

The Importance of Good Learning Targets

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(Originally titled "Learning Targets on Parade")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Susan Brookhart and Connie Moss (Duquesne University) say that ideally, learning goals help students know what they're supposed to be learning, why it's important, and what their work will look like when they're done. When this happens, they are better able to monitor and adjust their work, select effective strategies, and connect current work to prior learning. But teachers' learning targets don't always accomplish this. Here's an example of flawed goals for a unit on literary language. The overall goal: *Students will learn that point of view and figurative language help tell a story.* Two daily lesson targets:

- *The students will put examples of figurative language on cards and sort them according to type.*
- *The students will identify two examples of simile and two examples of metaphor in *Julie of the Wolves*.*

These are okay activities, say Brookhart and Moss, but what's missing is students knowing what they're going to learn. Here are better goals for lessons in the same unit:

- *I can define simile and recognize examples in literature.*
- *I can define metaphor and recognize examples in literature.*
- *I can explain how metaphors and similes enhanced the storytelling.*
- *I can describe and identify examples of different points of view.*

Important Dates:

- **Mentor Meetings:** All mentors assigned to a mentee for this school year are required to attend the following meetings.

- November 18
- January 26
- March 16
- May 18

- **Project Success Mentor Training**

- March 28
Stay tuned for further details

Note that these tell what students will *learn* rather than what they will *do* and are part of a clear progression toward larger unit goals and understandings. "Each day, students should know what new content they're learning and how they're sharpening their skills," say Brookhart and Moss. "Are they learning a new concept? Extending understanding by building on a previous concept? Combining concepts to form more sophisticated understandings? Practicing a skill for accuracy and fluency? Applying a skill they already know to new content?"

The Importance of Good Learning Targets *Continued*



Brookhart and Moss say that components of effective learning targets will:

- *Describe exactly what students will learn by the end of the day's lesson.*
- *Use language students can understand.*
- *Be stated from the point of view of a student who has yet to master the knowledge or skill being taught.*
- *Contain a performance of understanding that translates the description into action – what students will do, make, say, or write during the lesson.*
- *Include student look-fors or criteria for success in terms that describe mastery of the learning target, not a score or grade.*

Here are daily learning targets for a second-grade unit on subtracting with double digits:

- *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number without regrouping, using cubes.*
- *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number without regrouping, without using cube.*
- *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping, using cubes. One of the criteria for success in this lesson was, I use regrouping when the problem needs it, and I don't use regrouping if it doesn't.*
- *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping, without using cubes.*
- *I can subtract a two-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping.*

Here are the lesson goals for a unit on the federal bureaucracy. The goals: To help students understand the complexity of Washington's government; realize that some agencies are more subject to partisan politics than others; and be able to identify various workers' roles and the budget involved in each type of agency and understand where federal taxes go.

- **Lesson 1:** Learning the characteristics of a bureaucracy and three agencies of the federal government.
- **Lesson 2:** Learning the makeup and responsibilities of the Executive Office of the President.
- **Lesson 3:** Learning the makeup and responsibilities of the cabinet departments and their relationship to the Executive Office of the President.
- **Lesson 4:** Learning the makeup and responsibilities of three types of independent agencies.
- **Lesson 5:** Learning how to analyze certain issues facing the U.S. and relate them to the appropriate type of independent agency.
- **Lesson 6:** Comparing and contrasting private business management with the management of federal agencies.
- **Lesson 7:** Extending those ideas by evaluating whether bureaucracy is the most effective way to organize and manage government functions.
- **Lesson 8:** Learning that various taxes are levied to fund various parts of the federal bureaucracy.

"If the teacher is the only one who understands where learning should be headed," say Brookhart and Moss, "students are flying blind. **Writing the goal on the board is not enough;** students should have the target in mind as they work and ask themselves how what they're doing will help them hit the target."

Every lesson needs its own reason to live. One of those reasons is that today's lesson builds on the learning from yesterday's lesson and leads to the learning in tomorrow's lesson so that the learning targets form a parade that leads to the achievement of larger curricular goals and state standards.

