

Thomas Guskey on Mastery Learning

(Originally titled “Lessons of Mastery Learning”)

Among research-supported strategies, says University of Kentucky/Lexington professor Thomas Guskey, “one of the most powerful is mastery learning. Few strategies have been implemented as broadly or evaluated as thoroughly during the last 40 years. The core elements of mastery learning also provide the foundation for many innovations and interventions that teachers are implementing in classrooms today.”

Benjamin Bloom was the granddaddy of mastery learning; it rested on his conviction that virtually all students can reach high levels of achievement, given enough time and the right learning conditions. Here are the core elements:

- *Unit planning* – Teachers divide the curriculum into chunks and design units to get all students to mastery. This parallels the Understanding by Design backwards planning process.

- *Diagnostic pre-assessments* – These tell whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills to be successful in the unit and allow teachers to address any gaps. This is similar to the universal screening recommended in Response to Intervention (RTI).

- *High-quality group instruction* – The next step is engaging all students in high-quality, whole-group, developmentally appropriate, research-based instruction. These lessons are adapted to the content, tied to students’ interests and experiences, and differentiated according to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and background characteristics of students. This is also true of Understanding by Design and RTI.

- *Interim assessments* – These measure students’ skill and understanding so far. They are assessments *for* learning, not assessments *of* learning.

- *Corrective instruction* – Students get immediate feedback so they can fix any learning difficulties and reach mastery (80% or better). “High-quality corrective instruction is not the same as ‘reteaching,’” says Guskey, “which often consists simply of restating the original explanations louder and more slowly.” Effective correctives accommodate student differences and strive to untangle misconceptions and misunderstandings. Correctives typically mean spending 10-20 percent more time per unit, but Bloom contended that this investment of time pays off in remediation time saved later in the year.

- *Second, parallel interim assessments* – “In mastery learning, assessments are not a one-shot, do-or-die experience,” says Guskey. “Instead, they are part of an ongoing effort to help students learn.” When students have completed the corrective assignments, they take a second formative assessment on the unit, giving them a second chance to succeed. Should students who scored 85% on the second assessment get the same mark as students who scored 85% on the first one and didn’t need correctives? Yes, says

Guskey. It's similar to the test we take for a driver's license: "Many individuals do not pass their driver's test on the first attempt.... Because they eventually met the same high performance standards as those who passed on their initial attempt, they receive the same privileges. The same should hold true for students who engage in corrective activities and eventually show that they, too, have learned well."

- *Enrichment or extension activities* – Students who achieved mastery the first time around get involved in worthwhile activities that broaden and deepen their knowledge and allow them to delve into related topics – without moving ahead in the instructional sequence. This makes it possible for students in the corrective loop to rejoin their peers when the next unit begins.

"Lessons of Mastery Learning" by Thomas Guskey in *Educational Leadership*, October 2010 (Vol. 68, #2, p. 52-57); this article can be purchased at <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/current-issue.aspx>
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