

4 Modes of teaching

For many years in Scotland, a standard way of considering types of lesson or lesson activity was known as the Four Modes of Learning. It provides a useful starting point for discussion. The four modes are:

- Exposition
- Discussion
- Activity
- Enquiry

The origin of this classification is in a government report on primary school teaching, and some of the categories are ill-defined and based more on superficial appearance than on purpose. Almost any form of whole-class teacher-led activity is classified as ‘exposition’, regardless of purpose. ‘Activity’ is explained by examples such as painting and making things, and ‘enquiry’ in terms of individual pupil projects and more generally ‘looking things up’. Some major activities don’t fit easily into any category, for instance scientific experiments or creative writing.

It is also important to recognize, when using such categories, that any one can vary in quality of *thought and participation*.

- i) Exposition can involve a straightforward lecture, or it can be more interactive by asking thought-provoking questions, inviting short responses and contributions.
- ii) Conversely, often when teachers say they have had a ‘discussion’, it is little more than whole-class questioning.
- iii) Learning from ‘activity’ also requires thinking, reflection, planning. For example, a good science experiment may involve inviting pupils to make predictions, engage in planning, and debating alternative conclusions.
- iv) Enquiry can degenerate into copying from encyclopaedias or the internet. To be worthwhile, enquiry should involve discussing problems, forming hypotheses, understanding possible bias in sources or insufficiency of evidence.

It is crucial to consider whether a mode of activity is *appropriate to purpose*, e.g. acquisition of factual knowledge, formation of opinions, developing skills of interpretation, artistic skills and creativity.

Equally, the quality of a lesson may depend on the *sequencing* of particular modes of activity.

This manual builds on the original ‘Four Modes of Teaching’ and brings them up to date in terms of current curriculum:

Explaining and presenting knowledge

Short lecture

Interactive presentation

Questioning to verify knowledge and correct misunderstandings

Intervening to provide supplementary clarification

Discussion and other pupil talk

Small group discussion

Formal debate

Simulation and role play

Activity

Creative expression

Designing and making

Scientific experiment

Enquiry

Using books as sources

Critical enquiry using a variety of sources incl. ICT

Social surveys and interviews

Suggestions for discussion

- A. Consider and discuss some ways in which pupil participation can be increased and made more thoughtful and creative in whole-class sessions.
- B. How much structure and guidance is needed to focus small group discussion? How can the need for focus be balanced against the need to give pupils opportunity to articulate, explore, disagree, and so on?
- C. What might 'activity' involve in a particular subject? What kinds of thinking, talking, writing or visual sketching (before, during and after) would enhance the quality of learning from the activity.
- D. What skills do pupils need for enquiry learning, in order not to take at face value what the sources tell them?
- E. Discuss some issues and possibilities of sequencing. For example, how can discussion or enquiry in small groups articulate with the need for coherence in the whole class's learning? How can learners share their findings?