Instructional Strategies and Teaching Methods: Are They One and the Same?

A View Inside the Truths and Misconceptions of these Similar Phrases

Rachel M. Mudrich

University of South Alabama

Dr. Davidson-Shivers

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Abstract

In the working world that we reside in today, specifically the world of education, there are many misconceptions made about phrases that have been overused and misused. Two such phrases are instructional strategies being intermixed with teaching methods. One must ask, are these two the same concept masquerading under different pseudonyms? With extensive research into the terms and the foundational basis they are derived from, we look at the similarities and differences between these two phrases and how they work independently and together to create an active and engaging learning experience. By viewing how they are used in real world situations, we see in the end the importance of both concepts to be able to be used standing together as well as standing alone.

*Keywords:* instructional strategies, teaching methods

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Many times in the professional and causal working world, you will here misconceptions drift about throughout the collaboration of coworkers. Concepts that create a stir amongst people, due to their controversial content, are what spark the fire under some to delve deeper into the research environment in order to reveal the truth and end the war of words. Is it a “Holiday Tree” or a “Christmas Tree”? Are you taking “Guided Study” class, or “Study Hall”? “Retract” or “Detention”? These are just a few examples of things that, depending on the person and place, can mean the same thing, or stand for two completely different ideas. One such concept that faces teachers is the terms ‘instructional strategies’ and ‘teaching methods’. If I were to ask, many teachers would state that those two terms are different names for the same thing. The purpose of this paper is to dig a bit deeper into each term, so that an informed decision about them can be made. I will state that, after years of teaching and conducting research on these terms, the phrases ‘instructional strategies’ and ‘teaching methods’ are speaking of two different thoughts that at times can intertwine within areas of use. How can you know the difference? Steps must be taken to research and review documented, credible literature to find out the true meaning behind the terms and see the similarities and differences, and develop the thesis from there. By looking at the definitions of the terms throughout literature, the use of each term in real world situations, misconceptions that are held about the two terms, and how one can better prepare themselves to correctly use these phrases in the future, a better understanding of instructional strategies and teaching methods can be held.

**Looking Into the Foundational Core of the Concepts**

As a teacher, I know that, at times, the terms ‘instructional strategies’ and ‘teaching methods’ are casually tossed about in relation to planning lesson. However, why would there be two phrases if they meant the same thing? It leads me to wonder if there is more to these phrases than the simple form in which they are used daily. The term ‘instructional strategy’ describes the general pieces of a set of instructional materials and the procedures that will be used with those materials to elicit particular learning outcomes. The basic thought here, is that the instructional strategy is how the lesson, or instruction, was delivered; the techniques that are used to get the objective across to the learners. This covers the materials involved, the direct instruction, guided instruction, and independent instruction, and how one assesses the outcome and overall success/failure of the lesson. Teaching methods, by definition, is the order or sequence that one uses to teach; the method or principle one follows to teach. Therefore, on paper, both terms seem to be covering the same concept: how instruction is presented. Due to the similarities of the paper definitions, often times in the professional world the terms are used interchangeably. There is no difference to many between the term ‘strategy’ and ‘method’; they are both just a process. Likewise, in doing research on the two phrases, I have found many articles and research materials also interchange teaching and instructional as well. The similarities and differences between the two phrases lie within the words that make up the phrases themselves, and how intricate they are researched.

**Known Factors of Instructional Strategies**

It is known in any working discipline, that if the audience isn’t interested, no real learning is taking place. The key to administering instruction is to “hook” the audience at the beginning, and keep them engaged throughout the learning process. The best way to do this is to use appropriate instructional strategies for the learners at hand. Instructional strategies were brought to the foreground of the educational world by Robert Marzano when he developed what is known has his Essential Nine strategies. These strategies are seen across education as being the nine strategies that aid in improving student achievement across the curriculums, over all grade levels. These nine strategies are introduced at the beginning of ones’ teaching career, in hopes that if one follows these as a guideline, the results will be high levels of student achievement. Marzano’s nine essential strategies are:

1. Identifying similarities and differences  
2. Summarizing and note taking  
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition  
4. Homework and practice  
5. Nonlinguistic representations  
6. Cooperative learning  
7. Setting objectives and providing feedback  
8. Generating and testing hypotheses  
9. Cues, questions, and advance organizers

As a teacher, it is known that you can and should use more than one of these strategies at any given time. There are times when the use of some of these strategies is not necessary, so it is really teacher discretion on which strategies to use based upon the learning objective.

