Prioritizing the Standards Using R.E.A.L. Criteria

"In the absence of an agreed-upon set of criteria for prioritizing the standards, educators will, out of necessity, make up their own."
-Larry Ainsworth

Whether working in Texas, which has categorized the Essential Knowledge and Skills into readiness and supporting standards, or in the 46 states that adopted the Common Core, teachers routinely ask themselves the same questions: Are some standards more important than others? Which standards will students need in the next class, course or grade level? Will all the standards be tested?

During a recent team meeting teachers were given a sample unit plan and asked to 'identify what was important for students to learn' before an upcoming assessment. Teachers embraced the task but as they worked to identify the requisite standards for the upcoming unit, it became obvious that each individual was using their own unique criteria to prioritize what was essential for students to learn. The result was several different and competing sets of standards based on the contrasting views of individual teachers. Agreement on the unit's essential outcomes remained an elusive goal.

Larry Ainsworth argues that this experience is not unique to a single district, school or team. He suggests that, "left to their own professional opinions when faced with the task of narrowing a voluminous number of student learning outcomes, educators naturally pick and choose those they know best, like best, the ones for which they have materials and lesson plans or activities, and those most likely to appear on state tests." Reaching consensus on a unit's essential outcomes is important but many teachers wonder where to begin the task of prioritizing an overwhelming number of standards.

Using the R.E.A.L. Criteria to Prioritize the Standards

In response to this dilemma, Ted Horrell and his colleagues in Shelby County, Tennessee have translated criteria first developed by Reeves and Ainsworth into an easy to remember acronym. Using the R.E.A.L. criteria (Readiness, Endurance, Assessed, and Leverage), teachers collaborate around whether a particular standard should be considered a priority. An example for each of the four categories is listed below.

Readiness: The 'R' stands for Readiness. This standard provides students with essential knowledge and skills necessary for success in the next class, course or grade level. Here is an example of a Readiness standard.

> Algebra I Standard: *Manipulate formulas and solve literal equations.*

Student proficiency in this standard is necessary for success in subsequent math classes including Geometry and Algebra II. Students who cannot demonstrate these skills would not be ready to advance to the next level of instruction.

Endurance: The 'E' represents Endurance. This standard provides students with knowledge and skills that are useful beyond a single test or unit of study. Here is an example of an Endurance standard.

> English 9-10 Standard: *Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.*

This standard, in particular the skill of providing an objective summary of written passages, will be required for future high school and col-

lege courses. It is also likely to be an essential skill in many professions and in everyday life. The standard has a high degree of endurance.

Assessed: The 'A' represents Assessed. This standard will be assessed on upcoming state and national exams. Here is an example of a standard reflecting the Assessed criteria.

> Algebra I Standard: *Order and classify rational numbers.*

Although ordering numbers is a vital part of the math curriculum that most students master at an early age, classifying rational numbers is a skill that is not an essential building block for understanding future concepts, nor does it have much practical application outside of the math curriculum. However, there are questions on the ACT and PSAT that require students to use this specific skill—a fact that would have to be considered when prioritizing this standard.

Leverage: The 'L' corresponds to Leverage. This standard will provide students with the knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines. Here is an example of a standard reflecting the Leverage criteria.

> Physical Science Standard: *Choose, construct, and analyze appropriate graphical representations for a data set.*

Though it is part of the physical science curriculum, this standard has significant leverage. Students will be expected to apply these skills in future science classes as well as in other content areas such as social studies, career and technical education, and math.

Should Teachers Prioritize the Standards?

Educators on both sides of this question make passionate arguments for and against the idea of prioritizing standards. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the truth is teachers are prioritizing standards all the time and effective principals take advantage of the significant benefits the process has for their schools.

Collaboratively prioritizing the standards creates greater clarity around what teachers should teach and students should learn. Many teachers find the process of prioritizing standards allows them to see how one standard overlaps with other standards. Furthermore, prioritizing the standards sharpens the focus on what students should learn which promotes development of better assessments and helps identify which students will need more time and support. This kind of knowledge fosters more efficient planning and more efficient sharing of resources.

Prioritizing the standards also encourages teachers to embrace more effective instructional practices by reducing the pressure to simply cover the material. According to Ainsworth, "the consensus among educators nationwide is that in-depth instruction of 'essential' concepts and skills is more effective than superficially 'covering' every concept in the textbook."

Perhaps the biggest argument in favor of prioritizing standards is the positive effect the process has on sharpening the pedagogy and deepening the content knowledge of teachers. Teams who prioritize the standards recognize that in many ways, the process is as important as the product. Carefully analyzing the standards, debating the merits of individual standards, and coming to consensus on the most essential standards helps everyone gain a more thorough understanding of what teachers should teach and students should learn.

If Everything is Important, Then Nothing is Important

To paraphrase the famous quote, "If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority."The question is not whether teachers will prioritize the standards but how will teachers prioritize the standards. Will teachers use a unique set of criteria formed by individuals working in isolation or will they prioritize the standards based upon a common and agreed upon set of criteria developed collaboratively while working as a team?

