

Identifying Essential Questions to Guide Learning

What essential questions do you want your students to be able to answer by the end of your course? “What provocative questions will foster inquiry, understanding, and transfer of learning”? Essential questions are important questions that recur throughout one’s life, they point to big ideas within a discipline, and they help students make sense of important but complicated ideas.

Characteristics of Essential Questions:

- Make the course content “answers” to questions
- Have no simple “right” answer
- Often address the conceptual or philosophical foundations of a discipline
- Cause genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas of the core content.
- Provoke deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions.
- Require students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers.
- Stimulate vital ongoing rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons.
- Spark meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences.
- Naturally recur, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations, refer to “core ideas and inquiries within a discipline” and help “students effectively inquire and make sense of important but complicated ideas and knowledge.”

Six Facets of Understanding:

The six facets (below) are used to frame “big ideas” and should permeate thinking about all three stages of backward design process:

Explanation	What is the key concept in ___?
Interpretation	What does ___ reveal about ___?
Application	How and when can we use ___?
Perspective	What are the strengths and weaknesses of ___?
Empathy	How might we reach an understanding about ___?
Self-Knowledge	How are my views about ___ shaped by ___?