The Teaching for Understanding Framework

with David Perkins

Developing understanding means doing things—using old knowledge in new situations to solve novel problems. But what exactly do we want our students to understand? How do we help them develop these understandings? And how do we gauge their progress and provide them with feedback? The framework developed by the Teaching for Understanding Project provides a language for discussing and creating curricula that address these issues.

The Four Parts of the Framework

The framework includes four key ideas: generative topics, understanding goals, performances of understanding, and ongoing assessment. (Although the four parts of the framework are usually presented in this order, the ordering is somewhat arbitrary. You can begin your discussions or planning sessions with any part.)

Generative Topics

Not all topics (concepts, themes, theories, ideas, and so on) lend themselves equally to teaching for understanding. For instance, it is easier to teach statistics and probability for understanding than quadratic equations, because statistics and probability connect more readily to familiar contexts and other subject matters. If students need to develop an understanding of colonial tax policies, then the Boston Tea Party might be a good generative topic since it dramatizes in an interesting way the issues surrounding those policies. Generative topics have several key features: They are central to one or more disciplines or domains. They are interesting to students. They are accessible to students (there are lots of resources available to help students pursue the topic). There are multiple connections between them and students' experiences both in and out of school. And perhaps most important, they are interesting to the teacher.

For more about generative topics, see Chapter Four.

Of course, one might argue that anything can be taught for understanding—even quadratic equations! It is just a matter of good teaching. This is true, but some topics are more central to a discipline or domain, more interesting to teachers, more accessible to students, and more easily connected to students' experiences than others. These topics should form the core of the curriculum.

However, many of us feel restricted to an established curriculum: particular topics must be taught regardless of whether they are generative or not. One solution is to give a topic a more generative cast by adding a theme or a perspective to it—for example, teaching *Oedipus Rex* as part of an exploration of family relationships or teaching about the food chain to illustrate that all living things are interconnected.

Understanding Goals

The trouble with generative topics is that they are almost too generative. Each topic offers the opportunity to develop many

