The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards for the 21st Century Learner Lesson Plan Database

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Abstract
The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards for the 21st Century Learner Lesson Plan Database (AASL Database) is a free, Open Access, interactive tool recently (2011) developed by the American Association of School Librarians, a division of the American Library Association, to assist librarians, teachers and other educators in implementing the AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner (AASL Standards) and the Common Core State Standards. It is comprised of vetted, content-area lesson plans meant to provide excellent models to integrate AASL Standards across K-12 curricula; the platform also includes social networking features and a user portfolio. The AASL Database receives high marks from this reviewer for its rich content, design simplicity, ease of functionality, focus of purpose, special features, and value to the profession.

Pricing Options
Free access via any Web browser.

Product Description
The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards for the 21st Century Learner Lesson Plan Database (AASL Database) is a free (supported by AASL membership dues), Open Access, interactive database that was developed by the AASL to assist librarians, teachers, and other educators in implementing the AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner (AASL Standards). The AASL Standards include four “strands of learning,” skills, dispositions, responsibilities and self-assessment, that learners use to “inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge (Standard 1); draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge (Standard 2); share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society (Standard 3); and pursue personal and aesthetic growth (Standard 4).” These information literacy skills are an integral part of a whole-school curriculum, and the AASL Standards embedded in the AASL Database’s content-area lesson plans are automatically cross-walked to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) via the AASL Learning Standards and Common State Standards Crosswalk. User-contributed lessons are vetted by AASL moderators before they are included in the database; a lesson plan template, Lesson Plan Rubric, and Lesson Plan Checklist are provided to assist potential contributors in creating lesson plans with a uniform format that reflects AASL Standards. AASL moderators use the Lesson Plan Rubric and Lesson Plan Checklist to evaluate potential additions to the database.

Users can view the lesson plans, but must register and create a free account to access all content, follow other users, view published authors’ profiles, contribute lessons, rate lessons, post comments, and view posted comments. Once an account is created, a personalized portfolio contains the user’s profile and stores bookmarked lesson plans, draft lessons, published lessons, and a list of favorite users (Figure 1). Users can access lesson plans by key word; use a faceted search by grade level, content area, AASL Standards, or resources; or browse and sort lesson plans by title, rating, date published, or author.

The AASL Database is similar in design, purpose, and functionality to Thinkfinity/Verizon Foundation’s immensely popular ReadWriteThink lesson plan database (<www.readwritethink.org>). Like AASL Database lesson plans, ReadWriteThink lesson plans connect to national standards (National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association National Standards for the English Language Arts), are aligned with the CCSS, are created by educators, and are “carefully screened and edited.” Launched in 2002, the database has 843 lesson plans to date (compared to the AASL Database’s 113) and offers many extra features such as Student Interactives, links to Web sites, and mobile apps.

Introduced with much fanfare in 2011 with an initial 30 lesson plans, the AASL Database currently contains 113 lesson plans. Its release was announced in Library Media Connection and AASL Hotlinks on the School Library Journal and AASL blogs in other publications that reach K-12 teacher-librarians. The database was lauded by several contributors to Knowledge Quest, journal of the AASL, and was presented at the AASL’s 15th National Conference and Exhibition in 2011. Many school districts and state school library associations link to the database on their home pages and encourage its use (by offering professional development, for example). One school
library association is offering 20 ($250) stipends to authors of lesson plans published on the database.

Critical Evaluation

AASL STANDARDS AND THE CCSS

The timing couldn’t be better for this standards-based lesson plan database. School librarianship has always been a standards-based profession; AASL Standards describe broad learning skills, dispositions, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies that fit well into the CCSS framework. AASL Database lesson plan authors designate AASL Standards (via a drop-down menu) in their lesson plans and these are automatically connected to the CCSS via the AASL Learning Standards and Common Core State Standards Crosswalk. As schools across the nation begin to implement the CCSS, many teachers will be required to create CCSS-connected activities, transform old lesson plans into CCSS-frameworks and build whole-school CCSS-based curricula. As Joyce Karon pointed out, “it is easy to see that many of the standards we call ‘information literacy’ are at the heart of the CCSS. … Seven key points describe what it takes for a student to be college and career ready under the CCSS: students demonstrate independence; build strong current content knowledge; respond to demands of audience; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and capably; and come to understand other perspectives and cultures. This describes the heart of what school librarians do on a daily basis.”

Two “Key Design Considerations” of the CCSS are pertinent to the value of the AASL Database:

- Research and media skills blended into the Standards as a whole. Research and media skills and understanding are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section.

- Shared responsibility for students’ literacy development.
  - Instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening and language is a shared responsibility within the school. Although designed primarily to support school librarians, many teachers are contributors (and probably registrants); lesson plans are based on the content areas, and AASL Standards reflect library, research, reading, critical thinking and learning skills that are relevant across the curriculum. Consider AASL Standard 1.2.7: Standard 1 (Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge). Dispositions 2, Indicator 7: “Display persistence by continuing to pursue information to gain a broad perspective.” This crosswalks to several CCSS including, for example, CC 9-10 W.7: “Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question…” Librarians and teachers alike can use this tool to integrate standards into their schools’ curricula, and, hopefully, the database will indeed “serve as a catalyst for change.”

