Do you ever feel as though you can’t get into a rhythm during class or that days feel choppy? Perhaps you plan well, with all your “ducks in a row,” yet they keep straying from the row. Why? Most likely you are experiencing trouble with lesson flow.

Lesson flow is how individual parts of a lesson work as a whole, taking into account timing and transitions. Thinking through these elements during planning will help you go from “stop and go” lessons to ones that flow as smoothly as the Mississippi River.

Timing
When planning a lesson, consider how much time each element will require. These questions can help:

• Do you have a focus assignment?
• How long will you give students to work on this activity?
• What will you do while they work?
• How long will you spend going over the activity as a class?

Based on your answers, assign a time frame for the activity and write it in your lesson plan. For example, you may plan the focus activity for 8:00–8:10 a.m. or, for upper-level teachers with multiple classes, simply allow 10 minutes. Do this for each lesson part: introduction, discussion, activities, evaluations, and closure. Assigned times will keep you from spending 30 minutes on a 10-minute activity.

Pacing is another part of timing. When giving direct instruction, engaging in a discussion, or completing an activity, maintain an even pace. If students seem confused or frustrated, you may be rushing them. If they are bored or distracted, your pace may be dragging. Pacing takes time to develop, so work at it until you feel your rhythm.

Transitions
Lead students from one part of the lesson to the next with a transition. Transitions are to completing a lesson what stepping-stones are to crossing a stream—the right ones easily lead you from one side to the other. Stepping from the introduction into direct instruction requires transitioning with words and actions that direct students’ attention. In studying the medieval era in England, for example, you might introduce the topic with short video clips from A Knight’s Tale, showing a jousting session, sword fight, and the dance. Students then could create a chart headed with “Authentic” and “Modern Life,” on which they classify elements from the clips under these categories.

To transition from the introductory activity to direct instruction, you might have students discuss their entries while you create a class chart on an overhead or whiteboard. You might say, “Excellent chart, class. Now let’s take a look at _____” (one item listed on the chart); or “How do the items listed under ‘Authentic’ work together? Do any of them fit in a broad category?” Students might say that armor, jousts, and chargers are all things used by a knight, which could prompt discussion on a knight’s role during the Middle Ages.

Transitions are more than clapping to signal change or providing questions to fill time. They are planned. After direct instruction on a knight’s role, you must transition to an activity that reinforces learning. “Okay, we’re done with that now, so let’s move on to our activity” is direct, but abrupt. That transition is comparable to driving a standard-transmission car for the first time. You change gears, but the ride is abrupt and jerky, and the passengers (your students) may be distracted from making connections in the lesson. A good transition lets the clutch out slowly and smoothly as you move to the next lesson element.

Planning timing and transitions between parts of the lesson helps you create and direct flow in your lessons, moving both you and your students from point A to point B with few stops and starts. Try it for a day of instruction as smooth as the Mississippi River!

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