



Teaching for Understanding: The Concept of Growth of Personal and Ethical Ideas

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After my second year working as a fellow with the BATDC and working with the ideas of TfU, I thought I could be more ambitious in my goals for this year's project. As a teacher of sixth grade English and Social Studies, I chose to focus my TfU goals around the concept of growth of personal and ethical ideas through focusing the lessons of the class around four central throughline questions:

1. What is perspective?
2. How does our perspective influence the way we see the world?
3. How does our experience influence our perspective?
4. In what ways do our emotions play a role in shaping our perspective?

The goal of having the students raise their level of ethical awareness turned out to be a much loftier goal than I had imagined. The students had difficulty with the concept of ethics because of their differing levels of development. Some of the class might have had a strong sense of right and wrong engrained in them through family or religion, while others were establishing their "moral center" through the relationships amongst friends. Above all, the mainstream media greatly influenced all of the students, shaping the way they saw the world and what they valued as right or wrong. Albeit, the class was always willing (and at times eager) to address the throughline questions while examining the different themes in the novels we read throughout the year and also in our discussion of ancient civilizations and their impact on our world today.

As the project and throughlines were more woven into the class, there was an overwhelming focus on the first three questions and less so on the fourth. The class read historical fiction and young-adult fiction novels (*Inside the Walls of Troy*, *Seedfolks*, and *Habibi*) which had strong central characters who, through personal desire or external events, changed their perspective of the world around them. The class explored the concepts within the throughline questions and then reflected on their own experiences.

In Social Studies, the throughline questions were connected by having the class reflect on the impact cultures have on our society and how a "legacy" in reflecting on a certain group of people is only an "advancement" in the cultures own time. In ancient civilizations (Greece, Rome, the Bantu & Nok of Africa) there is no mention that the advancements of the time were going to be, in some situations, revolutionary. The discovery of the monsoon winds by traders on the Eastern African shores was seen as a benefit, but not something that was going to revolutionize the African coastal people that resided there. Perspective of one's own time is not measured by success at the time but success of what lasts the longest. It was interesting to discuss the way in which different technologies impacted the societies we studied and having the class hypothesize about what in our own time would be part of our "legacy" to future generations. Being a highly technological group and growing up in a time of media image inundation, the class was almost always willing to explore how the tools they use in their daily lives allow them great connectivity and ease today. Being a big believer in the process of questioning, the students would often see that there was no "closed" question when it came to working with the throughlines questions.

The throughlines and TfU ideas were not always easy. There were days when I felt the students were tired of analyzing the idea of perspective, and so was I. The ethical side of what I was attempting to have the class understand also fell aside at times. Teaching for understanding was not easy. It was not a set fixed form of what was supposed to be, instead my lessons were sometimes completely away from the concepts I was attempting to rally around. Occasionally it was the students that brought me back to the center.

Maybe having the throughlines posted in the class helped the class see connections that I might not have seen myself. At times teachers are so entrenched in what we teach that linking one element to another can pass by unrecognized; the students did not let that happen. In the midst of teaching *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman a comment was made about the idea of perspective by one of the characters that I did not see before. A character in the novel who was an immigrant described their environment with prejudice towards another ethnicity. Although I did recognize the prejudice and begin to discuss it in class, one of the students pointed out that the prejudice was based on the individual's perspective and experience and was based in her own ignorance rather than what we, as readers, saw as prejudice or stereotype. Moments like this, times where the class made connections to both perspective and the ethical concepts of "right or wrong" made me push forward with a renewed curiosity about the process and outcome.

I had to be reminded by the students that although we did not discuss the concepts of teaching for understanding, the class was thinking about the ideas within the throughlines and making connections in ways I did not recognize. I was assured that even though the process was a struggle to keep on track with, it was the process that was most valuable, and the students were engaging with the ideas beyond our conversations or guided writing assignments.

The driving force behind my work with the TfU concepts was my own desire for greater understanding of the way students process and connect ideas, along with my own hope to become a more consistent teacher. The concepts raised by TfU, with all of its complex language at first, became something I wanted a greater understanding of. I believed I employed many of the ideas of TfU, but I believed having the guidance of the concepts on a daily level could help guide my teaching to be more effective and also help the students in their understanding of what were my goals for their sixth grade year.

The process of incorporating the TfU framework began with the introduction of the throughlines into my classroom. At the start of the year I spoke with the class about the purpose of the throughline questions and my own hopes of having them "see" the application of the ideas within the throughlines throughout the year. In all of the novels I taught, along with the major units in Social Studies, I tried to keep the throughline questions in mind when planning the classes. This process had me working opposite than I had in the past – looking at the understanding goal and making sure that when the class finished a unit all parts of the process incorporated the goals I had set out for myself at the beginning. The ongoing assessment was the most challenging part of this process because I had to come up with new ways to assess the students' understanding outside the traditional reading comprehension or vocabulary quiz. There was great benefit from this though, a re-examination of what I taught and a critical self-assessment of what material I deemed as crucial to the student's understanding.

As the class became more versed with the throughline questions, they were able to make connections in their writing and our class discussions which assured me the concepts were being incorporated into their learning and understanding. Since the process is ongoing, I can not yet say that the TfU ideas are thoroughly effective in my classroom. From all that the class has done there is a high level of comprehension and exploration that might not have existed before my work with the TfU concepts.

Teaching for Understanding continues to be incorporated into my classroom and I am anxious to see how my teaching improves in the coming years, as the concepts discussed here are further integrated into my classroom. As teachers we are consistently challenging ourselves to be the best teachers we can be, employing all tools at our disposal. The concepts of TfU will be used and refined as I reassess my own curriculum over the summer, and look forward to the continued growth within my experience of teaching in the years to come.

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