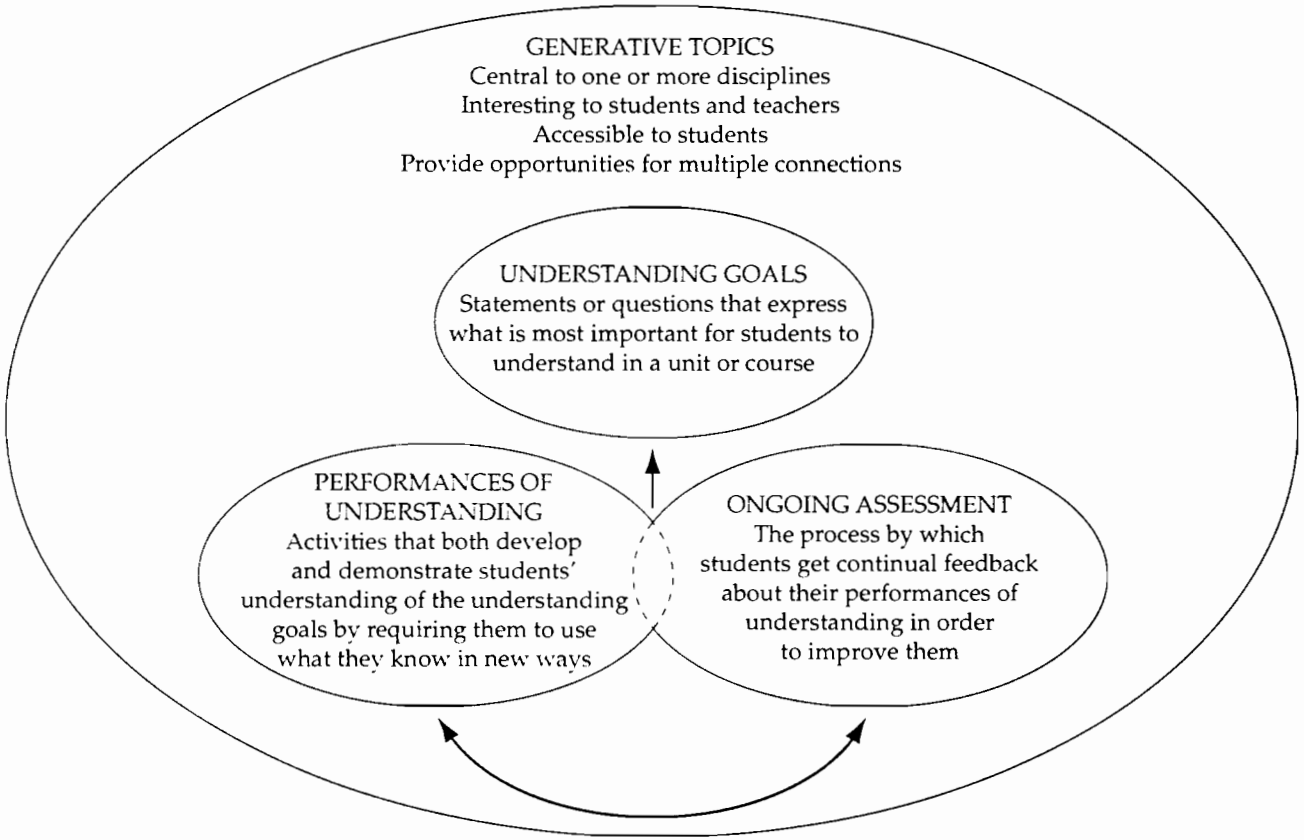

FIGURE 3.1 *The Teaching for Understanding Framework*

different understandings. To create a focus, teachers have found it useful to identify a few specific understanding goals for a topic. Teachers have also found it helpful to state these goals both in sentence form ("Students will understand . . ." or "Students will appreciate . . .") and as open-ended questions that can be posed directly to students.

Suppose that the generative topic is "The Boston Tea Party as a Political Protest." One understanding goal for that topic might be "Students will understand the features that make the Boston Tea Party like and unlike other political protests of various historical periods." In question form, it might be phrased this way: "How is the Boston Tea Party similar to and different from other historical political protests, and why?" Another understanding goal might be "Students will appreciate the state of mind incited by deprivation of civil rights." The question form might be "What happens when people are deprived of their civil rights?" There is never a "right" list of understanding goals; the point is to lend focus to the ensuing instruction.

Chapter Five presents a more detailed description of both unit-level and overarching understanding goals.

In addition to such unit-sized understanding goals, there are also year-long or overarching understanding goals, sometimes called "throughlines." Such goals describe the understandings that you feel are most important for students to take away from your class. There might be several throughlines for a course, and each of the individual units that make up the course will have understanding goals that relate closely to those overarching understanding goals or throughlines.

For example, one overarching understanding goal for an American History course might be "How do we find out the truth about things that happened a long time ago?" (In statement form it might read "Students will understand the various considerations and strategies historians use to interpret evidence about the past.") If the course includes a unit on the American Revolution, a related unit-level goal might be "Students will understand how to read and judge the reliability of primary sources about the American Revolution."

Making these throughlines explicit for students helps to ensure that they will stay focused on developing the most essential understandings. Discussing throughlines with students gives them opportunities to revisit those understandings over the course of several different generative topics as they move through the semester or year.

Performances of Understanding

As discussed in Chapter Two, performances of understanding are at the heart of developing understanding. Thus they need to be linked closely to understanding goals. Students should be engaged in performances that demonstrate and develop understanding from the beginning to the end of the unit or course.

For further explanation and more examples of performances of understanding, see Chapter Six.

For example, a class might devote several weeks or even months to a generative topic. Throughout this time the students would engage in a variety of understanding performances (supported by appropriate information on the topic from texts and the teacher) as they work toward a few understanding goals. The initial performance of understanding probably would be relatively simple. In the Boston Tea Party unit, for example, students might begin by discussing political protests they have witnessed. They could then move to slightly more demanding tasks, such as explaining in their own words why the Sons of Liberty opted to throw the tea into the harbor and speculating about what might have happened if their protest had taken another form. Successive understanding performances would present students with progressively subtler (but still accessible) challenges. Ultimately students might develop some "culminating" performance of understanding, such as an exhibition or an extended essay (arguing, for example, that the media age has transformed the nature of political protests).