**Brief meanings of the Essential Nine Strategies**

The first of Marzano’s Essential Nine Strategies in learning is to find or identify the similarities and differences in the materials. By doing this, students must analyze problems to see the components and segregate based upon the components into simplistic forms. This usually results in group or class discussions. The results for this type of strategy can be displayed in many different forms. The second strategy is summarizing and note taking. It has been said that the notes a child takes is his or her own understanding of the material being presented. When taking notes, a student must summarize and analyze the material in their own words, to bring out the main points for future study purposes. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition is another strategy that the teacher must take control over. Here, the teacher must monitor each students’ work and efforts, and make sure they are working to their fullest potential to achieve the desired outcome. In layman’s terms: no room for slackers!

Homework and practice, the next strategy, is one that aids in reinforcement of the taught objective. Students need to practice what they learned, in order to retain the information. Homework is a way to just reinforce the fact that the student did learn, and can perform the desired outcome without the aide of the instructor/teacher. Students should always be prepared for the work, and know why they are doing it, so that they aren’t going home and struggling or doing something that is irrelevant to what was learned in class. The most important part of homework is for the teacher to make sure they treat it as a priority, and check the work completed. Nothing causes more of a negative connotation on learning than a teacher who assigns homework just as busy work, and the students’ see that it goes unchecked, unaccounted for. That makes the students’ feel as if their time is wasted and taken advantage of, thus they will not put forth the effort for that teacher and/or subject area. The fifth strategy is nonlinguistic representation. Essentially, this is showing things without the use of words. Images, pictures, and other forms of visual representation provide a creative outlet for students. Cooperative learning, the sixth strategy, is one of the most frequently used strategies. In cooperative learning, students learn in groups. In a group setting, you get peer collaboration and positive support from the students. Groups must be within an appropriate size (3-5 members) in order for this strategy to be most effective.

The seventh strategy is one that many school system administrators are pushing into a higher level of importance in the daily routine of teachers. Setting objectives and providing feedback is important, because the students’ need to know what they are responsible for learning on a daily basis. They know that teachers are expected to be at school and teach them, and have all materials prepared. Therefore, it is important that the students’ also realize they have a job at school: to learn the objective presented to them, and look for feedback on their progression.

The generating and testing hypothesis strategy is great for inspiring students’ to take responsibility for learning and think out beyond their norm to other possibilities. Students need to be able to think up possibilities for outcomes and support that hypothesis with well thought out explanations. The final strategy is a combination of cues, questions, and advance organizers. These three things, in turn, help students build on their prior knowledge and enhance it with further learning. These types of prior knowledge questioning before a lesson will help generate thoughts for the lesson, and provide a better learning experience for the students as they work to answer those cues and questions. Robert Marzano, in composing this list of nine essential strategies for instruction, i.e. instructional strategies, has given instructors an essential checklist for every lesson presented. If the lesson includes one or more of these instructional strategies, then the students will have the opportunity to perform on higher academic levels and have a greater learning experience.

**Known Factors of Teaching Methods**

Teaching methods, to any teacher, is defined as how they teach. Some teachers use lecture and notes, some use video presentations, others use complete student guided teaching; regardless of the differences, these are all different methods, or process of teaching. Teaching methods are similar to instructional strategies in that at times these methods and strategies are one and the same. However, strategies are more of specific ideas and activities, and a method is the process you use to carry out that idea or activity. For example, you can use the instructional strategy of cooperative learning to teach your lesson, where students work in groups. However, your teaching method here would be how you set up that lesson, how you prepare the students for the group learning, how you facilitate the group learning as is it taking place, and so on. Both teaching methods and instructional strategies work together, and sometimes work the same. Both are flexible to be adapted to fit the learning environment and the audience at hand. Robert Gagne is the theorist whom we can credit for developing a good, foundational teaching method. To begin, as the instructor you must gain the attention of your audience. The key here is to know the audience going in. If the audience was, per say, a third grade classroom, I have to gain their attention in a different style than I would, say a room full of their parents. Regardless of the style, gaining the attention of the audience is a good starting point to lead your lesson. Next, describe the objective that is to be covered through this lesson. This ties back in with one of Marzano’s essential nine instructional strategies, # 7 – Setting objectives and providing feedback. This shows that it is important that the audience knows what outcome is expected from them as an audience; what are they supposed to learn? This way, the audience can self-monitor throughout the lesson: e.g. “I am supposed to know \_\_\_\_ and the end of this lesson and it is towards the end and I’m still confused. Perhaps now, I should ask a question.”

