The Role of a Pacing Guide  
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Henry Kranendonk  
Milwaukee Public Schools

Clearly a pacing guide can be an effective tool – it can also, however, be an ineffective one. How it is used over time will be a continual challenge.

Possibly, one could discuss the use of a guide of this type in one of three categories:

“The Good”
“The Bad”
“The Ugly”

To discuss each type of use, remember the overall reasons why a guide of this type was created:

(1) To provide focus;

(2) To challenge teachers with important questions such as:
   “How are my students doing as defined by Targets/Descriptors?”
   “Am I adequately planning my year to provide a balanced mathematics program teaching all five content standards of mathematics and the process standard?”
   “Am I adequately planning my year to provide grade level expectations?”

(3) To identify and effectively use classroom assessments.

“The Ugly”
An “ugly” implementation of a pacing guide would be simply to ignore the students. A teacher sees the suggested timeline as something fixed without a reflection on the progress or lack of progress of the students. This type of implementation can be identified when the primary word used in planning instruction is “covered” as in “I must cover all of these points.”

A pacing guide can never be viewed as the standard by which all students will learn. Some students need more time and explanations - plowing forward with an inadequate understanding of some topics results in leaving students behind inappropriately.

Another “ugly” use of a guide is to see the discrete topics (in our case, the state descriptors) as units of learning unto themselves. By this I mean, a teacher addresses a descriptor and then moves on to the next descriptor. Learning mathematics in this way will clearly disengage students; it will also result in temporary mastery of a subset of skills that will be lost in mathematics problems that pull together these topics (problems that are characteristic of the WKCE).
“The Bad”
A “bad” implementation is one that does not link the suggested plan with formative classroom assessments. This type of implementation can be seen in classes in which the primary form of assessment is summative (chapter tests, large assessments that are graded and then put away). A guide is intended to provide “chucks” of what is expected to be learned by the students (in our case, these chunks are the state descriptors). Identifying CABS that help a teacher determine how a student is doing, and then planning from that work what is the next step cannot be lost in the frenzy to keep up with the pacing guide. A necessary tension that must be addressed by individual teachers is how a pacing guide and the feedback learned from good formative assessments work together. Teachers continually need to both reflect on what is happening in “real time” and what is expected to happen over the year as outlined by these guides.

“The Good”
So, essentially what is a good way to use this type of guide?

I suggest we think of the guide as a timeline that is marked by key “entry points” that might be illustrated in the following way:

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Entry  Next entry
Point   points
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At each entry point, a planned curriculum is identified. For example, if a teacher is using the “Investigations” or “CMP” resources, an investigation or a module is identified at the beginning of an entry point; other resources might result in chapters or sections of books being identified. The identification of the module or chapter is based on the decision that “this resource has a focus on a majority (not necessarily all) of the descriptors outlined in the guide.” The main point is that the curriculum resources address “the chunk”. During the time period indicated in the guide, CABS should continually guide a teacher as to whether students are mastering the important descriptors. The CABS should help a teacher decide what to do at the next entry point or the next “?”, namely, “I have reached the next entry point. Do I follow this entry point, or do I have need to re-adjust the timeline based on the formative feedback?” Clearly I advocate that teachers be empowered to answer that question based on the assessments.

Several scenarios exist that make this a complex process. For example, maybe the teacher should be encouraged to simply cut loose and begin a-new with the next “chunk” – “students were just not getting it, so let’s try a new perspective!” Possibly, a few more days on the current “chunk” is warranted before you move on – thus creating a revised
timeline. And possibly, a teacher may have to be selective on what was addressed, and not worry about every detail. The guide is good at providing detail - it is not good at providing a workable way that all of the detail makes sense.

I would remind teachers that not all of these details are going to be mastered; if a subset of descriptors is mastered at each entry point (evident by the CABS), then we will see incredible improvement in students’ mathematics achievement. If we focus on mastery of all of the descriptors, we will NOT see in our students’ the engagement necessary for sustained learning – student learning will reflect “mastery” to individual applications and not to the integration of the chunks or descriptors. An effective way to evaluate the question how to follow the guide’s timeline is to prioritize descriptors that are assessed; determine from those assessments if the next entry point should be adjusted.

I advocate we continually encourage teachers to keep a careful record of their implementation of the guide so that appropriate adjustments can be made in the future – maybe the chunks are too big, maybe too small, and maybe, there are places that we could identify where flexibility can be achieved by simply moving to another point in the timeline.

I hope this is not making the guides too complicated – in reality, they are guides that remind us of the important topics and skills expected for our students to master, and they suggest a way to organize the topics so that we can maximize our focus or our instruction. They help nudge us along, and hopefully they help us understand how to effectively evaluate the progress of our students. They hopefully do not separate effective instruction from our students. In other words, a guide should help plan instruction with an understood flexibility in these plans.

In summary:

1. Prioritize descriptors within an entry point.
2. Identify curriculum resources that address the descriptors at an entry point.
3. **Assess in small units** (and especially regarding the prioritized descriptors);
4. Using formative assessments, determine how to address the next entry point. (See CABS Summary form.)
5. Always keep in mind the students – teachers know their students, the district and designers of the pacing guide do not.
6. Remember, this guide provides focus; it will help prioritize, identify important formative assessments, and provide a nudge for moving forward; however, teachers must continually balance “real time” with “the pacing guide time.”
7. Guides must be continually examined – remember flexibility. Their primary value is in the resulting discussion and collaboration among teachers when effectively used.