

Enduring Understandings

"Education is what remains when we've forgotten everything we learned." Mark Twain

It is a paradox in our educational system that a student can make all A's and still not truly understand a concept, principle, or idea. We must teach for understandings which endure, which transcend disciplines, and which facilitate transfer to new, unfamiliar situations. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, in *Understanding by Design*, call these "enduring understandings."

What are Enduring Understandings?

- Enduring understandings are the major concepts and ideas that anchor a unit or a course.
- They are the universal generalizations, big ideas, and important understandings that we want students to "get inside of" and retain after they've forgotten many of the details.
- They go beyond discrete facts or skills to focus on larger concepts, principles, or processes that are applicable to new situations within or beyond the subject. They transfer across time and cultures. They are exemplified through the fact base but transcend singular examples. For example, we study the enactment of the Magna Carta as a specific historical event because of its significance to a large idea—the rule of law whereby written laws specify the limits of a government's power and the rights of individuals. The big idea goes way beyond its beginnings in 13th-century England to become a cornerstone of modern democratic societies.
- They are linchpin ideas—ideas that are essential to understanding of a discipline.
- They are ideas and concepts that have lasting value, that are worth an adult's knowing, and that contribute to making a child a better adult.
- They are "big picture" ideas.
- They have great potential for engaging students.
- They lie at the heart of a discipline and are essential for authentic learning experiences.

How do we write enduring understandings?

- Create a content/concept web that identifies concepts and topics to be included in your unit.
- Write complete sentences which begin with "Students will understand that..."
- Complete the sentence by conveying an important idea about one or more ideas/concepts that will transfer through time and across cultures. This important idea should go beyond the facts while being supported by the facts.
- Avoid using proper and nouns. These should transcend specific people, places, and time periods.
- Use active, present tense verbs to convey a timeless characteristic. Avoid passive voice and past tense verbs. Try to avoid the use of the verb *to be* in any form. Avoid writing simple definitions of a concept (Scale is a range of possible values for a measured property.)
- Use qualifiers (*may, can, often*) for generalizations that may not be true for all examples but that are still significant as understandings.

The sophistication of enduring understanding may range from less to more sophisticated. These examples from primary curriculum illustrate this point. Generalizations become more specific, and more concepts are included in the statements as the level of sophistication increases. More background knowledge is required for understanding as the levels increase, and ideas become more cognitively challenging.

Example One: (primary)

- Level 1: People of different cultures show similarities and differences.
- Level 2: Culture influences the dress, customs, and behaviors of a people.
- Level 3: Cultural diversity can lead to conflict.

Example Two: (elementary)

- Level 1: All cultures have celebrations.
- Level 2: Celebrations express the traditions of a culture.
- Level 3: Traditions reflect the beliefs, values, and heritage of a culture.

Example Three: (secondary)

- Level 1: Organisms survive in diverse environments.
- Level 2: Biological adaptations change structures, behaviors, and physiology and enhance reproductive success.
- Level 3: An organism's behavioral responses to stimuli evolve through natural selection and often exhibit an evolutionary logic.