

Injecting Pace into lessons

“Good planning will enable you to stretch pupils without exhausting yourself” says Jo Smith

A headteacher once described a lesson of mine he observed as having ‘unrelenting pace’. I’m not sure whether this was a compliment about a fast-moving, productive lesson in which my pupils were asked to work hard with unbroken concentration, or a criticism of the lesson providing too few opportunities for my pupils to reflect and ponder on the skills I was teaching them.

For me, pace has always been an important component of a successful lesson, particularly with able or gifted groups of high-achieving students who are more than able to cope with 50 minutes of rigorous challenge, who thrive on the demands of a lesson that asks them to move quickly through exposition and review to get to new learning points and spend time developing and extending new learning. Pace is also a critical feature of a well-disciplined classroom; if pupils are busy enough there is no time for off-task behaviour.

How do you structure the lesson so you are stretching the brains of the most able without leaving yourself exhausted and drained at the end?

To begin

1. Plan your lesson thinking about what pupils will be asked to do, not what you will be doing.
2. Write aims on the board and a quick task as pupils settle – able pupils will focus on what they will be asked to achieve and most will get to work immediately while waiting for others to arrive.
3. Write any homework tasks on the board for pupils to record.
4. Tell latecomers briefly that you will hear their excuses later, rather than letting their explanations delay your start.
5. Plan a starter activity that doesn’t need lengthy introduction but is a quick, focused activity.
6. Have the necessary resources out on desks or ask early arrivals to do this.
7. Don’t get side tracked by pupil requests, off-task enquiries, or administration tasks. Able pupils are masters at asking those interesting but deliberately delaying questions.
8. Be at the front of the classroom, waiting to begin and expect your pupils to mirror that attention. Scrabbling through papers on your desk suggests you are not ready to start yourself.

In the main

1. While pupils are working on the starter activity, prepare for the next activity (by writing on the board, distributing the next resources).
2. Give your instructions for the main activity or key learning points verbally and visually.
3. Have a clock in your room that all can see.
4. Make the circumstances of learning clear and enforce them: silent work, two minutes to ask your partner any questions then quiet work, and so on.
5. Give clear time instructions for every task. 'You have five minutes to complete task 1 after which we will...' Give pupils a countdown: 'You've got four minutes, three minutes, two minutes...'
6. Use the timer facility on your IWB, if you have one, to make five minutes a real five minutes. Allow pupils to see the time counting down. Or ask a pupil to be a timekeeper and announce the end of the time allocated.
7. Include a competitive element to your lesson if it's appropriate.
8. Try using fast-paced music. Alistair Smith suggests epic movie soundtracks, such as Star Wars. For the last 30 seconds use TV's Countdown music.
9. Set tasks that rely on pupils needing to have their contribution ready to share. They might not mind failing to complete a task if they think someone else in the class will take responsibility for answering. If they know they have to share their personal work with a partner or demonstrate to the class they will, perhaps, feel a greater pressure to complete it.
10. In an able group, regularly ascribe the roles of chairperson or lead learner to pupils who will then take on the mantle of responsibility and help maintain momentum and focus during tasks.

You are nearly there!

1. Use pupils to provide the plenary. Ask an able or willing pupil early in the lesson to collect their findings to present to the class at the end of the lesson.
2. If you are taking feedback during the lesson enlist a pupil to record ideas on the board while you lead the discussion.
3. Keep end of lesson plenaries short and focused: 'You have two minutes to write down two facts you have learned this lesson', or, 'turn to your neighbour and tell them two reasons for...'
4. Have pupils clear away in plenty of time and stand behind their chairs properly dressed before the bell goes. You need to end the lesson promptly so that you can begin your next pace-driven lesson on time!

Conclusions

Well-paced lessons for able pupils seem to require two major elements: considered planning and the establishment of systems and routines. The benefit is a well-structured lesson in which pupils play an active and responsible part.

With time the pace becomes second nature; helpful to you and to pupils' accelerated learning and productive and energetic rather than exhausting. Don't feel you have to give 150% while they are giving only 50%. In a lesson injected with pace you will have done the planning but the lesson will go quickly and pupils should be the ones who are tired by the end.