Also tying back into the instructional strategies is invoking prior knowledge in the audience. (Instructional Strategy #9) If I can get the audience’s minds reeling about things they already know about the topic, they begin the lesson feeling accomplished that they know a bit already. The next three steps to the teaching method is what, in many systems, has been renamed the “I Do, We Do, You Do” part of a lesson. The teacher starts by presenting the lesson to the audience, or giving direct instruction. Then, the teacher works with the class to practice the lesson, also called guided instruction. Then finally, the students’ practice the skill independently, independent instruction. These three steps must stay together, and must be presented in this order. As learners, we can attest that the sequence of things can help or hurt the learning experience, and this is one of those instances where the sequence of the presentation of the material is crucial for the learning to take place. Continuing through the foundational teaching method guide would bring us to providing feedback as the students’ work independently, to ensure they are following the correct steps and practicing correctly to learn correctly. In the end, I assess the lesson as a whole (success or failure?) and determine if the objective was met in this lesson. The final part of the flow of this teaching method is to have the students’ recreate the lesson objective at another time, to see if the material is retained. I often review the objective every few days, or when it comes up in other subject areas, just as a way to continually refresh the material. By following this base foundation put forth by Robert Gage, a teacher has the right and ability to tweak as they find the teaching method that fits for their style of teaching. However, each part of this method covers the essential parts of a successful lesson, as well as intertwining different instructional strategies that ensure high student achievement across all content areas.

**Real World Uses of Instructional Strategies and Teaching Methods**

Instructional strategies, as previously mentioned are the techniques used to give instruction. Many different resources in text and online give lists after lists of different instructional strategies that are out there, that can be tweaked to fit whichever situation you are in and to adapt to what type of audience you have at the time. The topic and audience will absolutely determine the instructional strategy that you will use. Case in point, if I am trying to get a first grade class excited about reading and making book choices, I may use the instructional strategy called ‘Book Talks’. In a book talk, the teacher preselects a book that he or she enjoyed. The teacher sits in front of the class, and states how excited that he or she is after a book they just finished, and wishes to share it with others so that they can enjoy it as well. The teacher shows the cover of the book, pointing out key features of a book: title, author, spine, dedication page, publisher information, and table of contents (if included). The teacher then conducts a book walk, where he or she does a brief flip-through of the book, showing off many of the pictures included. As he or she is turning through the book, the teacher does a brief summary of the general concepts of the story, without giving away any details that would ruin the book for another. At the end of the book walk, the teacher states if he or she enjoyed the book, and one reason why. This book could be the start of a display of a “Book of the Week” that is open to any student going and getting that book to read for themselves. After the teacher, the students can be encouraged to share a book they enjoy the next week, (one student at a time, perhaps assign days or weeks) and they get to pick the format they chose to share their book in. Creativity comes into play, by allowing them to dress up as characters, do a picture summary, and/or answer others questions about the book. This instructional strategy covers many objectives, as the students have to display the parts of a book to their peers, summarize the story, and actually enjoy the reading so that they can share with others. By making fun, interactive ways of doing things, students tend to get more involved.

Suppose the audience was and 8th grade honors English class, however. Then, this instructional strategy seems a bit simplistic to these advanced minds, so a different instructional strategy must be implemented. One such instructional strategy that is known and used is the use of debates. A debate, as a whole, is a great strategy that encourages thinking across curriculums and disciplines. In a debate, present a controversial topic: Television is a Bad Influence. The teacher would present the topic, and decide the teams and act as a moderator between ideas. Brainstorming first comes into play, which is another strategy. I have them think of the pros and cons (depending on what side they are on) of the topic at hand. Then they develop a well conceptualized argument by way of a writing assignment. This involves language arts, as well as research, in that they have to conduct research to develop a point that is factual based, not opinion based. When the actual debate is being held, peer collaboration and communication is involved to hear the sides, provide feedback and another viewpoint, and to be able to develop a comeback for any item that is still unresolved in the debate. A debate is a good strategy to get away from traditional essays, and really involve the students in the research, development, and writing so that they can try to provide a good foundation for their team to ‘win’.