"Learning Targets on Parade" by Susan Brookhart and Connie Moss in *Educational Leadership*, October 2014 (Vol. 72, #2, p. 28-33), <http://bit.ly/ZrdYyz>; the authors can be reached at susanbrookhart@bresnan.net and moss@castl.duq.edu

Two Misconceptions About Close Reading



Every good teaching idea becomes a bad idea the moment it hardens into orthodoxy,” says Robert Pondiscio in this article in *The Education Gadfly*. He believes there’s a danger of that happening to close reading.

According to literacy expert Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago), close reading is “an intensive analysis of a piece of text, in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means.” Close reading immerses students in challenging texts that stretch their abilities, which, says Pondiscio, “requires supporting students via multiple readings, providing vocabulary, working in pairs or groups, and posing questions designed to lead students to understand the text, among other techniques.”

But this powerful classroom practice can go off the rails if teachers (a) over-use it, and (b) have students close-read without drawing on background knowledge. On (a), only a small part of reading instruction should involve close reading, says Pondiscio. “There’s little to be gained in ‘practicing’ close reading on any ol’ text as long as it’s sufficiently difficult. The work we put in front of kids should be worth the time it takes to read them repeatedly and thoughtfully. If the work isn’t stimulating, it’s unlikely to stick.” On (b), some teachers are being advised to have students close-read a text as if they know nothing about the subject matter. “This seems crazy to me,” says cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham. “It doesn’t just seem crazy,” says Pondiscio. “It *is* crazy. It’s impossible not to bring your prior knowledge to reading...

“You don’t want to cover a subject; you want to uncover it.”

- Eleanor Duckworth

Writing is not interpretive dance. When authors commit words to paper, they do so expressly to create associations in the reader’s mind... Students may lack background knowledge to fully appreciate a work of literature or an historical document. But it does no good whatsoever to keep them in a state of ignorance on purpose, let alone make a virtue of it.” “When close reading is done well, you have weak readers who never would never have had the chance to deal with rich, complex text in the ballgame, grasping it, learning from it, and feeling good about it,” notes reading specialist David Liben of Student Achievement Partners. You’re not just giving them a steady diet of dumbed-down, content-free books at their “just right” reading level. “A part of every day, it’s good for kids to bear down on a text,” says Liben. But, critically, this is not to suggest that all—or even most—reading should be close reading. Kids also need a high volume of text they can read independently to build knowledge, vocabulary, stamina, and more. It’s indispensable.

So close reading should be used sparingly and strategically, concludes Pondiscio, and teachers should draw on and build students’ knowledge every time they use it.

“How to Kill Reading Achievement” by Robert Pondiscio in *The Education Gadfly*, October 1, 2014 (Vol. 14, #40),

<http://edexcellence.net/blog-types/common-core-watch>

Essential Questions

What Is an Essential Question?

Grant Wiggins

November 17, 2007



What *is* an essential question? An essential question is – well, *essential*: important, vital, at the heart of the matter – the *essence* of the issue. Think of questions in your life that fit this definition – but don’t just yet think about it like a teacher; consider the question as a thoughtful adult. What kinds of questions come to mind? What is a question that any thoughtful and intellectually-alive person ponders and should keep pondering?

In *Understanding by Design* we remind readers that “essential” has a few different connotations:

One meaning of “essential” involves **important questions that recur throughout one’s life**. Such questions are broad in scope and timeless by nature. They are perpetually arguable – What is justice? Is art a matter of taste or principles? How far should we tamper with our own biology and chemistry? Is science compatible with religion? Is an author’s view privileged in determining the meaning of a text? We may arrive at or be helped to grasp understandings for these questions, but we soon learn that answers to them are invariably provisional. In other words, we are liable to change our minds in response to reflection and experience concerning such questions as we go through life, and that such changes of mind are not only expected but beneficial. A good education is grounded in such life-long questions, even if we sometimes lose sight of them while focusing on content mastery. The big-idea questions signal that education is not just about learning “the answer” but about learning how to learn.

A second connotation for “essential” refers to **key inquiries within a discipline**. Essential questions in this sense are those that point to the big ideas of a subject and to the frontiers of technical knowledge. They are historically important and very much “alive” in the field. “What is healthful eating?” engenders lively debate among nutritionists, physicians, diet promoters, and the general public. “Is any history capable of escaping the social and personal history of its writers?” has been widely and heatedly debated among scholars for the past fifty years, and compels novices and experts alike to ponder potential bias in any historical narrative.

