

# Educational Philosophies in the Classroom

## The Categories of Various Teaching Philosophies



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There are many different educational philosophies that have developed over the years. Some of these philosophies are teacher-centered and some are student-centered, but they all have the same goal, and the goal is to provide students with the best education possible. The following is a list of educational philosophies and their basic ideas.

Perennialism is a teacher centered philosophy that focuses on the values associated with reason. It considers knowledge as enduring, seeks everlasting truths, and views principles of existence as constant or unchanging.

Progressivism is a student centered philosophy that believes that ideas should be tested by experimentation, and learning comes from finding answers from questions. This philosophy values the scientific method of teaching, allows individuals to have their own beliefs, and promotes the interaction of students as valuable to the learning process.

Reconstructionism is another student centered philosophy that promotes world social progress, focuses on world events, controversial issues, and developing a vision for a new better world. This philosophy is associated with pragmatism and essentialism.

Positivism is a teacher centered philosophy that rejects intuition, matters of mind, essences, and inner causes. This philosophy relies on laws of matter and motion as valid, and bases truth on provable fact. It is also known as logical positivism.

Constructivism is a student centered philosophy that emphasizes hands on learning and students actively participating in lessons. Constructivists believe that students should be able to discover lessons on their own through hands on activity because it is the most effect way of learning and is considered true learning.

Behaviorism is a teacher centered philosophy that is closely related to realism. This philosophy focuses on human behavior as a reaction to external stimuli, and believes that changing the environment can change misbehavior.

Humanism is a student centered philosophy that focuses on enhancing ones innate goodness, rejects the idea of group-oriented education, and upholds the idea of enhancing individual development. This philosophy also believes that students should be actively involved with their education on all levels, and students should be able to make choices about what they will be learning.

Essentialism is a teacher centered philosophy that believes there is a common set of skills and knowledge that educated people should have. It focuses on respect for authority, developing sound habits of the mind, and training in fundamentals. Essentialism is similar to perennialism

Although all of these philosophies differ in many ways they all focus on teaching students effectively. These philosophies are beneficial to all students and should be applied in school environments.



# Usable Knowledge

## What is Teaching for Understanding?

HGSE Professor David Perkins and Lecturer Tina Blythe

The Teaching for Understanding framework is a guide that can help keep the focus of educational practice on developing student understanding. Faculty members at the Harvard Graduate School of Education collaborated with many experienced teachers and researchers to develop, test, and refine this approach for effective teaching. Read on to learn about the key components of the framework.



Research and practice were connected in the development of the Teaching for Understanding Framework. It's no surprise, then, that the core dimensions of the framework reflect what educators would agree good teaching ought to be. Educators can apply these guidelines, described below, to teaching at all grade levels, even through higher education. They are not meant to capture every element of effective classroom practice—other factors, like classroom structure and teacher-student relationships also play a role. Instead, this framework is a guide that can help keep the focus of educational practice on understanding, while allowing teachers flexibility to design units that fit their priorities and teaching style.

### **#1: Generative Topics**

What makes a topic or concept worth teaching? To guide the selection of teaching topics, the framework prioritizes those that have the following features:

- Central to a given discipline or subject area
- Connect readily to what is familiar to students, and to other subject matters
- Engaging to students and to teachers
- Accessible to students via multiple resources and ways of thinking

When teachers are largely restricted in terms of the topics they must teach, steps can be taken to make a given topic more generative. For example, teaching *Oedipus Rex* to high schoolers can be part of a unit on family relationships or intrapersonal conflict. Adding a theme to a given topic can help to add new entry points into a topic, making it more accessible to students who might not otherwise be engaged by it.

**“The (Teaching for Understanding) framework is a representation of what good teaching is. It captures what good teachers do so that we can take gut feelings and make them more explicit and visible.”**

### **#2 Understanding Goals**

To focus the exploration of generative topics, teachers can develop nested understanding goals—that is, unit-sized goals embedded within year-long overarching goals, or “throughlines.”

In an American History course, a year-long understanding goal might be, “Students will understand the various considerations and strategies historians use to interpret evidence about the past.” This goal can be made explicit to students, helping them organize their thinking, by phrasing the goal as a question: “How do we find out the truth about things that happened a long time ago?” A unit-goal, in this case, might be: “Students will understand how to read and judge the reliability of primary sources about...” the American Revolution, or a topic of local history.

### **#3 Performances of Understanding**

Throughout the school year, students should be engaged in performances of understanding; activities that both develop and demonstrate their current understanding.



Initial performances would be rather simple, such as discussing as a group how coal mining relates to students' existing understandings of energy resources. In an elementary science class, students might be given a dried leaf or other “specimen” to explore using various tools, like magnifying glasses or a water dropper; guided by a teacher, these activities can help to develop students' understanding while simultaneously revealing what they know about coal mining in one case, and the scientific process in the other.

Over time, the performances of understanding in a given topic become progressively more complex. Also, teachers gradually transition from offering high levels of instructional support to lower levels, as students begin to understand key concepts independently of the teacher. Ultimately, students might participate in a culminating performance of understanding or exhibition, where they apply their understanding to a new problem or context. In the examples above, the older students might develop an essay on how advances in transportation influence the availability of energy sources. Using images and text, the young science students might document the characteristics they found to apply across various authentic specimens.

#### **#4 Ongoing Assessment**

In the Teaching for Understanding framework, performances of understanding and student assessment go hand-in-hand whenever possible. Rather than assessing outcomes primarily at the end of the unit, teachers provide feedback, learning criteria, and opportunities for reflection throughout instruction. Feedback from teachers, peers, and self-evaluation can help to advance the students' work, particularly when:

- Assessment criteria are made public to students
- Feedback is provided on a regular basis
- Students and teachers have ample opportunity to reflect on students' understanding and barriers that remain.

The Teaching for Understanding Framework has been used for over twenty years by teachers around the world. Since its development, the framework has evolved to better meet the needs of educators and students. In particular, HGSE professor Stone Wiske has emphasized *learning communities* as a fifth element of the framework. Acknowledging that learning need not occur among isolated students, generative topics can be taught with an eye towards developing supportive learning communities. Like the rest of the framework, promoting collaboration is a challenge that many educators already take on in their classrooms. The TfU framework provides a structure that teachers can return to, over the school year, to help ensure that these important instructional components are systematically being addressed.

*Adapted from Tina Blythe and David Perkins (1998), The Teaching for Understanding Framework. In Tina Blythe, editor, The teaching for understanding guide. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.*

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