Giving Clear Directions for a Task
Coaching Guide

Module Summary

In this module, teachers will:
- Connect the concept of clear and explicit directions to issues of fairness and equity.
- Identify the criteria for clear and explicit directions.
- Examine best practices for effectively delivering directions.

Module activities:
In this module, teachers learn about the connection between clear and explicit directions, student behavior, and issues of fairness and equity. They learn a step-by-step process for crafting clear directions, and the criteria that effective directions should meet. They engage in a practice scenario where they help craft a new set of directions to help a struggling teacher. This module is accompanied by a resource (attached to the end of this document) that provides a template for planning and executing an effective set of directions.

Key Takeaways

Essential knowledge: Many teachers (especially those from middle-class backgrounds) tend to use indirect forms of communication when conveying directions or behavioral expectations to students (Calarco, 2014; Delpit, 1988). This can be seen in phrases such as “Can you raise your hand before you leave your seat?” or “Work quietly with your partner.” These examples—as well as many others—contain implied expectations that are not explicitly stated. The problem is that in order to be successful in any classroom, students need to understand—rather than having to guess—how their teacher is expecting them to behave in a given situation. This is why teachers must give clear and explicit directions for any task. It is necessary for ensuring that all students (not just the students who can infer the unstated desires of the teacher) can be successful.

Essential skill: Effective directions should include a what, a why, and a how:
- **What** – Teacher explains in clear and simple terms what students are going to be doing.
  - Ex: “For the next 20 minutes, we are going to be peer-editing our writing.”
- **Why** – Provides a rationale for the activity or task.
  - Ex: “We peer edit because getting someone’s feedback on your work helps you notice things about it that you might not have seen yourself. We are going to help each other become stronger writers and editors.”
- **How** - Explains the steps or process that students will follow to complete the task or learning activity, as well as the expectations for movement, volume level, and behavior.
  - Ex: “1) Exchange papers with your partner; 2) Read your partner’s paper; 3) Use your pen to circle words that you think might be misspelled; 4) Use your yellow highlighter to highlight parts that were unclear, or that need more elaboration. Use your green highlighter to highlight parts that were strong, or well-explained; 5) For anything that you highlight, use your pen to write comments in the margin; 6) After you finish giving feedback on your peer’s paper, use the editing checklist to check off which requirements have been met; 7) While you are editing and giving feedback you may ask your partner questions about what they wrote if you need clarification. Do this with your 12-inch voices. Otherwise, work silently; etc.”

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1 For a complex task that involves multi-step directions, it may be wise to “chunk” the directions rather than giving them to students all at once. It also may be helpful to post the directions (on the board, on chart paper) so students have a visual reference for the directions.
There are some additional guidelines that teachers should follow when they deliver their directions to students. These include:

- **Avoid verbal fillers** – Make the directions as concise as possible.
- **Use student-friendly language** – Ensure that the directions are comprehensible for your students, given age and developmental level.
- **Pause appropriately** - If your directions have multiple steps, you might consider having students follow them one or a few steps at a time, rather than all at once.
- **Check for understanding** – Ensure all students understand directions, then provide an explicit cue to begin.
- **Give directions as positive statements** - If there is something that you want to make sure your students do, say it as a statement. Directions should not be given in the form of a question.

**Essential mindset:** It is not fair to hold students to a behavioral expectation (like working silently, raising hand before speaking, etc.) if that expectation has never been made clear. Behavioral expectations may vary depending on situation and task, so it is essential to provide clear directions in order to set students up for success.

**The Skill in Action**

Teachers who are skilled at giving clear directions explain exactly what they want students to do, and how they want students to do it. They explain the directions, take student questions, check for student understanding, and cue students to begin. For multi-step tasks or activities, teachers will post the directions and refer students back to them as necessary.

In addition, teachers take the time to explain the why behind a task, and do not simply expect the students to do it simply because “the teacher said so.”

Teachers who struggle with clear directions give vague or unspecific directions for a task. They expect students to infer what they are supposed to do, or assume that students already “know” what the teacher wants.

**Questions for Discussion**

The following is a list of suggested questions for engaging in a reflective dialogue with the teacher, either before or after he or she attempts to implement the skill:

- How are clear directions related to issues of fairness?
- Why are clear and explicit directions important for all students?
- What components should effective directions include?
- When explaining the “how” of a task, why is it important to state expectations for volume level, movement, and participation?
- Do you think the directions you give are clear? Has your opinion changed since completing this module?
- What should you keep in mind when delivering directions to students?
- What help do you need?
### Coaching Moves

**Situation:**
The teacher gives directions before each activity, but there is still a lot of off-task behavior and lost transition time.

**Ask:**
- Do you clearly explain *what* students will be doing and *how* you expect them to do it?
- Do directions address movement, voice, and physical response (MVP)?
- Do you explain the purpose or rationale (i.e. the “why”) for a task before having students begin?
- Are your directions worded and delivered in a way that is easy for students to understand?
- Do you check for students’ understanding of the directions before cueing them to begin?
- Do you use praise to reinforce the desired behavior?

**Suggest:**
- Before teaching a lesson, try writing out the directions you plan to give. Check to make sure they meet the what/why/how criteria.
- For any given activity, give the directions orally but also post them somewhere in writing so students can refer back to them.
- Encourage students to hold you accountable for giving clear directions. You might consider creating a classroom job of “Clarifier” and making it this person’s responsibility to ask questions to clarify directions before starting an activity.
- Make it a point to give students positive, specific praise when they are following directions or behaving responsibly.

### Standards

**InTASC: 3a** – The teacher understands how learner diversity can affect communication and knows how to communicate effectively in differing environments.