



Weaving the Red Threads
A way into the Teaching for Understanding Framework through
Posting the Throughlines

By Mila Tewell and Dan Dworkin – The Hamlin School

Does art have to be beautiful? What does it mean to be civilized? What is progress? Is it good for everyone? Where do good ideas come from? Where indeed. Stroll around the classrooms, K through 8, of the Hamlin School and you will find these and other provocative questions on display. Do they catch students eyes, and minds? Are they constant reminders to teachers to lead students to the deeper questions, to teach for understanding? How do we make sure the "throughlines" get through to our students? These were what Dan Dworkin and I hoped to discover as we embarked on a year long project to explore the use of "throughlines" or "red threads" in our classrooms and those of our colleagues.

As Fellows of the Bay Area Teachers Development Collaborative, we designed a project which we hoped would help us deepen our understanding of our own teaching and of ways to use the framework, Teaching for Understanding, offered by Project Zero. The project design was relatively simple: create a set of throughlines or yearlong, curriculum wide understanding goals, post them in your classroom and then keep a regular journal of how you use them to help guide your teaching and enhance your dialogue with your students. Throughout the year, we checked in with the BATDC fellows on questions of substance or procedure, and also checked in with like minded faculty members who generously shared their experiences of throughlines.

Creating our throughlines was then the starting point, a labor of self reflection (What questions are important to you as a teacher?) and an attempt at clear headed evaluation of what we wish went on and what really goes on in our classroom (What do I want students to learn here? What have students really learned here?) So we looked back over our curricula, our units, and the ideas offered in the Teaching for Understanding Guide. The questions seemed to come fairly easily, though at the time neither one of us thought much about the difference between content and process questions, and how important one or the other was to our curriculum.

Last August, after the typical midsummer promises had been made and the deadlines expired, we met in the rush of the last few days before school and put our ideas down, shared them gingerly with each other and then took the plunge and posted them prominently in our room. Dan was far more creative than I, turning a world map upside down with the question next to it "How does our perspective influence the way we see the world?" and actively drawing students in with visual cues. I just put the questions up front in the room and hoped the words would work their magic.

First day: we both introduced students to the idea of "big questions" I directly discussed the "big questions" with my eighth graders (whom I was teaching for a second year), and explained that they would be questions we would come back to again and again during the year. I asked them – based on their experience – what they thought the "big questions" had been for us in 7th grade. They came up with the following:

- Should the U.S. be a melting pot or a salad bowl?
- Is it right that America, a nation of immigrants, ever close its doors to immigrants?

- Should the U.S. be the "world's policeman?"
- Why should we value diversity?
- When, if ever, is war justified?
- How much should the national government be involved in local affairs?

These seemed a fair reflection of some of the questions we had explored, but were they the throughlines I had intended, subconsciously or consciously? I then asked students to choose one of my newly posted questions and write about it. The results were nondescript; did they need more context than a first day of school offered? Looking back, I wish I had saved them to come back to later in the year.

Early in the year I introduced a geography unit, borrowing from Dan's throughlines: How does where you live affect who you are? We launched quickly into a freewheeling discussion of the importance of place and the unique cultural components of San Francisco. If its ability to engage students was a test of a good throughline, then this one was clearly a winner.

As we worked our way through this unit, the stated unit goal guided my ideas and my model of an appropriate performance of understanding. In previous years, I might well have simply given tests, asking students to feed back to me their knowledge of geographic terminology and respond to essay-style questions on the importance of geography to a given group of people. This time I began by asking students to write about three ways in which living in this city had shaped who they were. The results ranged from comments on clothing and the importance of learning to layer in a fog bound California town to tolerance and their heightened exposure to and comfort level with diverse populations. For a final project, I asked the girls to create their own "model" citizens from nations around the world, and supplied them with the dry facts of a CIA World Factbook profile. Using this solid evidence as a base, they devised some intriguing "Josephina Q. Citizens" who were introduced in amusing skits. Not only was it a fun approach but it also asked them to take the knowledge and use it in new ways, which reflected their understanding of the underlying meaning of often dry statistics.

Interestingly, Dan also opened the year with the question "How does where you live affect who you are?" which was the basis of several discussions during the early days of school. Each student's first project was to create a personal timeline, which provided ample opportunity for sharing and reflecting back on that throughline question. Here the throughline proved to be, as Ron Ritchard had suggested, "a lens (to probe below the surface), a lamp (to better illuminate implicit messages) and a lever (to move the class in the direction we want them to go)." And quickly, Dan found that the girls were drawn to the other questions posted around the room (What are your responsibilities as a human, citizen, class member? What does it mean to be civilized? And, looking from the inside out, how does perspective influence the way we see the world?).

Increasingly both he and I found the simple act of posting these questions, and posing them to our students periodically, to be a "way in" to and reminder of the value of the teaching for understanding framework. Sounds simple, but sometimes those are the best ideas.

September 11th brought the "big questions" into high relief for everyone, and launched both Dan and me into passionate and sometimes painful conversations with our students. For Dan's students, the talks often revolved around "How does perspective influence the way we see the world?" As the girls developed their personal timelines, this served as an excellent example of an event changing one's perspective. Many students included the date on their timeline and were able to see how their perspective on specific things – as simple, for example, as air travel – made them see their own experience differently.

In my eighth grade class, "should the U.S. serve as the world's policeman?" was subtly reconsidered during our talks, and became instead the question, "What is the appropriate role and the appropriate response to this disaster?" How would they advise the president? As a whole class, in teams, and individually we explored this many-tiered question, in discussion and in written responses. In the wake of the tragedy, I wrote to parents, sharing the questions the girls had raised that week:

- Will this tragedy take away our freedoms? Change our freedoms?
- How will our nation recover? Emotionally? Economically?
- How will our nation respond? How will other nations respond to our actions?
- Will this event bring more discrimination within our nation?
- Will this event bring us closer to other nations or pull us apart?

