



Getting Started with the TFU Framework in a Third Grade Classroom

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The first time I attended the Project Zero summer institute, I'd left feeling energized, excited and convinced that the PZ ideas and Teaching for Understanding Framework was something I wanted to implement in my third grade classroom. But how to start? I went back to my classroom and wrote throughlines for all the subjects I teach as well as throughlines for the important social and behavioral goals I had for my students. This was quite a task considering I teach reading, writing, science, math, spelling, computers as well as a myriad of organizational skills and social skills. I didn't know where to stop writing throughlines; there seemed to be an interminable list of necessary goals for all the things that I taught. I looked back at the examples in the Teaching for Understanding Framework book and envied single subject teachers who could describe their entire curriculum with a few all-encompassing throughlines. I felt overwhelmed but decided to come up with just one throughline for each subject I taught as well as a few throughlines that applied more generally to ways of thinking or problem solving. I felt good about my throughlines. In September, I wrote them up, hung them on the walls and never thought about them again until June!

After attending the PZ summer institute for a second year, I realized I needed to try new approach to make this framework stick. My goal was to really use the TFU framework in my classroom in some way and see if it helped my students develop understanding. Following the institute, I developed new throughlines for many of the subjects I teach and delved further into the framework by coming up with understanding goals for writing, reading and science. I also joined the Fellows Group just before the first meeting as I suddenly realized that my throughlines would probably collect dust again if I didn't have some support, and ongoing accountability to actually make me put my ideas into use!

In our first Fellows meeting, we talked about coming up with goals for ourselves for the year using the PZ ideas. I realized I need to take the leap and stop writing understanding goals and throughlines and just DO something. It was hard to take this leap for me because it felt risky and public. Once I'd make my ideas known I'd really have to follow through and I wasn't sure that I'd be able to. I got some good advice from colleagues who told me to try to narrow my focus. At first, I was reluctant to narrow my focus too much because I had so many ideas I wanted to use and so much to teach, that I didn't want to short change any part of my curriculum. However, after considering my approach the year before, I realized that it just wasn't realistic to think I could follow through with anything if I tried to do too much. So, I decided to focus on just one subject. I decided to put my energy towards something I felt passionate about; teaching reading.

I was really excited about looking at reading using the TFU framework. I tweaked and added to my pre-existing throughlines and understanding goals, but again realized I had too many! I thought I might try to separate reading into 3 different units and develop 3 different frameworks. The units were going to be about Reading Discussions/Book Talks, Active Reading and Independent Reading. Somehow, this still didn't feel right. I realized that I still had no easy place to start. If we read a chapter book as a class, how could I employ 3 separate frameworks effectively? It would be completely confusing and impractical. I pitched that idea and just decided to take one book as my topic, come up with understanding goals for the unit as well

as some performances of understanding and take it from there. My focus, would be on comprehension. While it seems like an obvious solution, at the time I worried it would be too little. I felt like one 5 week unit in just one of 6 subjects I teach wouldn't seem like enough after all the time and effort that had already and would continue to go into it. Fortunately, I trusted that it would lead to more and that what was important was just getting my feet wet and trying out some of these ideas.

After that hurdle, things went remarkable smoothly. When I really thought about it, my understanding goals for comprehending the book, *The Big Wave*, were clear to me. I felt secure that these were the ideas that I felt were worthy goals and wrote them up and made them public as soon as we started reading the book. On chart paper, I'd written "Our reading goals for *The Big Wave*"

1. Retelling
2. Making Mind Pictures
3. Inferring
4. Connecting what you read to your own life and experiences
5. Asking questions
6. Figuring out the Big Ideas
(see graphic organizer as well)

Then, over the course of a few discussions, I talked with my students about what each one of the understanding goals meant and why it was important in building understanding. The chart was always in a visible spot where we could refer to it. The hardest work was done!

