

The Five-Room Dungeon Approach to Lesson Planning

Are your lessons stuck in a rut? Do you feel like you are “rinsing and repeating” two-to-three times per week? Does your content change, but the structure of your lesson always remain the same? If so, you or your students may be getting a bit bored in class. Perhaps you can take a page from the tabletop roleplaying game community to freshen up your approach.

[The Five-Room Dungeon](#) is a method Gamemasters¹ can use to keep their adventures new and exciting without having to put in a lot of extra work for each session. You don’t need to know anything about these games to understand the approach: a good adventure has a limited number of core elements, and by identifying the core elements of each adventure, and maybe altering the order in which they appear, you’ll end up with a unique adventure every time without wasting much time and effort in the planning stage.

Let’s apply this to lesson planning. A good lesson has a limited number of core elements. I’ll identify five², to really lean into the five-room dungeon aspect:

The Five Elements of a Lesson Plan

The Objective

You have probably heard that your lesson needs to have one or more learning objectives. I think that’s right, and I won’t belabor the point here. Both you and your students should clearly know what the goal of the lesson is, and why it is important. So, expressing and explaining the objective should be part of your lesson.

The Lecture

Lecturing has a [bad reputation](#), but keep in mind the objection to lecturing is that you shouldn’t do it *exclusively and all the time*. It is still fine to deliver pertinent information to your students. If you really don’t like the word “lecture,” you can call this element “The Information” or something. But this is the component of your lesson where you convey information to your students.

The Activity

You have probably heard that active learning is effective.³ I think that’s right, and I won’t belabor the point here. A good lesson has some element where students are working with the content. Types of

¹ The Gamemaster (or Dungeon Master if you are playing Dungeons & Dragons) is the person who runs the game session. They are in charge of telling the story, adjudicating the rules, and letting players know if their actions were successful. Very much like a teacher, actually.

² If you think I didn’t identify the five most crucial elements, you can modify it. Maybe there are more than five. I still think the approach can be helpful if it is a six-room dungeon approach, or if the “rooms” are somewhat different.

³ Freeman, S., Eddy, S.L., McDonough, M., Smith, M.K., Okorafor, N., Jordt, H., and Wenderoth, M.P., (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 111 (23), 8410-8415.

Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93 (3), 1-9

activities are many and varied, so you will have lots of choices for offering this element in your lesson.

The Assessment

You will want to know if your students are learning what they are supposed to learn. But don't wait for the big exam, the final paper, or some other high-stakes assessment. Both you and your students should find out as soon as possible how things are going. A good lesson is going to have some sort of knowledge check in the session.

The Connection

The hallmark difference between experts and novices is how they organize their knowledge.⁴ A good lesson will help your students fit what they are learning into a larger schema. Explicitly point out to students how the lesson fits within a bigger picture.

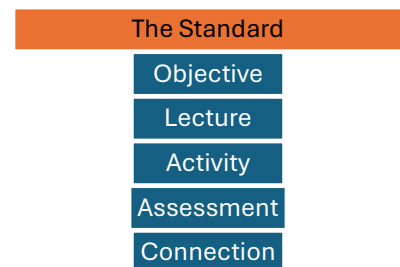
Identify your Core Elements

A first good use of the five-room dungeon approach to lesson planning is to be sure you are using all five elements. Don't leave anything out.⁵ Additionally, you can use the elements to make sure your lesson is coherent. The elements should relate to each other. The Assessment should be *of* The Objective. The Activity might be *practice for* The Assessment. The Lecture might *elucidate* The Connection. And so many more relations are possible.

Additionally, the five-room dungeon format can save you time. Use it as a mental schema to help you more quickly build the parts of a lesson you need. Instead of worrying about how to fill 50-80 minutes and starting from scratch every time, instead make sure you have your five elements identified, build each one, and then adjust how long each one takes.

Reorganize your Lesson

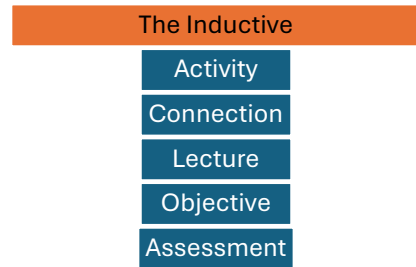
Here is where the five-room dungeon approach really shines. I think a good, standard lesson might offer the five elements in the order presented above. Start with The Objective, give The Lecture so students have information to work with, have your students do The Activity to make use of the information, check on their learning with The Assessment, and then end by helping them understand where their new knowledge fits in the greater scheme of things with The Connection. This probably sounds sensible to most people. And you should do it. But consider...



⁴ Svinicki, M. D. (2004). *Learning and motivation in the postsecondary classroom* (Vol. 34). John Wiley & Sons, 41-42

⁵ At least not right away. As you gain expertise, feel free to experiment with lesson plans that omit one of the elements, if you are sure the element is not necessary. Perhaps you try a lesson that has no lecture at all – it is 100% student discovery.

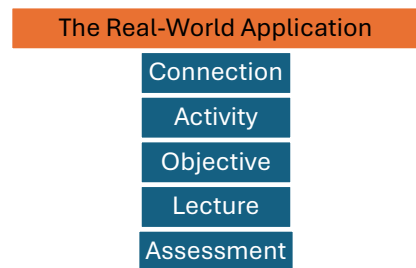
The standard order presumes a deductive approach to learning. You set the goal and give the information first, then the practice and assessment are meant to consolidate or expand upon the



information already given. But lots of students learn better from a more **inductive approach**. It is hard for many students to understand the information right away; they may need to work with it a bit before it makes sense. Therefore, you might rearrange the order so The Activity happens first, letting students work with some concrete examples right away. Then you might offer The Connection, to help students begin to understand the relevant context. Then offer The Lecture, but in

this scenario your students have had a concrete experience (The Activity) that your lecture can reference to help them understand the concept. Then reveal The Objective, which might be more meaningful now that they have been working on it for a while. End with The Assessment, so you can find out how well it went.

And perhaps now you see that you can arrange the elements in all sorts of ways, to offer very different lessons based on the same raw materials. Maybe you want to stress **the real-world application** of a concept, so you start with The Connection, then do The Activity as a proof of



concept, then identify The Objective, offer The Lecture to fill in the gaps, and end with The Assessment.

You don't have to limit yourself to one instance of each element. If you want students to improve on a skill, you might start with The Assessment as sort of a pre-test, and then have it show up again later in the lesson as a post-test. Perhaps The Lecture is best doled out in very small chunks between other elements.

Perhaps you have several Activities throughout your lesson.

Let the nature of your content help you decide the order of your elements. Some things may best be done in the standard way. Other things, not so much. But if all else is equal, variety is probably good, so shake up the shape of your lesson.

Go Make Exciting ~~Adventures~~ Lessons

I hope this approach encourages you to create some exciting lessons, but without having to do much extra work. Make sure the important elements are there, make sure they are related in a coherent manner, but otherwise the sky's the limit.