



## Using Project Zero Ideas to Create a Culture of Thinking in My Humanities Classroom

by Cathy Carr — San Francisco School

### I. BACKGROUND:

This is my second year as a fellow, and I find myself using the Project Zero ideas in every aspect of my teaching. Last year I did extensive work on ongoing assessment and how to make rubrics instructional, and I continued to work on ongoing assessment throughout this year. However, my focus this year shifted to explore how I could use Throughlines (also called overarching understanding goals) to help increase the amount of critical thinking in my classroom.

This idea emerged based on what students had said about my course the previous year. In general, they had enjoyed the course and felt they learned a lot, but many students (particularly the weaker ones), said they weren't always sure how everything we studied was connected. This got me thinking that although I had a big picture plan for what I taught and why, I rarely expressed that explicitly to my students, leaving some children unsure of the deeper connections and reasons for my curriculum choices. Based on my knowledge of the Teaching for Understanding Framework, I decided that introducing Throughlines might be the perfect way to publicize what I was hoping the students would think about and learn in my classroom.

### II. MY THROUGHLINES:

In August, I got together with the other Humanities teachers at my school and with the head of our school, and we brainstormed hundreds of possible history Throughlines. Then we decided what we wanted our courses to focus on and which ones were appropriate for each grade level. Ultimately we decided on the following history ones for seventh grade:

- How can we find out the truth about what happened in the past?
- How do we understand (and learn from) patterns in history?
- How are just and equitable societies created?

Then I went on to make my own Language Arts ones for seventh grade:

- How can I use reading and writing to give power to my idea?
- How can I revise to demonstrate my progress as a writer?
- How can I read for understanding?

I was wary of putting up these Throughlines, because I was unsure if I liked the wording and not yet clear how I would make my course revolve around them, but putting them up in the room turned out to be the best move I made all year. I can't stress enough the importance of making Throughlines public, for it helps make what you want students to learn visible.

### III. VARIOUS WAYS THE THROUGH LINES IMPROVED MY TEACHING and HELPED IMPROVE THE CULTURE OF THINKING IN MY CLASSROOM.

The Throughlines...

- Focused my thematic history course and answered the often asked questions “Why am I teaching this?” and/or “Why do we have to learn this?”
- Changed the types of questions and depth of student responses in class discussions
- Inspired me to keep a journal of students’ responses and document when students’ used Throughlines
- Improved the directions I give to the students in their daybooks, making student entries more thoughtful and focused
- Transformed my culminating assignment on our study of Rome (Talked about in more detail in IV.)
- Altered directions and questions on the students’ self-assessment sheets of their Language Arts assignments and history projects and/or tests
- Helped focus student reflection and preparation for our portfolio exhibition
- Informed the write-ups on my report cards to the parents

### IV. WAYS THE THROUGH LINES IMPROVED STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING IN MY CLASSROOM:

Based on my journal entries about students’ comments during class discussions, students began to take ownership of the Throughlines around January, and soon I saw them popping up in some form or another in their assignments. One such example of students using the Throughlines in their assignments occurred when students worked on their final assignment on Rome. The assignment required students to examine the positive and negative lessons of Roman history and then to use these lessons to give advice, feedback, criticisms, and/or compliments in a letter they had to write to George Bush based on how well he was applying the lessons of Roman history.

The letters were filled with many insightful comments about Rome and current events, but the excerpts I have chosen here are the ones that show my seventh grade students incorporating our Throughlines into their letters to George Bush. This was not required or suggested in the assignment, so it shows them taking ownership of the Throughlines and buying into how such overarching questions can help guide (and ultimately increase) understanding.

#### EXCERPTS FROM STUDENTS’ LETTERS:

*“Please look at history for your answers, because it truly holds the solution to all our problems. If we only look back at the mistakes we have made, we will know how to create just and equitable societies.”*

*“Lately we’ve been learning about Roman History, and we just couldn’t help but notice that America is making the same mistakes that the Romans did thousands of years ago. It made us ask ourselves, “How do we understand patterns in history?” and “How can we use what we know about history to improve our country?”*

*“They say history repeats itself, and I wouldn’t want to see America get buried beside Rome.”*

*“There are too many patterns in history that go unnoticed. How long will it take until someone realizes that we can learn*

*from our mistakes? The leader who is brave enough to learn from our mistakes, will be the leader that is brave enough to be the best."*

*"Try not to repeat actions that lead to patterns of collapsing civilizations. Notice the mistakes in history and be careful not to repeat them. The people of America need to speak, and you, Mr. President, need to listen."*

#### **V. THE MAIN LESSON I LEARNED FROM MY FELLOWS PROJECT:**

This year has taught me that having the Throughlines up in my classroom and using them daily helps deepen my students understanding. The year ended with me giving a course evaluation for the students to fill out. When asked what they had learned one student immediately piped up, "We all learned about those all year (as he pointed to the Throughlines up in my classroom), so that is a given, right?" I assured him that I was gratified to know he had understood the point of those questions on the classroom walls.

Another question on the course evaluation asked students to write what they saw as the strengths of the course. One student summarized a sentiment present on over 80% of the evaluations, when he said that "a strength of this course was having the big questions guide our thinking, so we always knew WHY we were learning something."

In my opinion, that alone, validates the use of Throughlines in the classroom!

This paper is a result of research conducted by the author. Any use of this material in any theme, essay, term paper, research paper, thesis, or dissertation should be credited to the author. This research was conducted with the support of the Bay Area Teacher Development Collaborative.