Next came developing performances of understanding. Even though I'd taught this book before, when thinking of performances of understanding that would address my understanding goals, I thought I'd have to come up with completely new projects and activities. I looked back to see what I'd done in the past and after some careful thought, I discovered that most of the activities did already support my understanding goals! Yahoo! For instance, I'd usually have the kids do a watercolor painting or drawing of setting of the book that is described vividly and in great detail by the author Pearl Buck. I'd always known that was a worthwhile activity and I knew the kids enjoyed it but I'd never thought about why it was valuable. Now I realized that it reflected one of my understanding goals about "Making Mind Pictures". I started a conversation with my students about how I usually made a movie in my mind as I read and how picturing what I read helped me understand it better. Making Mind Pictures was a fascinating topic to my students and one that we returned to often once the it was defined. Students loved to compare the books they had pictured a certain way compared to the movie version of the same book (Inevitably the pictures in our minds were always better!). Another important piece of this process for me was not just "doing" the activities but letting the kids in on why we were doing it and how it related to the understanding goals. I think this explicitness is critical. It's what I had been missing in my teaching or reading before now. Posting and sharing the understanding goals so clearly reminded me what was important and made me really rethink the activities and projects I'd always done to make sure they were pointing at one of those understanding goal. Furthermore, I think the students really appreciated knowing why we were doing something and why it was important.

Many of the lessons I'd done basically remained the same but were put into context using the goals; however, I did find there were some holes. For instance, realized I needed more performances of understanding where the kids were asked to think about the author's message/big ideas. I also realized that I needed to spend more time modeling retelling. We ended up retelling main events in other areas of the curriculum too; during writing, science and class meetings. I found that the kids were not only able to practice many understanding goals during our performances of understanding but they also began to use the language and ideas in other subjects. We talked about the inferences we'd made during electricity experiments, and the connections we'd made while listening to each other's writing.

Another piece of this project came up unexpectedly. A colleague saw the way I was using understanding goals in reading and asked if I would present some of what I was doing as part of a meeting for board

members about teaching reading. With the help of a co-teacher, we decided it would be more fun to show what was going on rather than tell, so we taped various sessions of reading time and put it together in an i-movie. The idea was that the movie showed each understanding goal up on the screen and then demonstrated various scenes of me modeling or explaining it and then the kids attempting to put it into use in their performances of understanding. I told the students that we were making a movie about what good readers do; specifically the goals we'd talked about. The students were really engaged with the idea of being in a movie really excited about showing what good readers they were. It added to their sense that this was important work they were doing. For me, it was another way to stay focused on the understanding goals and make sure that I was addressing them everyday. It turned out that watching the unedited tape was also a really good assessment tool for me. I was surprised and happy to see and hear most of the students ask good questions, explain their mind pictures, retell, connect the book to their own lives and try to make inferences.

It wasn't until after I'd pretty much finished the unit, that I realized that both my understanding goal and throughlines were transferable to other books. I didn't need new understanding goals; what I'd come up with was challenging and captivating enough to sustain our work for the year (and probably more). It suddenly seemed absurd that I'd been thinking of adding more and different understanding goals when there was so much more depth to the ones I already had.

I have since applied the goals to another book that we've read. The students are able to go deeper and more comfortably use the language of our goals. For instance, I have a number of students who can say "I can make a connection between the book and my own life because it reminds me of the time..." or they'll say "I have a really clear picture of the house where she lives..."

My initial concern about doing too little with the framework by focusing on just one unit turned out to be unfounded. Coming up with and putting the understanding goals into use not only led to the development of performances of understanding and throughlines, but carried over into other books and subjects. Furthermore, it led to new questions for me to explore.

A major part of what helped me forward was not only my part in the fellows group but also my participation in a study group at my school that allowed further conversations about my work with the PZ framework. During these monthly study group meetings, each teacher presented something she wanted feedback, questions or help with. Using the TFU framework, I feel I was more effective at helping colleagues with their own questions and projects. Knowing that I was to be a presenter also forced me to continue to work with the TFU framework so I'd have something to share. I ended up sharing my process and my reading understanding goals and the i-movie. While I was both excited and apprehensive about sharing my work, I felt proud of it, yet was nervous to expose something I cared so much about. Ultimately, the group was incredibly positive about the reading goals and the movie. It was great to have such thoughtful input from colleagues and talk about what was working. I realized that sharing my work with colleagues made it more real for me and made the whole project feel like it had come to an end. Through our discussion, I came up with new questions which helped me decide that I wanted to work on ongoing assessments next.

I feel really satisfied with the work my students and I did this year. There are a few things that helped me get things off the ground this year. First, was having the ongoing support of colleagues through my school study group and the fellows program. Being flexible was another important part of this process; realizing when something wasn't working and being willing to try something new. Another critical piece was starting small; a little turned out to be a lot! Finally, making my work and ideas public by sharing them with the students, colleagues, parents and fellows really helped me propel my work forward. Next year, I hope to use what worked this year and take another small bite from the TFU framework.

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