

# PROBLEM-BASED THREE PART LESSON INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

Problem-centered teaching opens the mathematics classroom to exploring, conjecturing, reasoning, and communication. This model is very different from the “transmission” model in which teachers tell students facts and demonstrate procedures and then students memorize the facts and practice the procedures. This model looks at instruction in three phases: launching, explore, and summary.

## Launch

In the first phase, the teacher launches the problem with the whole class. This involves helping students understand the problem setting, the mathematical context, and the challenge. The following questions can help the teacher prepare for the launch:

- What are students expected to do?
- What do the students need to know to understand the context of story and the challenge of the problem?
- What difficulties can I foresee for students?
- How can I keep from giving away too much of the problem?

The launch phase is also the time when the teacher introduces new ideas, clarifies definitions, reviews old concepts, and connects the problem to past experiences of the student. It is critical that, while giving students a clear picture of what is expected, the teacher leaves the potential of the task intact. He or she must be careful not to tell too much and lower the challenge of the task to something routine or to cut off the rich array of strategies that may evolve from an open launch of the problem.

## Explore

In the explore phase, students work individually, in pairs, in small groups, or occasionally as a whole class to solve the problem. As they work, they gather data, share ideas, look for patterns, make conjectures, and develop problem-solving strategies. It is inevitable that students will exhibit variation in their progress. The teacher’s role during this phase is to move about the classroom, to observe individual performance, and to select specific student work samples to be shared during the summary phase. The teacher helps students persevere in their work and differentiate their work by asking appropriate questions and providing confirmation and redirection where needed. For students who are interested in and capable of deeper investigation, the teacher may provide additional challenges related to the problem. Although it is imperative that all students be given enough time and opportunity to thoroughly work on the problem, it is not always necessary for every student to finish the problem at this time.

The following questions can help the teacher prepare for the explore phase:

- How will I organize the students to explore this problem? (Individuals? Pairs? Groups? Whole class?)
- What materials will students need?
- How should students record and report their work?
- What different strategies can I anticipate they might use?
- What questions can I ask to encourage student conversations, thinking, and learning?
- What questions can I ask to focus their thinking if they become frustrated?
- What questions can I ask to challenge students if the initial question is “answered”?

## Summary

The summary phase of instruction begins when students have gathered sufficient data or made sufficient progress toward solving the problem. In this phase, students discuss their solutions as well as the strategies they used to approach the problem, organize the data, and find the solution. During the discussion, the teacher helps students enhance their understanding of the mathematics in the problem and guide them in refining their strategies into efficient, effective problem-solving techniques.

Although the summary discussion is led by the teacher who has collected specific student work samples he or she would like shared, students play a significant role. Ideally, they should pose conjectures, question each other, offer alternatives, provide reasons, refine their strategies and conjectures and make connections. As a result of the discussion, students should become more skillful at using the ideas and techniques that come out of the experience with the problem.

During the summary phase, content goals of the problem, investigation, and unit can be addressed, allowing the teacher to assess the degree to which students are developing their mathematical knowledge. At this time, teachers can make additional instructional decisions that will enable all students to reach the mathematical goals of the activities.

The following questions can help the teacher prepare for the summary:

- How can I help the students make sense of and appreciate the variety of methods that may be used?
- How can I orchestrate the discussion by choosing specific student work samples that will help students summarize their thinking about the problems?
- What concepts or strategies need to be emphasized?
- What ideas do *not* need closure at this time?
- What definitions or strategies do we need to generalize?
- What connections and extensions can be made?
- What new questions might arise and how do I handle them?
- What will I do to follow-up, practice, or apply the ideas after the summary?