

## Essential Questions

Excerpts from Chapter Five of *Understanding by Design*

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“Any complex unit or course of study will naturally involve many educational targets simultaneously: knowledge, skills, attitudes, habits of mind, and understanding. But, as we have said, if the goal is to help students make good sense and use of what they learn, then the design (and resultant teaching) must explicitly focus on the big ideas that connect and bring meaning to all the discrete facts and skills.”

“How do we more deliberately stay focused on big ideas? How can we take a mass of content knowledge and shape it into engaging, thought-provoking, and effective work? How can we avoid the twin sins of activity-based and coverage-based design. In *Understanding by Design*, that focus is accomplished in part by framing goals in terms of what we call *essential questions*... These are questions that are not answerable with finality in a brief sentence – and that’s the point. Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions – including thoughtful student questions – not just pat answers. They are broad, full of transfer possibilities. The exploration of such questions enables us to uncover the real riches of a topic otherwise obscured by glib pronouncements in texts or routine teacher-talk. We need to go beyond questions answerable by unit facts to questions that burst through the boundaries of the topic. Deep and transferable understandings depend upon framing work around such questions.”

“...Instead of thinking of content as stuff to be covered, consider knowledge and skill as the means of addressing questions central to understanding key issues in your subject. This conceptual move offers teachers and curriculum committees a practical strategy for identifying important content ideas while engaging students in the very kind of constructivist thinking that understanding requires.”

“...We propose that a question is essential if it is meant to: (1) cause genuine and relevant inquiry into big ideas and core content; (2) provoke deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions; (3) require students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers; (4) stimulate vital, ongoing rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, prior lessons; (5) spark meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences; and (6) naturally recur, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects.”

“We cannot say a question is or is not essential based only on the language used in its phrasing. ...Although we appreciate the concern that teachers need to clearly signal their intentions to learners, we don’t think that a hard-and-fast rule about wording is the key issue. Rather, what is at stake is the whole design: Is it clear to students that their job is inquiry? ...In fact, many yes/no, either/or, and who/what/when questions offer the potential to spark impressive curiosity, thought, and reflection in students, depending upon how they are posed and the nature of the follow-ups.”

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Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Understanding by Design (Expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> ed)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education (Pages 105-111)