For example, if you teach psychology and a large percentage of your class did not understand Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, this means you need to review it. A lack-of-mastery concern often surfaces when you are so familiar with a concept that seems ultra simple and quickly grasped, yet for some students it’s new territory; it will take time and effort to comprehend it fully and apply correctly.

Sometimes, the toughest challenge is teaching something that you thought was basic, apparent and intuitive. For more in-depth needs insight, analyze the spelling, grammar and reasoning contained in these papers. One-minute paper sprints constitute an informal and quick-feedback exercise that is important to use early in the term to pick up some clues about your students progress before the first paper is due or the first exam is written. For those who want to know more about the efficacy of the one-minute paper, see: Chizmar, J.F. & Ostrowsky, A.L. The one minute paper: Some empirical findings. Research in Economic Education. Winter, 1998: 1-10.

TFS Action Step

End your next class with a one-minute feedback paper. Ask questions that will give you the insight to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process you use. Make the needed improvements and proceed.
Find the Connections That Actualize Learning

Sandra Alcaraz, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology
Arizona Western College
Yuma, Arizona
sandra.alcaraz@azwestern.edu

As a biology professor, I frequently ask myself the question: How can I make biology more relevant in my students’ lives? All I can remember from my Introductory Biology Professor is that he was short, had a pointy nose, and spoke very softly to more than 200 student bodies warming the chairs during a nonparticipatory lecture. I want my students to learn the importance of biology in their lives.

I discovered the value of connections during my first semester of teaching. I was explaining about sex-linked diseases and referring to hemophilia—a rare disease in females. Shortly thereafter, one of my female students raised her hand and said, “I am a hemophiliac.” The students suddenly fell silent, and I commented, “Well, you are a very special lady.” Then, the questions started pouring out. I asked my student if she would like to make a presentation about her disease, and what it entails to manage it. She said she would love to; the research involved would give her a chance to learn more about her condition. The student gave her carefully compiled presentation two class sessions later. It was enlightening not only because of what the students were learning, but because they saw that real people were affected by genetic problems—biology is real.

After she had finished, and a big round of applause had filled the room. The students then began to add their own personal comments, saying things like “my cousin has that,” or, “I know a lady whose daughter has that.”

I then realized what a great opportunity I had to bring a real life connection with biology into the classroom. I assigned each student to a human genetic disorder of his or her choice. They researched the cause of the disorder, its symptoms, and the management of the disease. Following their research, they too would make their own presentations to the class. The results were fantastic; my students learned more than originally planned, and they definitely enjoyed it.

Write and Win Cash...

W in a cash award; enjoy the recognition of being published; grow your career, and contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education.

Your teaching improvement idea could win you a cash award in the 2004 TFS Super Ideas Contest. There are two contest idea categories: Super Ideas and Quick Tips. In the Super Idea category, First place wins $300, Second place $200 and Third place $100. In the Quick Tip category, First place nets $100, Second place $50 and Third place $25. Be sure to go to: <http://teachingforsuccess.com/Contests2/ContestInfo.html> for the contest rules.

Coauthored ideas are accepted and coauthors will split any prize awarded. But, to win you must enter. Send your entries to us by e-mail (preferred), fax or mail by May 31, 2004. Send to jack@teachingforsuccess.com; fax 530-573-8965 or mail to PO Box 8379 South Lake Tahoe, CA 96158.

In addition, all articles submitted will be eligible for publication in upcoming TFS issues. The winners will be notified after July 1, 2004 and featured in the August, September and October 2004 issues. Winners will be posted on the TFS website.

Note: The copyright to all published articles must be assigned to Pentronics Publishing. Preferred idea length is 575-word Super Ideas and 220- to 330-word Quick Tips. Why not enter today? The odds may be with you.