The answer is to embrace our collective responsibility, decide together what is most important for students to know and be able to do, and prioritize our teaching around the most important things. Insisting teams collaboratively prioritize the standards using R.E.A.L. criteria provides an important leverage point for principals. ■

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References

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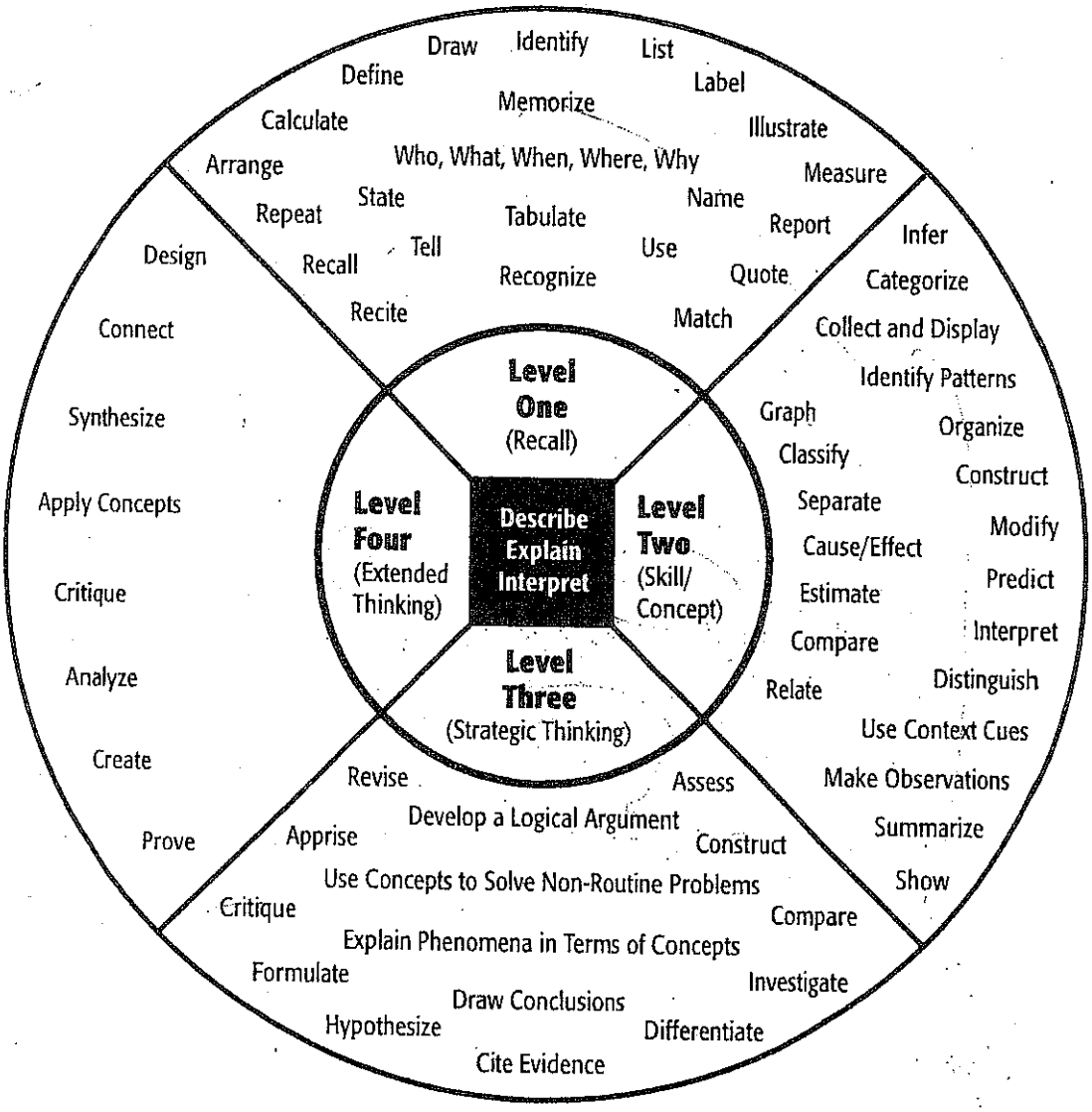
Read more from Dr. Many at http://bit.ly/manyarchive. Email your thoughts and feedback to admin@tepsa.org.

Depth of Knowledge (DOK) Levels



Level One Activities	Level Two Activities	Level Three Activities	Level Four Activities
Recall elements and details of story structure, such as sequence of events, character, plot and setting.	Identify and summarize the major events in a narrative.	Support ideas with details and examples.	Conduct a project that requires specifying a problem, designing and conducting an experiment, analyzing its data, and reporting results/ solutions.
Conduct basic mathematical calculations.	Use context cues to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words.	Use voice appropriate to the purpose and audience.	Apply mathematical model to illuminate a problem or situation.
Label locations on a map.	Solve routine multiple-step problems.	Identify research questions and design investigations for a scientific problem.	Analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources.
Represent in words or diagrams a scientific concept or relationship.	Describe the cause/effect of a particular event.	Develop a scientific model for a complex situation.	Describe and illustrate how common themes are found across texts from different cultures.
Perform routine procedures like measuring length or using punctuation marks correctly.	Identify patterns in events or behavior.	Determine the author's purpose and describe how it affects the interpretation of a reading selection.	Design a mathematical model to inform and solve a practical or abstract situation.
Describe the features of a place or people.	Formulate a routine problem given data and conditions.	Apply a concept in other contexts.	
	Organize, represent and interpret data.		

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Four (Plus 1)Standards

To build clear learning targets we need to understand there are five kinds of Standards.

1. **Knowledge-** facts and concepts we want students to know
2. **Skills-** use knowledge and reasoning to act skillfully
3. **Reasoning** – use what they know to reason or solve problems
4. **Products-** use knowledge, reasoning, and skills to create a concrete product
5. **Disposition-** attitudes about school and learning

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