The AASL Database is available via the Internet at <http://aasl.jesandco.org>. A welcome message includes links to AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner, AASL Learning Standards and Common Core State Standards Crosswalk, AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner in Action, a Lesson Plan Rubric, and a Lesson Plan Checklist. Links to newly published lessons appear on the right side of the page. There is a box for keyword searching and tabs for Home, Browse All Lesson Plans, and FAQs. Registered users can log in, and new users can register to create free accounts by providing a user name, e-mail address, full name, title/role, organization/school name, grade levels, city, state, and country. This full profile of published lesson plan authors is available to registered users.
BROWSING AND SEARCHING

The four major search modes are Keyword Search, Browse All Lesson Plans, Faceted Search, and Browse & Sort. Hovering over the basic search box prompts a tip to appear: “Enter the terms you wish to search for.” The Boolean operator AND is implied: typing <the computer> will retrieve all lesson plans that have the words “the” and “computer.” Quotes can be used for phrase searching: <“the computer”> will retrieve all lesson plans with this phrase. The Boolean operator OR will retrieve either word. There are no wildcard or truncation options and no automatic stemming; users must type in variations of the key words.

Users can use the tab to browse all lesson plans or use the drop-down menu to select Faceted Search and select lessons by grade level; content area; estimated lesson time; specific AASL Standards’ Strands of Learning Dispositions Indicator(s), Skills Indicator(s), Self-Assessment Strategies Indicator(s) and Responsibilities Indicator(s); resources students will use; resources instructor will use; and extent of collaboration degree between teacher and librarian (Figure 2).

Faceted Search is very handy if a user has very specific needs. In the section “Resources students will use,” it is no surprise that 91 of the 113 lesson plans use “Text” (books, letters, poems, newspapers, etc.). The user can click on Interactive Resource to be linked to a list of the 55 lesson plans that use “Web sites or multimedia learning objects, or chat services.” Clicking on Still Image links the user to the 40 lesson plans that incorporate “paintings, drawings, plans, and maps.”

Clicking on Browse All Lesson Plans provides a list of all lesson plans with title, an overview of the lesson, grade level, and average rating. Clicking on the title links to the lesson plan. A keyword search box and guided search menu (faceted search offerings) also appear on the side (Figure 3).

Users can also Browse & Sort by title, date of update, average rating, or author. The lesson plans are initially listed by date updated (most recent first), then users can browse and sort by title, date, average rating, or author. The title links to the lesson plan. The overview statement enables the user to quickly ascertain what the lesson plan is about and see the essential questions in the lesson plan (Figure 4).

FAQS

Among other things, the FAQ section includes information about how to register and create a free account, the benefits of registration, and tips about creating lesson plans that will be accepted to the database.

PORTFOLIO

The Portfolio is available to registered users and is one of the best features of the database. Users have access to their personal portfolio with links to My account, My lesson plans, My bookmarks, Favorite users, and Create content.

Clicking Create content accesses the Lesson Plan Template which includes areas for: Lesson Plan Title, Grade(s), Library Context (Type of Lesson, Type of Schedule), Collaboration Continuum, Content Area(s),
Content Topic; Standards for the 21st Century Learner (Skills, Dispositions, Responsibilities, and Self-Assessment Strategies Indicators): Scenario, Overview, Final Product, Library Lesson goals, Estimated Lesson Time; Assessment: Product, Process, Student self-questioning; Instructional Plan: Resources students will use, Resources instructors will use, Other instructor resources; Instruction/Activities: Direct instruction, Modeling and guided practice, Independent practice, Sharing and reflecting and Strategies for differentiation. Also included are Workflow Status (Draft Lesson Plan or Ready to Submit) and a link to upload attachments to the lesson plan.

The lesson plan template includes very useful tips and clarifications for adding information to the various sections of the template. Users can create and store lesson plans in their portfolios to edit before submission (Figure 5).

LESSON PLANS

The database currently has 113 lesson plans for all grade levels. It is dominated by lesson plans in Language Arts (59%); Social Studies (25%), and Science (22%), with overlap. Other content areas represented include Educational Technology, Mathematics, Health, The Arts, Foreign Languages, and Vocational Education.

Rubrics, graphic organizers, copies of assignments, worksheets, articles, and brochures are attached at the bottom on the lesson plan template.

Web page addresses are automatically turned into links and the site allows HTML content (a handy HTML formatting tip sheet is provided).

There are also links for users to bookmark the lesson plan and make comments (Figure 6).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE LESSON PLANS

The strength of this database is its rich content. Lesson plans incorporate a wide range of resources, activities, and strategies. Students learn to use primary and secondary sources, search databases, avoid plagiarism, cite sources, use context clues to make predictions, use post-its to synthesize information, take notes, evaluate resources, and go on scavenger hunts. Final products include animal trading cards, posters, brochures, flap books, videos, multimedia presentations, research papers, annotated bibliographies, handouts, and dioramas. Each lesson plan includes instructional models, assessment suggestions, and differentiation strategies.

Most of the lesson plans contain fun activities, are student-centered and strategies-rich, and contain most, if not all, of the elements indicated on the Lesson Plan Rubric.

I share some users’ concerns about a small minority of the lesson plans (or parts of the lesson plans) as being “too vague” or “needs some refining or explaining.” The latter user continued: “How [do] students engage in actually locating print resources…?” Some statements from lesson plans that I thought needed clarification included: “Student[s] [were] asked to conduct research.” How? Or “students [were shown] how to navigate the site.” How? Or “students were provided with some Web site recommendations.” Which ones?

This vagueness was especially noticeable in the “Strategies for Differentiation” section. I agree with the first user quoted above who also posted this comment: “[Your] strategies for differentiation are not strategies for differentiation.” Some strategies for differentiation lack rationales and, frankly, strategies. An example of a strategy for differentiation that needs further clarification is “a modified version of citation tools is available as needed.” A database citation tool was used in the lesson; what is meant by a “modified version of the citation tools?” Another author recommended: “Groups can be stacked to accommodate learning needs.” How specifically will stacking groups accommodate learning needs? Other recommendations for differentiation that need clearer strategies and/or rationales include: “More or less challenging topics are assigned as appropriate” and “struggling students may work more closely with teacher.”

Again, these flaws are apparent in a small minority of lesson plans and detract little from the overall usefulness of the database and even of these lesson plans themselves.

CONTRIBUTORS

Authors are teacher librarians, school media specialists, library administrators, college professors, and graduate students from all over the United States. Authors’ profiles can be viewed by clicking on an author’s user name in Browse & Sort on in the lesson plan.
 users can view published authors’ profiles, activity (published lesson plans and posts), and bookmarks.

SUBMITTING LESSON PLANS

A Lesson Plan Rubric, Lesson Plan Checklist, and template are provided to assist in creating lesson plans. Draft lesson plans can be stored in a registered user’s portfolio and edited and saved before being submitted. When a lesson plan is ready for submission, the user clicks the submit button. Although published authors “receive a Web badge to display on [their] Web site or e-mail signature … and AASL will send a letter of recognition to [the author’s] administrator regarding exemplary contribution to the database,” nowhere is this stated on the database. Nor is there information about becoming a reviewer. Both of these could be included in the FAQs section.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Rating system

Incredibly all but three of the lesson plans are rated, some by as many as five viewers. A rating mechanism (Figure 7) is featured prominently on the lesson plan; because the database is new, most lesson plans have only one or two ratings and are thus not very meaningful at this point. Because users post comments and suggestions for the lesson plans, even low-rated lesson plans are worth considering.

User comments

Registered users simply click on the Add New Comment link at the bottom of the lesson plan to post comments. Approximately 20% of the lesson plans have comments. Clearly this is a vital component of the database and it is clear from the comments (some up to a page long) that users are carefully reading and using, or planning to use, the lesson plans. Five users posted similarly complimentary comments on a highly-rated lesson plan, and all had the same request: in a lesson plan entitled, “Passport Through the Library,” students create a “passport to use as a reference tool and guide for the nonfiction section of the library.” All five users asked to see the passport.

Comments ask for clarification, point out omissions (i.e., attachment not included), compliment the author, offer constructive criticism, and make suggestions. One user asked an author to contact them off-site to share resources. Many users commented that they used similar strategies or their students created similar products. Lesson plan authors often respond to comments.

Bookmark favorite lesson plans.

A user’s bookmarked lessons are accessed from their portfolio. There is a link at bottom of each lesson plan: “Bookmark this.”

Follow authors

This feature contains links to author profiles.

Create PDFs and printer friendly versions of the lesson plans

There are icons at the top of the lesson plans to create PDFs and printer-friendly versions.

Share lesson plans

There are 338 places to share lesson plans, including Facebook (Figure 8).

FIGURE 7 Rate the lesson.

FIGURE 8 The author shared a lesson plan on Facebook.
Contact Box
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American Library Association
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611-2795
Phone: (312) 280-5276 or (800) 545-2433 ext. 4382
E-mail: caasl@ala.org
URL: <http://www.aasl.org>

Contract Provisions
N/A

Authentication
Users create a user name and password to have full access to the site.

Author’s References

About the Author
Christina Miller, M.L.S., M.S. Ed., Assistant Professor, and is an academic librarian at York College Library and the Library’s High School Librarian. Miller provides library services for the Queens High School for the Sciences at York College, one of New York City’s specialized high schools, that shares the York College Library. Miller is a NYS-certified School Media Specialist and a NYS-certified Literacy Specialist (Grades 5-12), a member of the American Association of School Librarians, and a reviewer for Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA).