

Module 3 – Excerpt from Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom

The Five Planning Questions

Question one: What Do I Want Students to Understand?

In order to answer this question well in design, we have to get inside of the ideas that matter most. In the neuro-cognitive sense, an understanding is quite literally a physical thing. We know this because we can image how our understandings and the processes we have for retrieving them affect the physical architecture of our brains (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, Day & Goldstone, 2012). To get inside of an idea means to understand its most basic building blocks in context. It means one should understand both the object-element of the concept and also their goal-elements. By that I mean, a good, rich understanding can be described as a thing and also a thing that serves a certain purpose. In the former, I am describing something in terms of its characteristics, and in the latter, I am describing something in terms of how it functions in relation to some goal. (In the Operationalize This! sections of Chapters 1 through 5, I have described how my colleagues and I have considered the essential understandings of the different classroom stories I have shared in this book.)

The power of teaching is in the facilitating of conceptual understanding. Many of my favorite moments in teaching are those when I am confident that my students are grasping hold of an understanding that I hoped they would comprehend deeply and with a sense of purpose. (I've learned to make time to slow down for myself in those moments so I can more fully appreciate them in the there and then.) I know that many teachers share this sentiment. To share in an understanding – to grasp meaning in the same way as others – can be argued to be the very thing that most defines humanity. Human beings have the capacity to mirror each other's moods and behaviors and we use symbols (language) to calibrate our definitions of wholly abstract concepts. No other species of life on Earth does exactly that. The sharing of understandings is the glue that binds communities. We feel most alive, we feel most like ourselves in those spaces where we are confident in our understandings.

Understandings are a function of culture, and all instruction is culturally biased. We are always advantaging our disadvantaging some cultural perspective in our teaching – the extent to which this occurs is often made clearer in the presence of greater cultural diversity, but it's always there. We learn by making conceptual connections with new understandings that build on and bridge the understanding we bring to bear. Our concepts, yours and mine and every person you've ever known, are a product of direct experience and collective experiences in the social spaces we share with others (the social spaces where we have been indoctrinated to see symbols of culture as meaningful in some specific ways). Every perception and experience in the classroom is infused with cultural meaning. We provide more equitable opportunities for students to make conceptual connections in the learning of understandings when we give them



greater range from which to find conceptual associations and similarities. In the most basic sense, the way I understand it through my study of the most current published neuroscience is: Experience (the bank of individual and collective experiences from which we draw meaning) + Predictions (the estimations our brains make in the filling in of incomplete information) = Conceptual Understandings (Barrett & Russell, 2015; Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Barrett, 2017a, 2017b). Our experiences inform our predictions and vice versa, and our conceptual understandings adjust accordingly – and this is absolutely informed by our cultural identities. In fact, it is safe to say that nothing is ever learned in culturally neutral context. The process of coming to understand anything is always supported or inhibited by our ability to make these kinds of conceptual connections either through new experiences or the symbolic representation of something previously understood.

In the UbD framework (Hess, Carlock, Jones, & Walkup, 2009b), McTighe and Wiggins describe understandings as multi-faceted and performative – meaning that once something is understood, it exists not merely in one’s head but it is performed through one’s being. Understandings change us. Once we understand something, we are never the same as we were prior to that understanding. I often ask teachers in planning spaces to think about what they want their students to still know about a learning experience 20 years after the fact. That thought experiment usually yields rich insight into the true learning targets for students’ understanding. You might also ask yourself: *What is a deep and meaningful conceptual understanding about your content that matters tremendously for students so that they are able to think like practitioners in your field?* (Here’s a clue: It’s something on which other conceptual understandings hinge, as well.) *What do you remember about your own early emerging understandings of this concept? That did you figure out? How did you figure it out? How did it feel when you understood?* In answering these questions for yourself, you are more likely to be able to get inside of the understanding you want for your students.

Another way I’ve found to get to the heart of the understandings we want for students is *The Dream Exercise* in Chip and Dan Heath’s book, *The Power of Moments* (2017) in which they describe a thought experiment which they learned about at the University of Virginia’s Center for Teaching Excellence. It goes like this:

Imagine that you have a group of dream students. They are engaged, they think you’re amazing, they are perfectly behaved, and they have perfect memories... Fill in the blanks in this sentence: Three to five years from now, my students will still know ___; and they are still able to do ___; and they still find value in ___. (Heath & Heath, 2017, p. 101)

Stembridge, A., *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* (1st Ed.), Citing excerpts from *Planning With Equity In Mind*. Routledge: New York. (2019). (pp. 121-123).