

Game On: The Level-Up Lesson Layout

I've always liked a good game plan. From knowing my entire life I was going to be a teacher to organizing lesson plans, or even planning a family vacation, watching everything fall into place gives me a sense of accomplishment. Having a game plan for my life is one way I find peace. So, when my first day as a sixth-grade teacher went off without a hitch, I expected most days to be the same. That was a young, naive, and very optimistic view. While I can look back on my teaching career with pride and remember most of my teaching days having well-thought-out game plans, the day I had my son was probably one of the worst-planned days of my life. In the end, things worked out, but we will cover that day in the classroom later.

I've always known I was made to be a teacher. This is evident from my earliest memories when I would boss my little sister around as we made makeshift classrooms for our dolls. I spent hours arranging my Barbies as students and dreaming of the time I could have real students of my own. Believe it or not, I even dreamed about correcting papers!

My journey as a teacher has evolved over the years. In college, I spent my time between classes at a local private school in its after-school program and then later as one of their preschool teachers. Every spare minute of my time was focused on learning to grow in a profession I was finally going to be a part of. As my university days came to a close, I spent my time as a student teacher in both second- and fifth-grade classrooms. This was a drastic turning point for me. While I first

imagined teaching kindergarten or first grade, I soon realized upper elementary was where I wanted to be.

After graduating from the University of Utah with my bachelor's degree in elementary education, I was looking for a teaching position. It was summer, and I had my whole life ahead of me. For whatever reason, I thought it would also be a great idea to get my wisdom teeth out (want to keep those pearly whites straight!). So, as graduation ended and summer began, I headed to the oral surgeon to extract my wisdom teeth. Keep in mind, during this entire time, I was madly applying for any and all teaching positions I could find. I wanted to get hired closer to the beginning of the summer so I would have more time to plan and prep my classroom.

After the procedure, I headed home. A couple days later, I had an interview set up for an upper elementary teaching position. There were several positions open, so they were not assigning the grade levels until after the interviews. With a puffy face fresh from wisdom teeth removal, I walked confidently into the elementary school to meet the principal in my best skirt and blouse I could find, praying they lessened the distraction of my chipmunk cheeks.

I don't remember much about the interview other than loving the principal and instantly feeling a connection. She invited me to walk around the school, and I took that as a good sign that my puffy cheeks were not a problem. As she showed me the classrooms, the technology the school was equipped with, and all the building had to offer, call it intuition, but I knew I was going to work there. She hadn't offered me a job yet but had mentioned a sixth-grade teaching position that was open.

A few days later, I got the call. I was hired as a sixth-grade elementary school teacher. Just like I had hoped, it was near the beginning of the summer, and I would have plenty of time to plan, which would be necessary, because as I walked into room 123, I realized there was a lot of work to do. I found about six bottles of glue, a teacher's desk, and some student desks and chairs. That was it.

Luckily, I was given a grant as a new teacher, and with hundreds of dollars of my own money and some donations from my mom and mother-in-law, I got my classroom to where it needed to be to welcome

new sixth-grade students. I prepared all summer, even taking the lesson plans and school books with me on vacations. Nervous doesn't even begin to describe how I felt, but I was going to be prepared. This is what I was made for.

I planned the first day of school down to the exact minute. I had getting to know you projects, team-building games, art lessons, and rule-setting activities so the first day would be fun for everyone. Setting up classroom rules and expectations were woven throughout that first day and first few weeks of school. I can't even count the hours I spent planning for that first day, but it paid off. I will never forget as the class was leaving, one boy happily smiling and shouting, "This was the best school day ever!" My goal was accomplished. I wanted students to not only learn in school but also *love* coming to school, too.

Sitting down at my desk after that first day of school, I felt happy, accomplished, and ready to tackle the world. While college can be a great introduction to teaching, it did not prepare me for what lay ahead: 30+ students, old school books, an expectation to teach subjects like science with little to no science materials, an assumption that I should write grants to get money to supply my classroom or use cash from my own pockets, and the realization that grading papers may not be as fun as I imagined when I was eight. However, I pushed on because I loved these kids, and I had a passion for education. This was where I was meant to be. My entire life led to this moment, and I was finally becoming the person I dreamed of being.

Fast-forward three years. Sometimes our lives don't go as planned. Sometimes, we have to go with the flow. And, sometimes, those spontaneous moments end up being the most memorable and happiest events of our lives. This is how I would describe the birth of my son. It was the middle of March, yet his due date was April 4th. I had my maternity sub plans fully put together at this point, but I was still madly writing updates to them and making sure all lessons were outlined correctly.

