Imagine that you are invited to go on a road trip with a trusted friend. As you settle into the passenger seat of the car, you wonder where the trip might take you. However, the driver is not clear about the destination, or does not tell you. As the car moves along down the road, you look out the window with a sense of bewilderment and confusion. Your head is filled with questions: Where are we going? Are we going to make any interesting stops along the way? Will the driver ever let me in on what's happening or give me any hints about our final destination? What will happen when we reach our destination? Will I ever get a chance to let the driver know what I am thinking as we drive along? And finally, why does this all have to be such a big mystery?

The kind of scenario described above is unlikely. None of us, as adults, can imagine ourselves on a trip with a friend where we are completely in the dark about the trip's purpose or destination. However, the above description serves as a metaphor for how students might feel in classrooms every day. Often teachers, without meaning to cause confusion, begin a unit or a series of lessons without giving students the information they need to maximize the potential learning that will follow. The students are not told what they are expected to learn, how they will go about learning the new content or skill, or how they and their teacher will know that learning has taken place. Students are left to their own devices to piece together clues as they try to figure out what is going on. With careful planning, teachers can significantly diminish or completely eliminate any sense of confusion that a student may experience by carefully thinking through how they will introduce new learning to their classes and how they will ensure that students are learning as the unit unfolds.

In all four of Paula Rutherford's books, she points out the absolute necessity for teachers to lay the proper groundwork for learning at the outset of a unit and to include specific practices that will guarantee that both teaching and learning will occur. She calls this vitally important process “Framing the Learning.” In simplest terms, framing the learning means that the teacher provides a framework or context for the future learning that will take place by letting students know what they will learn, how they will go about learning it, and how they and their teacher will know that they have successfully mastered what they were supposed to learn.” Experienced, successful educators know how necessary this practice is, and they include it as a routine part of their unit planning. As a veteran administrator, I have had the
opportunity to be in hundreds of classrooms. I can attest that the best teachers, whose students consistently achieve the highest levels of success, are the teachers who let their students in on what they will be learning, why it is important, how they will go about learning, and how they will be assessed. In addition, these successful teachers plan and implement specific practices throughout their units that will help students know how they are progressing toward achieving a specific benchmark. Through years of successful teaching, these educators have learned that **framing the learning is not optional but essential.**

In her work, Paula Rutherford writes about the components of framing the learning in clear terms. She introduces “The Top Ten Questions I Ask Myself as I Design Lessons” in her first book, *Instruction for All Students*. One of those questions is:  

How will I frame the learning so that students know the objectives, the rationale for the objectives and activities, the directions and procedures, as well as the assessment criteria at the beginning of the learning process?

In her second book, *Why Didn’t I Learn This in College?*, she revisits these ten questions and elaborates further on the framing the learning process. To add further clarity to the process of framing the learning, Paula provides specific guidelines that teachers should follow as they determine how they will go about planning and teaching the upcoming unit.

The first step in the process is for teachers to communicate the standard(s) that will be taught, the learning process students will experience, and how student learning will be assessed. As teachers carry out this first step, it is important to remember that standards must be explained to students in “kid-friendly” language. It is counterproductive for a teacher to simply state words that are contained in local or state curriculum documents if the words do not make sense to the students. The teacher should not simply tell the students the topic that will be addressed, but should provide some essential details about the concept or topic as he or she is introducing the unit. Stating benchmark outcomes by using language such as “By the end of this unit (lesson), you will be able to (or know)…” will help students better understand what is expected of them.

Successful teachers also let students know at the outset of the unit exactly how the learning will be assessed. As a second step, it makes sense that if teachers want students to achieve the identified results, they should let the students know with specificity the types of formative and summative assessments they will use to measure student success. Some teachers have shared the unit tests with their students during the introduction to the unit. They collected the test at the end of that period, but the message to the students was clear. In short, they were saying, “I have planned the next unit in great detail, I know the types of learning processes that will take place, and I know precisely how your learning will be measured.” Although this seemingly unorthodox practice may surprise some practitioners, it served as a powerful message to the students about the teachers’ desire to “truly teach” and have students “truly learn.” Another teacher, who was introducing her new unit to her students, included in her introduction her “verbal contract” with her students that she was going to work extremely hard to make sure that students learned and were successful in the upcoming unit. She went on to explain what “verbal contract” meant. The students looked perplexed because they were not used to teachers talking in such a manner. The teacher further asked her students for their best work and effort during the ensuing unit so that the learning experience would be a 100% effort on everyone’s part. By the end of the unit, all students were successful because they worked with an adult who had their best interest at heart and who truly cared that her students learned during their time with her.

In addition to communicating the standards, the learning process and the assessment criteria, a third vital step in framing the learning is for the teacher to provide an agenda or outline for students to follow. This outline should include an overview of the entire unit as well as daily agendas, either in writing or orally, for the students at the outset of each lesson. Once again, the teacher’s job is to make learning an achievable outcome for all students. When students have a written unit outline, or when they can see a specific agenda
for the day’s lesson on the board, they will be much better able to follow what is being taught.

As teachers work through their units, a fourth and important step is to surface any naïve understandings or misconceptions students may have about the content. At the introduction of a unit or lesson, a teacher may ask appropriate questions that will help to determine what students already understand about a topic or what prior knowledge they bring to the learning environment. With students coming from so many diverse backgrounds, or with such a vast array of personal experiences, it is important to establish a level playing field so that everyone is operating with the same basic knowledge. When the teacher allows students to talk about their learning, or when a teacher frequently checks for student understanding throughout the unit, the misunderstandings become more public and it affords the teacher the opportunity to address inaccurate information or limited understandings.

The brain functions the same way for all learners whether the learner is an adult or a young person. As new knowledge or information is presented in a learning environment, the brain seeks ways to make connections between the new information and what the learner already knows. For this reason, a fifth important element of framing the learning is to help students access prior knowledge about a given concept or topic, and to make connections to the concept or topic with their life beyond the classroom. Learners are constantly seeking ways to make sense of the learning they are undertaking. When teachers plan to help students make these connections, learning is much more likely to occur and much more likely to be permanent.

The sixth and final consideration as teachers frame the learning is to include opportunities for students to process (make meaning of) the learning that is taking place. Studies have shown that 75% of learners learn best through verbal processing. Teachers who purposefully pause during lessons to allow students to think about the new learning and to share their thoughts and reactions with fellow students greatly increase the level of student engagement. As well, the students will be better able to retain what they have learned and will be able to transfer their learning to new situations. An important processing practice for teachers to follow is to allow students to summarize their learning at various points during a lesson, and at the end of an instructional period. Research on the topic of summarizing reveals that when teachers do the summarizing, further student learning is minimal or non-existent. However, when teachers regularly include a summarizing technique in their lessons during which students must personally determine what they have learned, learning is much more likely to occur.

In order for optimal learning to occur, teachers must be sure that their students are informed passengers from the very beginning of the learning journey. The best way to do that is to always include a learning map which frames the learning so that students know the intended destination, the learning experiences they will have on their journey, how what they are learning relates to what they already know, why it is worth knowing, and how they can use what they are learning in future journeys.