Giving Clear Directions for a Task
Coaching Guide

Module Summary

In this module, teachers will:
- Connect the concept of clear and explicit directions to issues of fairness and equity.
- Identify the criteria for clear and explicit directions.
- Examine best practices for effectively delivering directions.

Module activities:
In this module, teachers learn about the connection between clear and explicit directions, student behavior, and issues of fairness and equity. They learn a step-by-step process for crafting clear directions, and the criteria that effective directions should meet. They engage in a practice scenario where they help craft a new set of directions to help a struggling teacher. This module is accompanied by a resource (attached to the end of this document) that provides a template for planning and executing an effective set of directions.

Key Takeaways

Essential knowledge:
Many teachers (especially those from middle-class backgrounds) tend to use indirect forms of communication when conveying directions or behavioral expectations to students (Calarco, 2014; Delpit, 1988). This can be seen in phrases such as “Can you raise your hand before you leave your seat?” or “Work quietly with your partner.” These examples – as well as many others – contain implied expectations that are not explicitly stated. The problem is that in order to be successful in any classroom, students need to understand – rather than having to guess – how their teacher is expecting them to behave in a given situation. This is why teachers must give clear and explicit directions for any task. It is necessary for ensuring that all students (not just the students who can infer the unstated desires of the teacher) can be successful.

Essential skill:
Effective directions should include a what, a why, and a how:
- **What** – Teacher explains in clear and simple terms what students are going to be doing.
  - Ex: “For the next 20 minutes, we are going to be peer-editing our writing.”
- **Why** – Provides a rationale for the activity or task.
  - Ex: “We peer edit because getting someone’s feedback on your work helps you notice things about it that you might not have seen yourself. We are going to help each other become stronger writers and editors.”
- **How** - Explains the steps or process that students will follow to complete the task or learning activity, as well as the expectations for movement, volume level, and behavior.
  - Ex: “1) Exchange papers with your partner; 2) Read your partner’s paper; 3) Use your pen to circle words that you think might be misspelled; 4) Use your yellow highlighter to highlight parts that were unclear, or that need more elaboration. Use your green highlighter to highlight parts that were strong, or well-explained; 5) For anything that you highlight, use your pen to write comments in the margin; 6) After you finish giving feedback on your peer’s paper, use the editing checklist to check off which requirements have been met; 7) While you are editing and giving feedback you may ask your partner questions about what they wrote if you need clarification. Do this with your 12-inch voices. Otherwise, work silently; etc.”

1 For a complex task that involves multi-step directions, it may be wise to “chunk” the directions rather than giving them to students all at once. It also may be helpful to post the directions (on the board, on chart paper) so students have a visual reference for the directions.
There are some additional guidelines that teachers should follow when they deliver their directions to students. These include:

- **Avoid verbal fillers** – Make the directions as concise as possible.
- **Use student-friendly language** – Ensure that the directions are comprehensible for you students, given age and developmental level.
- **Pause appropriately** - If your directions have multiple steps, you might consider having students follow them one or a few steps at a time, rather than all at once.
- **Check for understanding** – Ensure all students understand directions, then provide an explicit cue to begin.
- **Give directions as positive statements** - If there is something that you want to make sure your students do, say it as a statement. Directions should not be given in the form of a question.

**Essential mindset:**

It is not fair to hold students to a behavioral expectation (like working silently, raising hand before speaking, etc.) if that expectation has never been made clear. Behavioral expectations may vary depending on situation and task, so it is essential to provide clear directions in order to set students up for success.

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**The Skill in Action**

Teachers who are skilled at giving clear directions explain exactly what they want students to do, and how they want students to do it. They explain the directions, take student questions, check for student understanding, and cue students to begin. For multi-step tasks or activities, teachers will post the directions and refer students back to them as necessary.

In addition, teachers take the time to explain the why behind a task, and do not simply expect the students to do it simply because “the teacher said so.”

Teachers who struggle with clear directions give vague or unspecific directions for a task. They expect students to infer what they are supposed to do, or assume that students already “know” what the teacher wants.

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**Questions for Discussion**

*The following is a list of suggested questions for engaging in a reflective dialogue with the teacher, either before or after he or she attempts to implement the skill.*

- How are clear directions related to issues of fairness?
- Why are clear and explicit directions important for all students?
- What components should effective directions include?
- When explaining the “how” of a task, why is it important to state expectations for volume level, movement, and participation?
- Do you think the directions you give are clear? Has your opinion changed since completing this module?
- What should you keep in mind when delivering directions to students?
- What help do you need?

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**Standards**

**InTASC:**

3a – The teacher understands how learner diversity can affect communication and knows how to communicate effectively in differing environments.
## Giving Clear Directions for a Task

### Your Directions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The WHAT: How will you explain to students what you want them to do?</th>
<th>What Students Will Hear &amp; Understand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look at the directions you just created in the column to the left. Then, answer each of these questions from the perspective of one of your students. If your directions are not explicit enough for students to be able to answer each of these questions, go back and change them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ What are we going to be doing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Why are we doing it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional: Why are we doing it this way?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ What steps or process will we follow?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Optional: What is the first step? The second? What should you do if...?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ What is the expected noise or volume level for each step?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Optional: What will it look like? What will it sound like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ How will we know if we did this correctly?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Any (or all) of the above questions can be used as checks-for-understanding when you deliver these directions to your students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The WHY: How will you explain the rationale for the task to your students?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The HOW: What are the steps you want students to follow?</th>
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</table>

### How You Will Deliver Your Directions

Use this space to create a plan for how you will deliver these directions to your students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How You Will Deliver Your Directions</th>
<th>What Students Will Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look at the plan you just created in the column to the left. Pretend that you execute it exactly as written. Answer these questions from the perspective of your students. If you answer “No” to one or more of the following items, consider revising your plan.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Were the directions modeled for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Did the teacher emphasize key parts of the directions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Were the directions posted where you could see them?</td>
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<td>□ Did you have multiple opportunities to ask questions?</td>
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<td>□ Did the teacher check that you understood the directions before beginning the activity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Do you know how to ask for help if you get confused?</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Was there a signal to begin?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A Step-by-Step Sequence for Delivering Directions
(The following sequence represents one set of steps you could follow when delivering directions to students.)

1. Use an attention-getting signal.
2. In a concise and student-friendly way, explain the WHAT and WHY.
3. Introduce the cue word or signal to begin.
   
   Ex: “When I say GO,” “When your hear me clap,” “When I ring the bell…”
5. Model or have students model.
6. Ask for questions.
7. Check for understanding.
8. Cue to begin.

Adapted from: