

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT *Newsletter*



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Helping Teachers Understand “Understanding”

By Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

We can safely state that all good teachers want their students to truly understand what they're being taught. What we *can't* safely state is that all good teachers share the same definition of *understanding*. Isn't understanding synonymous with a great deal of knowledge? some teachers ask.

It was this very issue that in part gave rise to Bloom's taxonomy. *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain*, written in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues, was designed to clarify intellectual objectives. In the introduction to the taxonomy, Bloom refers to understanding as a commonly sought but ill-defined objective:

For example, some teachers believe their students should “really understand”; other teachers desire their students to “internalize knowledge”; still others want their students to “grasp the core or essence.” Do they all mean the same thing?

It's a question we educators are still grappling with some 45 years after the taxonomy was published. Still, a moment's reflection reveals that understanding requires knowledge but is not synonymous with it. It's possible to know a great deal but lack insight into the essence of something, be it biology, golf, or politics. Conversely, some students can penetrate to the core of a complex issue, text, or problem but lack control of all the relevant facts. Understanding, then, requires *knowl-*



edge and *comprehension* and also the ability to apply what has been learned to new situations—the ability to “show what you know.”

Indeed, our focus in *Understanding by Design* (see box on pg. 5) is on how students can best reveal their understandings of big ideas and core processes. We view understanding as an insight into ideas, people, and situations. In our view, understanding is manifested in various performances.

Toward More Learning Through Less Teaching

Much of understanding is about thoughtfulness, and thoughtfulness is awakened more than trained. In teaching for understanding, students must come to see that understanding means that *they* must figure things out, not simply wait for and write down teacher explanations. That effort requires teachers to alter not only the curriculum but also their teaching style.

Given the complexity of all instructional methods, there is no one best or preferred approach to teaching for understanding. No single method of teaching will work all the time.

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Teachers should choose instructional methods by first considering the desired results (evidence of understanding) in the unit or course. Let's consider a 5th grade nutrition unit from the vantage point of the three types of teaching:

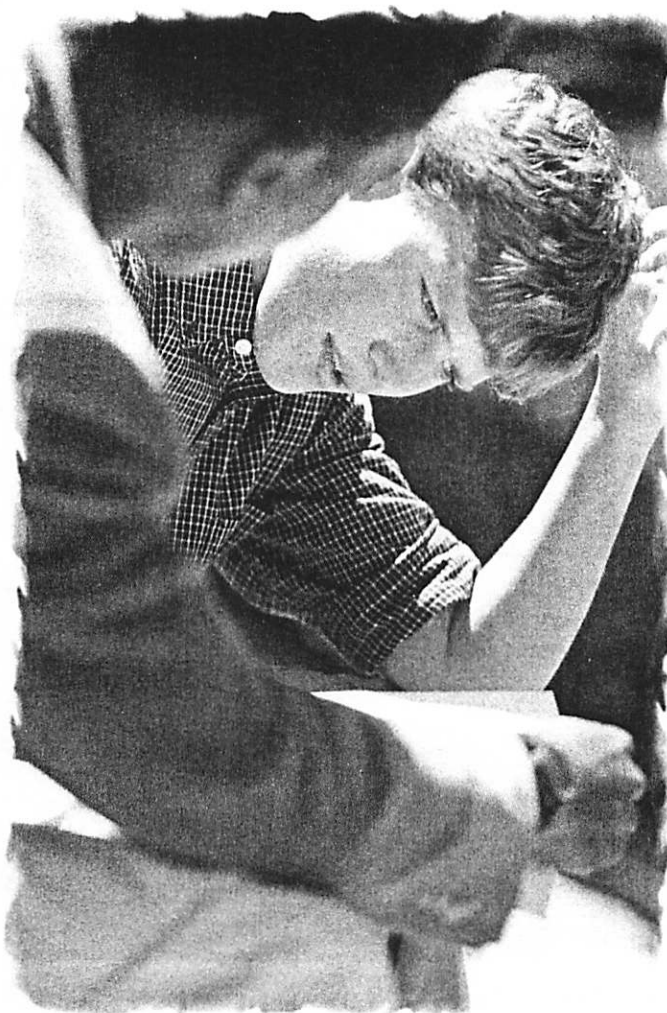
Didactic. Direct instruction is certainly needed. Explicit teaching and student reading, followed by checks for understanding, are best to teach knowledge about fats, protein, carbohydrates, and cholesterol; the food pyramid; and the relationship among food consumption, caloric intake, and energy expenditure.

Coaching. Coaching comes into play when the teacher provides feedback and guidance to students as they work.

Constructivist. The unit has numerous opportunities for guided inquiry and discussions around essential questions such as, What do we mean by "healthy eating"? In addition, students will need to do individual and group research for the performance tasks associated with the unit.

Teaching for understanding requires that teachers routinely use all three types of teaching. Far from being a second-class form of teaching, direct instruction is vital for helping students develop enabling skill and knowledge. An education devoted *exclusively* to guided discovery is inefficient and may be ineffective.

As an example, if you become lost while driving and stop to ask for directions, you



don't want Joe Socrates, the gas station attendant, asking, "And why are you trying to get there as opposed to some other place? What does it mean that you are driving? How do you think you became lost? Have you considered that maybe you are not lost and have found something important?" In the same vein, if you are learning entry-level

computer skills, procedures for library research, or a foreign language, you will probably do best with step-by-step instructional coverage and highly directed skill-building exercises. But to overemphasize didactic teaching is to bypass the constructive work students must do to understand what they learn.

Rather than succumb to either—or thinking about direct or indirect teaching approaches, we need to carefully consider the issues of strategy and choice. When should we teach what we know, and when should we structure experiences that cause inquiry and constructive understanding? When should we cover and when should we uncover? These are the key questions for teachers of understanding.

It is ironic but true that less teaching can yield better learning if we use good judgment in designing our assignments and assessments—that is, if we evoke and require understanding rather than merely trying to hand it over. ■■■

Editor's Note: This article was adapted from the book Understanding by Design by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Copyright 1998 by ASCD. For information or to order, call the ASCD Service Center at 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600, then press 2.

Reference

Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). (1956). *The taxonomy of educational objectives: Classification of educational goals. Handbook 1: Cognitive domain*. New York: Longman, Green & Co.