



## Direct Instruction: Design and Delivery Features for Successful Student Learning in an Intensive Intervention Setting

**Kit Marshall, Ph.D.** Action Learning Systems

The purpose, efficacy, and even the definition of direct instruction have a wide range of advocates and adversaries. Standards, accountability, and an authentic focus on ALL students learning at high levels have created a new surge in effective use of time and program selection based on proven student achievement results.

As with most methodologies, direct instruction should be defined by its first-level principles—those characteristics that set it apart. Depending on the advocate, direct instruction may have three, five, seven, or more “basics” that distinguish it from less structured approaches. Regardless of how a particular program identifies itself, hundreds of correlation studies of direct instruction versus any other methodology have shown that no program specifically designed for struggling readers measures up to the success of direct instruction. So, what might be a clear definition for direct instruction, and what are its first-level principles?

Most advocates can agree on certain underlying principles of authentic direct instruction. Foremost among these is that one of its major goals is the maximization of student learning time and, as a result, student academic achievement (Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun 2003). Academic Learning Time (ALT) includes three key aspects, all of which are dealt with extensively in the literature of direct instruction:

- Allocated Time (time dedicated to a task)

- Engagement Rate (the degree to which an individual student is attending and attempting to learn the task)
- Success Rate (how successful the student is in terms of mastery, usually 80% or better)

A second defining principle of direct instruction is that it is two-pronged: it must be understood as an instructional design system and a delivery system.

### Design System of Direct Instruction: Focus and Alignment

Many direct instruction programs are highly scripted, providing maximum control of both teacher behavior and student response. Others provide key teaching routines and phrases and acceptable student responses with a gradual release as these are internalized and incorporated into the daily lessons. The scripted nature of direct instruction is irrefutably rigorous, but has often been interpreted as detracting from the professional judgment of the teacher. An alternative view suggests that a program that has high regard for the complexity of teaching provides extensive support based on a strong research foundation. This, in turn, allows teachers to concentrate on instruction rather than spend their time and effort designing their own daily lessons. The common goal of all teaching is to achieve the highest level of ALT possible, and this is especially crucial with older, struggling learners for whom every moment is a gained or lost opportunity.

Two critical goals are achieved through the design features of direct instruction: clear *Focus* on what is to be learned and tight *Alignment* of every aspect of what is to be learned. The degree to which *Focus* and *Alignment* are achieved in program design will vary from extreme control to gradual release as rules, routines, and procedures become habituated behaviors for teachers and students. Standard features that address *Focus* include these:

- procedures for motivating and securing student attention
- effective presentation of stimulus events
- securing responses from students
- reinforcing and correcting responses

A second major feature of direct instruction design includes strategies used to sequence learning objectives and the tasks used to teach objectives. The standard design features that address *Alignment* include these:

- selection of general cases (once a student learns some examples of a “set,” the student can do all members of a set)
- keeping errors to a minimum and applying explicit correctives
- teaching of the essentials
- providing for adequate practice

Programs deemed to be “direct and explicit” should be based on these two design features—*Focus* and *Alignment*—and result in higher levels of student achievement.

## Delivery of Direct Instruction: Expectations and Opportunity

Delivery of instruction in a direct, explicit, and systematic manner requires adding two delivery principles to the design principles of *Focus* and *Alignment*.

The first principle of delivery, *Expectations for Success*, includes these features:

- explicit and frequent task-specific reinforcement and positive consequences to strengthen motivation and attention
- knowledge of results through frequent, brief, formative assessments
- conscious and appropriate orientation by the teacher to the forward progress that is expected and achieved by each student, in both public and private interaction
- frequent and clear exit pathways to the Core Program for intervention students

The second principle of delivery, *Opportunities to Learn*, includes these features:

- clear instructional routines that repeat throughout programs in a predictable manner
- prompts, cues, correctives, visual models and demonstrations, graphic organizers, and ongoing refocusing on what is being learned and how well it is to be learned
- gateways to higher levels of understanding through bridging activities and increasingly complex academic vocabulary
- proactive management including proximity to students and multiple response modes
- practice, practice, practice!

## References

- Joyce, B.; M. Weil; and E. Calhoun. 2003. *Models of Teaching, 7th Edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Marshall, K. 2003. *Effective Teaching*. Professional Educators' Press, Inc.
- Rosenshine, B. 2002. “Converging Findings on Classroom Instruction,” in *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence*, A. Molnar, ed. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.