There is a third important connotation for the term “essential” that refers to what is needed for learning core content. In this sense, a question can be considered essential **when it helps students make sense** of important but complicated ideas, knowledge, and know-how – findings that may be understood by experts, but not yet grasped or seen as valuable by the learner. In what ways does light act wave-like? How do the best writers hook and hold their readers? What models best describe a business cycle? By actively exploring such questions, the learner is helped to arrive at important understandings as well as greater coherence in their content knowledge and skill.

A question is essential when it:

1. Causes genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas and core content;
2. Provokes deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions;
3. Requires students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers;
4. Stimulates vital, on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons;
5. Sparks meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences;
6. Naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects.

Here is a variety of subject-area examples of such questions:

- Why did that particular species/culture/person thrive and that other one barely survive or die?
- How does what we measure influence how we measure? How does how we measure influence what we measure?
- Is there really a difference between a cultural generalization and a stereotype?
- How should this be modeled? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this model? (science, math, social sciences)

Note that an essential question is different from many of the questions teachers typically ask students in class. The most commonly asked question type is factual – a question that seeks “the” correct answer. For example, in a history class, teachers are constantly asking questions to elicit recall or attention to some important content knowledge: “When did the war break out? Who was President at the time? Why, according to the text, did Congress pass that bill?”

Such questions are clearly not “essential” in the sense discussed above. Rather, they are what we might call ‘teacherly’ questions – a question essential to a *teacher* who wants students to know an important answer.

Is such a leading question bad? No. There are all sorts of good pedagogical reasons for using a question format to underscore knowledge or to call attention to a forgotten or overlooked idea. But those questions are not “essential” in the sense of signaling genuine, important and *necessarily-ongoing* inquiries. Teachers have to be careful not to conflate two ideas: “essential to me in my role as a teacher” and “essential to anyone as a thinking person and inquiring student for making *meaning* of facts in this subject.”

Check out this website for additional information and sample Essential Questions:

<http://www.essentialquestions.org/index.lasso>

Here are seven defining characteristics. A good essential question:

1. Is *open-ended*; that is, it typically will not have a single, final, and correct answer.
2. Is *thought-provoking* and *intellectually engaging*, often sparking discussion and debate.
3. Calls for *higher-order thinking*, such as analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction. It cannot be effectively answered by recall alone.
4. Points toward *important, transferable ideas* with (and sometimes across) disciplines.
5. Raises *additional questions* and sparks further inquiry.
6. Requires *support* and *justification*, not just an answer.
7. *Recur*s over time; that is, the question can and should be revisited again and again.

Definition: Enduring Understandings



Enduring understandings are statements summarizing important ideas and core processes that are central to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom. They synthesize what students should understand—not just know or do—as a result of studying a particular content area. Moreover, they articulate what students should “revisit” over the course of their lifetimes in relationship to the content area.

Enduring understandings:

1. Frame the big ideas that give meaning and lasting importance to such discrete curriculum elements as facts and skills
2. Can transfer to other fields as well as adult life
3. “Unpack” areas of the curriculum where students may struggle to gain understanding or demonstrate misunderstandings and misconceptions
4. Provide a conceptual foundation for studying the content area and
5. Are deliberately framed as declarative sentences that present major curriculum generalizations and recurrent ideas.

DDM FAQs

Q: When do we have to submit our completed district-determined measures from this school year to Central Office?

A: *You do not HAVE TO submit your DDMs to Central Office. In June, we will send out a request asking teachers to voluntarily submit an electronic copy of their DDM (measure, scoring tool, protocols) so that a DDM Bank can be created.*

Q: What do I do with all this data? How do I keep track of it? Who do I “give” it to?

A: *DDMs should be treated like any other assessment; whatever system you currently use to record scores and track progress is the same method you should use with your DDM. The difference is that since you need to show evidence to your evaluator, you’re going to want to keep a file that has the measure(s), scoring tool, and protocols used, along with the student scores and some student work samples that show high, moderate, and low growth. You want to be able to walk your evaluator through the process you used- what did you assess, how did you assess it, what were the results.*