Having a good teaching method to guide instruction can make or break a lesson. The following is an example of the method used in my classroom at work that follows the foundational structure of teaching methods provided earlier. The class setting is an 8th grade honors English class, consisting of 32 students of various ages, races, and both genders. The learning objective is displayed on the board, and will be reiterated in the lesson: similes and metaphors. They walk in, settle into their seats, and I begin the lesson by playing a song, and singing along with the lyrics: Hot and Cold by Katy Perry. After the first stanza, I stop what I’m doing, and amidst the stares of wonder, I ask the students: what did you just hear? They will call out, things such as: noise, terrible singing, music, Katy Perry song, and so on. Then I move into informing them of our learning objective: “No, I heard figurative language!” and I present to them the objective of similes and metaphors, their definitions, and how they are constantly used in pop culture. To recall prior knowledge, I present questions to make them think of songs they like that have similes and metaphors in them, and we create a list. In my presentation of the material, or direct instruction, I show them a video that is complied of the many uses of similes and metaphors in pop culture. Through guided instruction, we work together to play the selected songs I have preselected, view their lyrics, and highlight the similes and metaphors. Then we, as a class, discuss what is meant by the figurative language. They need to see the importance in not only recognizing these similes and metaphors, but explaining the meaning of them as well. The independent instruction for the class is to watch a power point presentation I created of the music and lyrics of popular songs. I pause the video at the end of the song, for them to quickly scan the lyrics and write down the similes and metaphors they see, and explain the meanings of them. I facilitate and administer help as needed. In the end, we all go back, and discuss our findings to develop understanding as a group. To enhance this for further instruction, the students complete a project where they have to go home, find a different song than any we have already seen, find a simile and/or metaphor and explain that line in the song. This lesson, from start to finish, follows a very specific outline that covers any area of need for students and usually when followed results in high student success rates.

After viewing the foundation cores of the two phrases, and seeing examples of the phrases in action, it is easy to understand why there are so many misconceptions about the two terms being the same. However, after delving into the root of the processes, one can see that they cross paths at certain times, in certain situations, but they have different core concepts. Instructional strategies are more of different types of activities and interactions you can implement to get an objective across, where as a teaching method is a style or process of teaching that is followed to implement the instruction.

**Building Minds for the Future**

After conducting my research into the differences of instructional strategies and teaching methods, I feel that it is important to equip fellow instructors with the knowledge at hand. By providing a workshop at my school and make it open for other instructors, I feel we would have a better grasp on these concepts for the future. I would also like to equip others with different types of instructional strategies and ideas to use when planning and teaching a lesson. Technology is growing in leaps and bounds, so to furnish ways for instructors to use it in their teaching methods would be an ideal plan. Many teachers shy away from learning new instructional strategies to implement, because they don’t know how to carry out the activity. By providing examples and demonstrations, and a “go to/how to” guide, I feel that teachers would be more open to change and to trying new things with their instruction. At my workplace, the afore mentioned teaching method has become a school-wide plan. We all follow those nine steps when planning lessons, and it has provided more ease and structure to the lessons in our middle school. The great thing about a teaching method is that it can be implemented beyond a classroom, just tweaked towards the object at hand. You can follow the same steps when developing a speech, or presentation for a cause. The structure is the same; you just develop the ‘meat’ of the plan. To better aid other teachers in ways to make lessons more engaging and learner driven is a future goal that I feel must be a priority. In an age where students become engaged by things all around them, it is important that school lessons not become a proverbial ‘dog and pony’ show, but they must be engaging to keep up with the fast paced society in which these students are used to operating. Learning is fun, and can be presented in stimulating ways, if one has the self discipline and self motivation to know about teaching methods and instructional strategies and how to implement both, and by following both, they will intertwine for a very engaging and memorable learning experience for students and teacher.

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