At the time, the school I was at was on a year-round schedule. This meant the classes were on different tracks, and our breaks were spread out throughout the year instead of being lumped together in one summer. We would usually teach nine weeks and then be off for two

to three weeks. My son was supposed to be born during one of these breaks, and I was looking forward to saying goodbye for a time to my students and getting them all set up for when their substitute would return after their three-week break. My game plan was set to be a home run. My students were in capable hands while I was gone, plans were ready, and we were quickly approaching our time off.

One beautiful March morning, I woke up eager to finish out the school days ahead. We had just wrapped up parent-teacher conferences the week before, and I was exhausted. Assuming it was because of my pregnancy, I didn't think much of it. I had a checkup with my doctor the day before because I was feeling off, but nothing at the time seemed wrong. I squeezed my shoes on, which was a task because my feet were very swollen, and shuffled into school as only a pregnant teacher less than a month from her due date can do.

I taught almost the entire day. It was 2 p.m., and my students were at recess. I took a quick bathroom break and ran to the office, leaving my phone in the classroom. As I walked back through the office, the secretary stopped me and said, "Your doctor just called the school looking for you. She said you need to call her and get to the hospital immediately." I rushed to my classroom to find several missed calls from both my doctor and my husband. Apparently, this was an emergency if she was calling my school and husband!

While on the phone with my doctor, she informed me that some tests from the previous day came back and confirmed I had preeclampsia. I needed to get to the hospital immediately, and no, I could not wait to finish out the school day. This was an emergency. Suddenly, my plans were falling apart. We had three days until our break, I did not have those days planned for a substitute, and my students were counting on me. However, my health and the baby's health were at risk. So, I frantically left my students with my coworker and booked it to my car.

Upon reaching my vehicle, I discovered I had locked my keys in the car. Unbelievable. This was not the plan. Sheepishly, I made my way back into the office. After explaining my predicament to the office ladies and emphasizing the urgency of the situation, one of the secretaries took me to my house where I met my husband, and we then drove to the hospital. All the while, I am messaging a teacher friend, who

was also my teaching mentor, asking her, while she is on her break, if she could come in and sub for a few days and explaining she may have to just wing it because I didn't have time in my hospital bed to make plans. This, may I add, is a strange responsibility teachers have and put on themselves. We feel the burden of educating these children no matter the scenario. We come to know our students on a level that no one else does for the year. We know all their challenges, successes, and setbacks. We know how best to suit their needs. Getting a sub even for a day can be overwhelming for a teacher, but for maternity leave? It's akin to the plans made for the Apollo moon landing.

Without going into much detail, since this isn't a book about pregnancy after all, 12 hours later our son entered the world. It was an experience I will never forget. At that moment, my greatest role as a teacher began: mother. This is a teaching position I have also always dreamed of achieving and one I do not take lightly. The role of a mother never ends and lasts through ages to come.

As you can see, over the years, my identity as an educator has evolved significantly. From beginning as a student myself and transitioning to a sixth-grade teacher to embracing the paramount role of motherhood (which I consider the most profound educational role I've ever undertaken) to teaching other teachers how to take their passion and turning it into a business, my love for teaching in any form remains undiminished. Creating engaging lesson plans doesn't need to be complicated and doesn't need to take a lot of effort. However, sometimes it does take some planning.

With this book, I hope to give you a game plan for leveling up your lesson plans and turn them into something both you and your students enjoy. I want to show you how to change ordinary days into extraordinary ones. Every lesson does not need to be a theatrical production. Each day does not need to be Instagram worthy. Your classroom does not need to look like it was plucked from Pinterest. However, having lessons that are engaging *and* fun can help you connect with your students, give learners a new way to achieve their learning goals, and can inspire your class to want to participate and grow.

So, let's begin! It's time to explore the power of *fun* in the classroom. I firmly believe school can and should be both fun and educational.

When students enjoy where they are and whom they are with, learning becomes second nature. It's time to introduce you to the roadmap of lesson planning I have created. We will dig deeper into each section as the book progresses, but let's take a peek at each of the elements.

