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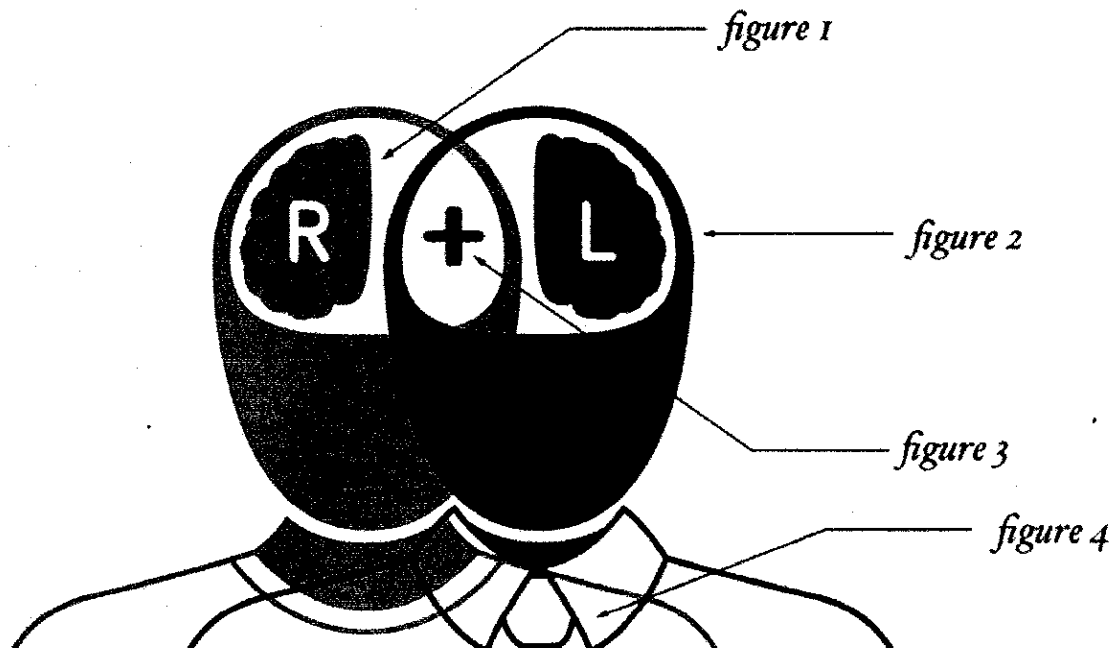
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## What is Teaching for Understanding?

Developed by HGSE faculty, teachers, and researchers, a new framework sets the stage for more effective practice

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Research and practice were connected in the development of the Teaching for Understanding (<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/info3.cfm>) (<http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/learning/LD2-9.html>) Framework (<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/info3.cfm>), a collaborative approach for effective teaching developed, tested, and refined by faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/>) along with many experienced teachers and researchers. It's no surprise, then, that the core dimensions of the framework reflect what educators would agree good teaching ought to be. Educators can apply these guidelines, described below, to teaching at all grade levels, even through higher education. They are not meant to capture every element of effective classroom practice — other factors, including classroom structure and teacher-student relationships also play a role. Instead, this framework is a guide that can help keep the focus of educational practice on understanding, while allowing teachers flexibility to design units that fit their priorities and teaching style.

## 1. Generative Topics

What makes a topic or concept worth teaching? To guide the selection of teaching topics, the framework prioritizes those that have the following features:

- Central to a given discipline or subject area
- Connect readily to what is familiar to students, and to other subject matters
- Engaging to students and to teachers
- Accessible to students via multiple resources and ways of thinking

When teachers are largely restricted in terms of the topics they must teach, steps can be taken to make a given topic more generative. For example, teaching the play, *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles to high schoolers can be part of a unit on family relationships or intrapersonal conflict. Adding a theme to a given topic can help to add new entry points into a topic, making it more accessible to students who might not otherwise be engaged by it.

According to HGSE faculty Tina Blythe (</node/125522>) and David Perkins (</node/126942>), “The (Teaching for Understanding) framework is a representation of what good teaching is. It captures what good teachers do so that we can take gut feelings and make them more explicit and visible.”

## 2. Understanding Goals

To focus the exploration of generative topics, teachers can develop nested understanding goals — that is, unit-sized goals embedded within year-long overarching goals, or "throughlines."

In an American History course, a year-long understanding goal might be, "Students will understand the various considerations and strategies historians use to interpret evidence about the past." This goal can be made explicit to students, helping them organize their thinking, by phrasing the goal as a question: "How do we find out the truth about things that happened a long time ago?" A unit-goal, in this case, might be: "Students will understand how to read and judge the reliability of primary sources about..." the American Revolution, or a topic of local history.

### 3. Performances of Understanding

Throughout the school year, students should be engaged in performances of understanding; activities that both develop and demonstrate their current understanding.

Initial performances would be rather simple, such as discussing as a group how coal mining relates to students' existing understandings of energy resources. In an elementary science class, students might be given a dried leaf or other "specimen" to explore using various tools, like magnifying glasses or a water dropper; guided by a teacher, these activities can help to develop students' understanding while simultaneously revealing what they know about coal mining in one case, and the scientific process in the other.

Over time, the performances of understanding in a given topic become progressively more complex. Also, teachers gradually transition from offering high levels of instructional support to lower levels, as students begin to understand key concepts independently of the teacher. Ultimately, students might participate in a culminating performance of understanding or exhibition, where they apply their understanding to a new problem or context. In the examples above, the older students might develop an essay on how advances in transportation influence the availability of energy sources. Using images and text, the young science students might document the characteristics they found to apply across various authentic specimens.

### 4. Ongoing Assessment

In the Teaching for Understanding Framework, performances of understanding and student assessment go hand-in-hand whenever possible. Rather than assessing outcomes primarily at the end of the unit, teachers provide feedback, learning criteria, and opportunities for reflection throughout instruction. Feedback from teachers, peers, and self-evaluation can help to advance the students' work, particularly when:

- Assessment criteria are made public to students
- Feedback is provided on a regular basis
- Students and teachers have ample opportunity to reflect on students' understanding and barriers that remain

The Teaching for Understanding Framework has been used for more than 20 years by teachers around the world. Since its development, the framework has evolved to better meet the needs of educators and students. In particular, former HGSE Professor Stone Wiske has emphasized *learning communities* as a fifth element of the framework. Acknowledging that learning need not occur among isolated students, generative topics can be taught with an eye towards developing supportive learning communities. Like the rest of the framework, promoting collaboration is a challenge that many educators already take on in their classrooms. The Teaching for Understanding framework provides a structure that teachers can return to, over the school year, to help ensure that these important instructional components are systematically being addressed.

*Adapted from Tina Blythe and David Perkins (1998), The Teaching for Understanding Framework (<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/info3.cfm>).*

## To learn more:

*Blythe, T. (1997). The Teaching for Understanding Guide (<http://www.amazon.com/Teaching-Understanding-Guide-Tina-Blythe/dp/0787909939>). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.*