

AP Art History: What's the Big Idea? Connecting Global Artistic Traditions

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What's A Big Idea?

- An idea is “big” if it helps us make sense of lots of confusing experiences and seemingly isolated facts. It’s like the picture that connects the dots or a simple rule of thumb in a complex field. For example: “the water cycle” is a big idea for connecting seemingly discrete and one-way events (the water seems to just disappear as it evaporates). “The heroic cycle” enables us to comprehend literature from many places, cultures, and times. “Measure twice, cut once” is a profound reminder about how to avoid heartache and inefficiency in building anything.
- A big idea is thus a way of seeing better and working smarter, not just a vague notion or another piece of knowledge. It is more like a lens for looking than another object seen; more like a theme than the details of a narrative; more like an active strategy in your favorite sport or reading than a specific skill. It is a theory, not a detail.
- If an idea is “big” it helps us make sense of things. So, an idea is not “big” merely because it categorizes a lot of content.
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- In literacy or history teaching, the important “themes” are big ideas. Why? Because – if used properly – they provide learners with mental schemas or templates that help make sense of all the details of texts that threaten to overwhelm inexperienced readers. If I am alerted to “the heroic quest,” or “the American Dream” I can read and think with more control and insight.
- So, we musn’t equate “big idea” with a concept taught as a fact or definition. Only when we help the learner see firsthand that an idea is an inference, and one with power to provide meaning and transfer, does it become a “big idea.”
- We pay for this desire to cover things ever more quickly: by treating all ideas as facts to be learned instead of inferences to be validated and analyzed through use, we unwittingly end up inhibiting meaning and transfer. Students end up just trafficking in meaningless words; science gets treated as a foreign language rather than a body of knowledge and understanding.
- *A true idea doesn’t end thought, it activates it.* It has the power to raise questions and generate learning. So, build your unit around one idea with power, an idea that helps learners make sense of otherwise isolated content and which cannot help but bring inquiry to the fore.

Grant Wiggins

June 10, 2010

http://www.authenticeducation.org/ae_bigideas/article.lasso?artid=99

What's An Essential Question?

- **What is an essential question? An essential question is – well, *essential*: important, vital, at the heart of the matter – the *essence* of the issue. Think of questions in your life that fit this definition – but don't just yet think about it like a teacher; consider the question as a thoughtful adult. What kinds of questions come to mind? What is a question that any thoughtful and intellectually-alive person ponders and should keep pondering?**
 - **One meaning of “essential” involves *important questions that recur throughout one's life*. Such questions are broad in scope and timeless by nature.**
 - **A second connotation for “essential” refers to *key inquiries within a discipline*. Essential questions in this sense are those that point to the big ideas of a subject and to the frontiers of technical knowledge. They are historically important and very much “alive” in the field**
 - **There is a third important connotation for the term “essential” that refers to what is needed for learning core content. In this sense, a question can be considered essential *when it helps students make sense* of important but complicated ideas, knowledge, and know-how – findings that may be understood by experts, but not yet grasped or seen as valuable by the learner**
- **A question is essential when it:**
 - causes genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas and core content;
 - provokes deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions;
 - requires students to consider alternatives, weigh evidence, support their ideas, and justify their answers;
 - stimulates vital, on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons;
 - sparks meaningful connections with prior learning and personal experiences;
 - naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects.

Grant Wiggins

November 15, 2007

http://www.authenticeducation.org/ae_bigideas/article.lasso?artid=53