“Leveling up” a lesson plan means enhancing and enriching your educational strategies to make learning more engaging, dynamic, and effective for students. We don't need to come up with a whole new structure for lesson planning, reinventing the wheel. What needs to happen is taking the bones of a good lesson plan and infusing it with teaching moments, connections with students, and activities that increase its potential to reach all learners in your classroom. So, drum-roll please. Here is your blueprint to level up your lesson plans:

The Leveled-Up Lesson Layout:

1. Start Your Journey with Clear Learning Objectives
2. Press Play Using Engaging Hooks
3. Map Expansion: The Introduction of New Material
4. Join the Training Arena During Guided Practice
5. Multiplayer Mode Collaborative Practice in Your Lessons
6. Assessment: The Lesson Plan Victory Lap

CLEAR LEARNING OBJECTIVE

With every lesson, having a clear learning objective is essential for effective learning. It provides both the teacher and student with a specific learning goal. It helps a teacher know exactly what they need to teach and helps students know what is expected of them.

Learning objectives provide a purpose for the lesson and help students engage with the topic. Your students recognize the value in what they are learning, and why, when they see what the end goal is supposed to be.

Writing clear learning objectives also helps facilitate accurate assessment. The objectives provide criteria for which a student should be measured. This makes assessment more focused and meaningful.

Having clear learning objectives is like having a roadmap for teaching. They guide you in the right direction.

ENGAGING HOOK

A lesson hook can often make or break your lesson. An engaging hook is crucial because it serves to capture the attention of your students, and get them invested in what they will be learning. A well-planned hook can also pique students' interest in a subject they are unfamiliar with.

For example, science never came easy to me as a student or as a teacher. As a classroom teacher, science was a subject I had to study longer and research more because it was not a subject that I was confident in teaching.

However, one of my best lesson hooks each year came when I was teaching about the solar system. The lesson involved introducing my students to objects within our solar system, such as asteroids, meteors, and comets. The engaging lesson hook started with combining dry ice, water, dirt, dark corn syrup, and a dash of ammonia to create our own classroom comet! Students always loved this because learning about the solar system and planets is not tangible and often very abstract. This brought the solar system right into our classroom.

An engaging hook can set the tone for the entire lesson. It will get your students excited about the subject and interested in their own learning. With a good hook, you can engage all different levels of learners, while maintaining enthusiasm with all students.

INTRODUCTION OF NEW MATERIAL

The third building block for leveling up your lesson plan includes introducing the new material. This is the meat of the lesson where students encounter new material. After all, this is why we are at school: to learn and grow. Each day, students are filled with new information. Their brains are like sponges, soaking up the knowledge we give them.

Without learning, we would be stagnant with no progression. This is a critical point in the lesson.

This is the time in the lesson where new material challenges students' thinking and helps them develop higher cognitive skills like analyzing and evaluating what they are learning. These skills will help with their future endeavors as they develop problem-solving skills and learn to adapt to real-world situations. New material can also help reignite interest and motivation in students. Learning about different subjects and topics keeps the educational experience fresh and engaging. As teachers, it is our duty to keep that spark alive in our students' minds.

As a professional teacher, you are also aware that introducing new objectives and materials prepares students for more complex concepts in the future. This portion of the lesson, introducing the material, lays the foundation and skills necessary for understanding more sophisticated topics. When talking to teachers, you will often hear how they love to see those “lightbulb moments” where students are learning a concept and the information “just clicks.” This happens by slowly building new material onto each other, one after another. It is an art that teachers master throughout their careers.

GUIDED PRACTICE

Once the objectives are outlined and the new material is taught, it is time for the next building block in leveling up your lesson plan, and that is the guided practice piece. I like to equate guided practice to when a teacher is student teaching. In college, you are introduced to the idea of becoming a teacher. Then, you get the opportunity to student-teach. The amount of time someone student-teaches varies, but in my experience, I student-taught for one year.

This was a huge turning point in my career. Since I was young, I always thought I would teach first or second grade or even kindergarten. While in college, I was one class away from getting my kindergarten endorsement when my professor placed me in a fifth-grade classroom to student-teach. She had watched me during other observations and lessons and

had a hunch I may thrive more in a different classroom setting than what I had originally planned. I was shocked to find that I absolutely loved the older elementary kids. I enjoyed the curriculum and the personalities of the students. The reason for my shock wasn't that I didn't think I was capable of teaching older students, it was that my whole life plan was pointed in a slightly different direction, and one experience made an entire mind shift that I wasn't expecting. My professor saw something in me I hadn't recognized yet and guided me in a direction that, with her knowledge and teaching experience, helped her recognize where I could find success.