At this point it is worth noting the importance of our midyear meeting with Lois Hetland, during which she discussed ongoing assessment, and levels of understanding. Understanding of the deep, subtle sort that we all strive for with our students can only come after substantial building of knowledge (the content) and skills (the analytical frameworks). In moving from naïve to novice to apprentice to master, students who demonstrate understanding are consistently deepening their knowledge and skills.

A case in point was when, after months of study of global political history, in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, I revisited the question "Should we be the world's policeman?" The answers drew deeply on new knowledge of our possible options, and reflected hours and days of discourse on the steps and missteps we or other world powers might have or have taken. No two answers were alike, but the subtlety of their understanding was profoundly changed. They ably discussed the relative merits of economic sanctions vs. military action, the role of the UN or of an individual superpower in intervention or in mediating peace talks, the threat of nuclear conflict and international efforts to enforce nonproliferation, and other related issues. The question evolved into many interrelated questions as the discussion deepened.

Dan's exploration of the importance of perspective continued throughout the year. A day's discussion in class could bring students back to the "big questions." In the novel *Habibi*, by Naomi Shihab Nye, they read of a young girl who, along with her family, moves back to Palestine and has a very clear change in perspective. The character leaves her walls blank in her new home, and one of the students pointed out that she could not decorate her room because she had "lost her perspective." The whole situation was too new to her to be able to "decorate" and therefore exhibit her own ideas or self in her décor.

How, Dan's students asked, might an ancient civilization's perspective have changed as its people encountered the rest of the world through sea trade, conquest, and exploration? Astutely, they asked this as they began to talk about the Nok people of Africa and how the salt trade, along with the slave trade, might have influenced the people of the time. The girls' own comfort level with exploring these "big questions" has grown over the year, and they increasingly work with the questions on a deeper and more consistent level. In this way, then, the posting of throughlines provides a model of thoughtful questioning.

Another point worth noting is the importance of our collaborative work with the BATDC Fellows. Our bi-monthly meetings made this learning experience a hundredfold richer, as we had a built in forum for our questions and an open and generous group of teachers who wanted to share and learn with us. It is not surprising that our understanding of throughlines and comfort level with the broader TfU framework deepened naturally through this regular dialogue

Our work with our Hamlin colleagues has been very informal. A few responded to our midyear questions about their posting and use of throughlines, so that we gained a broader Hamlin perspective. Earl Speas, our lower school art teacher, has developed some of the most compelling "red threads," which he posts in many spots around his room. Does art have to be beautiful? Where do good ideas come from? What works for you and what doesn't? When is my artwork finished and how do I know? A veteran teacher, Earl has the wisdom to know what is important to him, and the seasoned ability to communicate this to his students. When he asked the girls what they thought he cared about, not surprisingly the results were a direct reflection of his concerns. In my talks with Earl, I was reminded of the importance of process questions, that ask students to continually reflect on how they are getting to where they are going. Likewise, for Linda Begley (a second grade teacher and Project Zero graduate), process was key: How can I communicate what I know, think and feel? What are my questions and how can I go about answering them? What is my responsibility to myself, others and the world?

What are universal human rights? Which is more important, the individual or the community? What defines a nation? Borders, laws, people, religion or history? What is progress? Is it good for everyone? These were my posted throughlines, all questions that are still pressing in my mind. But there are others, like Earl's and Linda's, that may be closer to the heart of my teaching, questions like ... How do I argue my opinions well? How do I separate fact and opinion, and what is the value of each? How do I convey my thoughts clearly and coherently? What is a good question? And one that I did post: how can I find out the truth about what happened long ago and far away?

This spring, I asked the seventh graders to respond to the following two questions: "What are Mrs. Tewell's primary goals for you in this class?" and "What are the big questions we have been focusing on this year?" Their responses were enlightening and encouraging. Perceived goals included:

- learn how to write a good essay,
- come to me when they needed help,
- be self reliant,
- learn to ask good questions,
- have your own opinions and be able to support them, and
- have fun!

Some new "big questions" included:

- What makes an American?
- How does nationalism affect a nation?
- How does the U.S. relate to the world?
- Is might always right?
- What is government's role in our lives?

And my favorite, "How do you learn something, not memorize it?" (sic)

While all my throughlines were discussed, directly and indirectly, throughout the year, and in some cases were used as unit understanding goals, none were "overarching" enough to merit discussion in every unit. So were they throughlines as TfU defines them? Perhaps not, but they did prompt discussion and model the types of questions I want the girls to be asking, indeed the types of questions that the seventh graders were asking at the end of the year. I know that a key goal I have is to have my students leave my class at the end of the year knowing how to ask good questions, questions that reflect a deep understanding of our studies.

In summary, we learned this year that:

- Throughlines don't stand alone – they are simply a way to draw you into the process
- Throughlines serve as a model for us as teachers, a reminder as we design our units and plan our instruction
- Throughline serve as a model for girls, to guide their discussions; they also can prompt them to develop their own questions
- To be truly throughlines, they need to be relevant everyday, and able to be connected to every unit you teach
- Throughlines are constantly evolving, year to year, class to class, just as our teaching is evolving

Finally, and this is critical, collaboration is a key to good teaching.

We are not, despite the sway we hold over our individual classrooms, independent contractors. Our best work is done in collaboration with our colleagues, learning through their lessons as well as our own, enriching our knowledge through shared ideas and experiences. The BATDC Fellows program provided an excellent forum for regional collaboration where, guided by an important common purpose, we all grew as practitioners and friends.

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