Classroom Tip Sheet: Teaching for Understanding

Every month in our email newsletter we ask our instructors to provide us with a classroom-focused teaching tip. Their tips are a reflection of the Teaching for Understanding strategies that are taught in WIDE World courses. We hope these tips prove valuable to you in your own teaching practice.

Mary McFarland, Instructor
Teaching for Understanding 1: Focus on Student Understanding

Teaching for Understanding is one of the most important commitments to students that an educator can make. But supporting students to understand well enough to apply learning in new contexts both within and beyond the classroom has to begin by getting instruction off to a good start.

Howard Gardner, in The Disciplined Mind, points out how important it is that we give much thought to inviting the widest range of students possible to engage with a topic in the early moments of study. He points out that students can decide in "quick order" whether or not they will engage in a topic and need a variety of ways to see the topic as meaningful to them.

Selecting a "starter" topic is helpful. The Teaching for Understanding Framework calls on unit designers to select a Generative Topic – a topic that is broad in nature, central to your discipline and related in important ways to what students will be studying in the unit. Examples of Generative Topics might be "power," "leadership," "beauty," "conservation," "balance," etc.

The purpose of the Generative Topic is for students to be able to find a way to connect personally, to know they have something to contribute, to draw on their experience, and to become interested enough to pursue the learning further. Often taking the time to provide a brisk, "low-risk" learning experience such as brainstorming, or creating a word-web, or making a visual based around a Generative Topic can be just what is needed to get students off to a good start!

Anne Clarke, Instructor
Teaching for Understanding 2: Understanding in Practice

“What makes you say that?” I have found this simple phrase to have a power way beyond its five words. When I first introduced it as a Thinking Routine in my classroom, it rapidly became a favorite, popping up regularly in conversation. It's often surprising and gratifying to see how this question prompts others to share the reasoning behind their conclusions or assertions. For example, a teacher could use it to explore an image. If you first ask, "What's going on here?" and then follow it up with, "What makes you say that?" students start to dig into their own learning process.

Not only does this simple routine open a window into the hidden world of thinking but it helps us model and value good thinking. When giving feedback I often find myself saying, “just let me explain what makes me say that” as I explain the steps in my reasoning. It is also applicable to almost any classroom situation. Students working in groups use it frequently to prompt others to give evidence for their point of view.

So my tip is this. Introduce the “What makes you say that?” routine to your students, post it on the wall, and see how quickly it catches on. I am sure you will find, as I have, that this short phrase can be a significant step in creating a culture of thinking in the classroom.