Without this guided practice before entering into my full-blown career, I could have made a huge mistake. While I believe I could have been a wonderful lower elementary teacher, my skills and personality were better suited for different ages. Guided practice for all students is critical because it allows the student to problem solve under the guidance of their teacher. The teacher can give feedback, answer questions, and support the student in crucial areas of their learning process to ensure the student learns and applies the skills necessary for success.

During the guided practice phase, learning is reinforced, immediate feedback is given, and confidence is built. This is also a time where students can actively engage in material, whether it is a game, activity, or practice problems, and apply concepts they were taught when material was introduced. Giving feedback is important because it helps students understand if they are applying their lessons correctly. Also, building confidence is necessary because it fosters a positive learning environment for students. When students feel safe, they can learn from their mistakes rather than having their mistakes tear them down.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

The next building block for your lesson plan should be collaborative practice. In a world that is rapidly evolving and interconnected with technology, it can also feel extremely lonely. The importance of students learning to work collaboratively with others offers numerous benefits that are critical to personal, academic, and future professional

goals. Collaborative practice should be included in as many lessons as possible. Students need this skill more than ever.

Growing up, I don't remember many instances of group or partner work. It was not a time when in education collaborative work was talked about. We sat in rows, and the room was expected to be quiet most of the time. However, times have changed, and teachers, thankfully, are beginning to learn that a classroom that is always quiet does not necessarily equate to students who are learning to the best of their ability. Collaborative work, in my opinion, is the most important piece of your lesson plan. This book will give you tools, ideas, and resources needed to successfully incorporate collaborative practice into your classroom.

Collaborative work helps students develop social skills like communication, conflict resolution, and empathy. As students work together, they learn to articulate their ideas, listen to others, negotiate their differences, and find solutions to problems. While technology is a great doorway to the world, it also isolates the people right in front of us. Students need to learn to interact in ways that don't include screens. Yes, collaborative practice can include technology, but we need to find ways to let students work together in a way that allows for active communication to take place.

Collaborative work also helps students build leadership skills. Group work encourages students to take on various roles within a team. This allows for practicing skills like decision-making, accountability, and delegation. Learning to manage a piece of a project or lead a team will be valuable assets that serve students beyond a classroom.

Students can also learn to be flexible as they work in a group. Situations can change, and expectations may adjust. Our world is filled with change, and learning to accept change is a skill students can practice while working on collaborative projects or activities in the classroom.

ASSESSMENT

The last building block in your leveled-up lesson plan should be assessment. Assessment is important because it provides feedback about the

learning process for both teachers and students. Figuring out what students understand from your teaching is a critical piece of education. Assessment will guide instruction and is instrumental in setting learning goals for students to progress through the school year.

In your leveled-up lesson plan, the assessment will most often be formative rather than summative. Formative assessment is done while the learning is taking place, and summative assessment is used to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit. Formative assessment often works best for individual lessons.

Some formative examples of assessment that you could use to level up your lessons include the following:

- **Think-pair-share:** As you are teaching concepts, ask students to think about a question individually. Then, allow them a minute or two to discuss their thoughts with a partner. Finally, students will share conclusions with the class. This method allows the teacher to quickly assess students' understanding.
- **Exit tickets:** At the end of class, students fill out a small card, or half slip of paper, and answer a few questions from the lesson. They can even add something they found interesting or confusing from the day. This will help teachers gauge what students need help with on the next lesson.
- **Polls or quizzes:** These can be done with paper and pencil or with classroom clickers for online responses. Offering feedback, polls, and quizzes can guide a teacher into what the next steps in instruction should be.
- **Two stars and a wish:** With this formative assessment, students list two things they feel they understood well from the lesson and one concept they wish they knew better or found confusing. Using this assessment helps students reflect on their own learning.

With the building blocks of a good lesson plan set, it is time to start leveling up your own lesson plans. In the following chapters, we will discuss ways to add engagement, fun, and collaboration to each section of this lesson layout. Also, you will find lesson ideas that you can bring straight into your classroom. As Mark Van Doren said, "The art of teaching is the art

of assisting discovery.” I hope to assist you in discovering the best ways to level up your lesson plans and create a classroom space that fosters learning in the best ways possible. Make sure to use the template provided (see Figure 1.1) as you move through the book and write your lessons!

Leveled-Up Lesson Plan

Subject:

Date:

Grade Level:

Clear Learning Objective	Engaging Hook	
Introduction of New Material		Collaborative Practice
Guided Practice		Assessment
Materials Needed	Notes	

FIGURE 1.1 Leveled-Up Lesson Plan template

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