Ongoing Assessment

Traditionally assessment comes at the end of a lesson or unit and focuses on grading and accountability. These are important

functions for many purposes, but they do not serve students' learning needs. To learn for understanding, students need criteria, feedback, and opportunities for reflection throughout the entire sequence of instruction. In the Teaching for Understanding Framework this process is called ongoing assessment.

Chapter Seven contains a more detailed discussion of ongoing assessment.

Instances of assessment might involve feedback from the teacher, from peers, or from self-evaluations. Sometimes the teacher may provide assessment criteria, and sometimes he or she may engage students in developing them. While there are many reasonable approaches to ongoing assessment, these factors are constant: public criteria, regular feedback, and frequent reflection throughout the learning process.

In summary, the four concepts discussed in this chapter delineate the core elements of the Teaching for Understanding Framework. Of course, they do not address every condition that affects student understanding. Other factors, such as classroom structure and teacher-student relationships, play important roles as well. The framework is meant only as a guide, one that keeps the focus on understanding while allowing teachers room to design units and courses that suit their particular styles and priorities as practitioners.

"The framework is like an insurance policy for me. All of the key ideas are things I've always known are important for my students. They're things I've always tried to incorporate into my teaching. But it's hard to keep track of all of those pieces all of the time. Using the framework as a lens to look at my teaching gives me a systematic way of making sure I'm consistently integrating all of the important elements."

Lois Hetland, Seventh-Grade Humanities Teacher, Cambridge, Mass.

What's New Here?

"Isn't this basically about using good activities?" you might reasonably ask. Yes, it is about teaching with good activities—good activities *plus*. It is the *plus* that is the special contribution of this framework.

While most of us have always sought to teach with good activities, often those activities do not involve performances of understanding. For instance, a *Jeopardy*-style history quiz, an art activity consisting of drawing the Boston Tea Party, a follow-the-recipe-type science experiment—all can be

engaging activities. But typically they do not press the learners to think well beyond what they already know. While some of us often involve students in understanding performances, our curricula may lack the focus provided by thinking in terms of carefully selected generative topics and goals for understanding. Or some students may not receive the ongoing assessment needed to help them learn from their performances of understanding.

Many of the teachers who have collaborated with the Teaching for Understanding Project already do much, or even most, of what the framework advocates. They have described the framework as useful because it provides a language with which to discuss classroom practice with other teachers. It helps them sharpen the focus of their efforts. Since the framework grew out of teachers' practice, it would be odd if the kind of teaching it advocated were to come as a surprise to most teachers. Instead, it should look familiar: "Yes, that's the kind of teaching I like to do—and sometimes, even often, the kind I do." We already strive to teach for understanding. So this performance-based view of teaching for understanding does not aim at radical, burn-the-bridges innovations. Its banner is not "completely new and wholly different" but a just-as-crucial "more and better."

> "The 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."
>
> **Meryl Launer, Seventh-Grade Teacher, Norwalk, Conn.**

REFLECTION

To begin thinking in more concrete terms about the framework, you might reflect on a topic or unit you teach that you feel your students understand well. Here are some questions that could guide your reflection and discussion with colleagues:

- *What do your students come to understand well?*
- *How do you know?*

➢ *What helps them develop that understanding?*

Consider, too, a unit in which you were not convinced that your students understood what you had hoped they would. How did the approach you took in teaching that unit differ from the approach you took for the one you just described?

If you are working with a group, try drawing some generalizations across your reflections:

➢ *What kinds of things do your students come to understand?*

➢ *What do you take as evidence of your students' understanding?*

➢ *What does and does not help them to develop that understanding?*

Try looking back at the generalizations you made at the end of Chapter Two and compare that list with this one. How are your own most powerful learning experiences like and unlike the experiences your students have in your classroom?

You might also compare the units you described in this Reflection with the framework:

➢ *In what ways is your approach similar to the framework's?*

➢ *Are there ways in which the framework and your approach differ?*

➢ *Do the differences suggest modifications you might want to make, either to your practice or to the framework?*