

Designing Effective Projects: Curriculum-Framing Questions Developing Good Questions

Generating Questions that Target Higher-Order Thinking

Developing good Essential and Unit Questions takes practice. Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, co-authors of *Understanding by Design* (1998), suggest that in order to develop student understanding and engage and focus student inquiry, teachers should build their units around the questions that gave rise to the content knowledge. This means a look at the big ideas, the broad themes, and the overarching concepts that get at the heart of the subject.

A good place to start is by looking at your standards and thinking about general themes in the subject. Then begin formulating questions that require students to make a decision or plan a course of action related to those big ideas.

Example

Action	Example
Look at content standards	Social Studies standard for fourth grade: <i>Entrepreneurs are people who take the risks of organizing productive resources to make goods and services. Profit is an important incentive that leads entrepreneurs to accept the risks of business failure.</i>
Identify the general subject theme(s) related to the standard(s)	<i>Taking risks</i>
Brainstorm questions related to the theme that require a decision or plan of action	Decision: <i>Are risks worth taking? Why should we take risks?</i> Plan of Action: <i>How can we reduce risk?</i>

Make sure each question will take time to fully understand and answer. Don't worry about the mechanics and language in the beginning or whether the question is Essential or Unit; concern yourself more with whether it requires higher-order thinking skills. Remember, that truly good Essential and Unit Questions, motivate students, promote inquiry, target higher-order thinking, and get to the heart of what it is that you want your students to learn and remember.

Once you have developed your questions, put them to the test. Use the following list to assess whether or not each question is open-ended and will incite students to really think.

- Can the question serve as a discussion starter or problem poser?
- Will the question generate curiosity, invite an exploration of ideas, and hold student interest?
- Does the question pose a reasonable challenge and does it require students to construct their own meaning and support it with information they have gathered?
- Would different people answer the question differently and does it allow for creative approaches and unique responses?
- Does the question require students to answer how and why?
- Does the question help to uncover the subject's controversies?
- Does the question in some way connect to students' lives?
- Does the question require students to dissect their thinking?

Once you have evaluated your questions, modify and adjust them as necessary. Remember to word them using language that will appeal to your students. Let your questions evolve over time and when appropriate, let your students develop the questions themselves.

Finally, give your Essential and Unit Questions a try. When you do, you are likely to discover that your lessons have purpose and depth that you had never planned on and authentic learning that you did not know could exist. If you can draw your students into an interactive form of learning stimulated by effective questioning practices, you are likely to foster life-long learners.

Resources

Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J . (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.