

## Chapter 5

# Essential Questions: Doorways to Understanding

Given particular subject matter or a particular concept, it is easy to ask trivial questions. . . . It is also easy to ask impossibly difficult questions. The trick is to find the medium questions that can be answered and that take you somewhere.

—Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education*, 1960, p. 40

To question means to lay open, to place in the open. Only a person who has questions can have [real understanding].

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1994, p. 365

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 UbD, that focus is accomplished in part by framing goals in terms of what we call Essential Questions. (The other approaches, discussed in later chapters, are to specify the desired understandings and key performance tasks.)

What kinds of questions are we referring to? Not just any question will do. Consider the following examples of questions and notice how they differ from ones often posed in daily lessons and textbooks:

- What is a true friend?
- How precise must we be?
- To what extent does art reflect culture or shape it?
- Must a story have a beginning, a middle, and an end?
- Is everything quantifiable?

- Is the subjunctive necessary?
- To what extent is DNA destiny?
- In what ways is algebra real and in what ways is it unreal?
- To what extent is U.S. history a history of progress?
- What is the difference between a scientific fact, a scientific theory, and a strong opinion?
- Must heroes be flawless?
- What should we fear?
- Who is entitled to own what?
- What makes writing worth reading?

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.

Return to the apples vignette in the Introduction to see the benefit of anchoring curricula in thought-provoking questions that suggest fruitful (sorry!) avenues of inquiry. If the proposed string of “fun” activities suffers from a lack of intellectual focus, notice how we can provide better perspective and the impetus to go into depth by framing the unit with a set of provocative questions such as these: How have planting, growing, and harvest seasons affected life in the United States? How have children’s roles at harvest changed over time? Compared to other foods, how good for you are apples? Can today’s apple farmers survive economically?

These questions implicitly demand more than just a smorgasbord of activities and bits of knowledge in isolated units. They are asked and made central to the unit to engender probing inquiry and eventual transfer. They suggest that uncoverage is a priority, not a frill or an option if time is left over after learning other “stuff.” Such questions, when properly used, thus send all the right signals about understanding as a goal.

### Questions: Signposts to big ideas

The best questions point to and highlight the big ideas. They serve as doorways through which learners explore the key concepts, themes, theories, issues, and problems that reside within the content, perhaps as yet unseen: it is through the process of actively “interrogating” the content through provocative questions that students deepen their understanding. For instance, the question “How are stories from different places and times about me?” can lead students to the big ideas that great literature explores universal themes of the

human condition and helps us gain insight into our own experiences. Similarly, the question “To what extent can people accurately predict the future?” serves as a launch pad for examining big ideas in statistics (e.g., sampling variables, predictive validity, degrees of confidence, correlation versus causality).

As Bruner (1996) put it, good questions “are ones that pose dilemmas, subvert obvious or canonical ‘truths’ or force incongruities upon our attention” (p. 127). Good questions elicit interesting and alternative views and suggest the need to focus on the reasoning we use in arriving at and defending an answer, not just whether our answer is “right” or “wrong.” Good questions spark meaningful connections with what we bring to the classroom from prior classes and our own life experience. They can and do recur with profit. They cause us to rethink what we thought we understood and to transfer an idea from one setting to others.

In addition to stimulating thought and inquiry, questions can be used to effectively frame our content goals. For example, if a content standard calls for students to learn about the three branches of government, then a question such as “How might a government guard against abuses of power?” helps stimulate student thinking about *why* we need checks and balances, what the framers of the Constitution were trying to achieve, and other governmental approaches to balancing power.

Try it yourself. 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.

In short, the best questions serve not only to promote understanding of the content of a unit on a particular topic; they also spark connections and promote transfer of ideas from one setting to others. We call such questions “essential.”

## What makes a question essential?

In what senses should a question be deemed “essential”? The best questions push us to the heart of things—the essence. *What is democracy? How does this work? What does the author mean? Can we prove it? What should we do? What is its value?* Honest pursuit of such questions leads not only to deeper understandings, but also to more questions.

But essential questions need not be so global. They can go to the heart of a particular topic, problem, or field of study. Thus we can say that each academic field can be *defined* by its essential questions. Consider these examples:

- When error is unavoidable in measurement, what margins of error are tolerable?
- In what ways should government regulate the market system?