

Workshop 6

What's the Big Idea?

This workshop session is about planning and teaching toward Big Ideas—important understandings that have lasting value. In the program, you'll see how arts-integrated instruction enables students to make deeply personal connections to what they are learning.

Learning Goals:

The goals of this workshop are for you to:

- Understand and identify Big Ideas
- Explore ways to design arts-integrated instruction that helps students to discover Big Ideas

Featured Classroom Examples

- Sixth-graders have a visceral experience that helps them understand what all cultures have in common.
- Eighth-graders gain a deeper understanding of what makes their neighborhood special.
- Studying history and music through the lens of a play gives seventh- and eighth-graders insights into the past, present, and future.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Get Ready

Identify some Big Ideas you already teach. (10 minutes)

On a sheet of paper, write the name of a curriculum unit you teach, and underneath list one or two Big Ideas you want students to come away with. Big Ideas are important understandings that have lasting value for students. They should answer the question, “So what? Why is this relevant to me?”

As a group, share and discuss your Big Ideas:

- What for you distinguishes a Big Idea from other concepts or knowledge?
- How do you go about teaching to a Big Idea?
- How do you know if and when students have gained an understanding of a Big Idea in a unit you’re teaching?

Watch the Workshop Program (60 minutes)

Consider the following questions as you watch the program—they will appear as discussion prompts on the screen. If you are part of a professional development group, consider stopping the video to discuss each question with your colleagues.

- How could a Big Idea frame your planning and teaching?
- How can the interests of your students guide the development of Big Ideas?
- How can the arts lead your students to deeper inquiry around Big Ideas?

Activities and Discussion

Activity: Workshop Discussion

Review what you know about Big Ideas. (20 minutes)

Break into discussion groups, with each group concentrating on one of the three classroom examples featured in the program. Use the questions below to guide the small-group conversations.

Questions for Segment One:

In the first segment, we watched as sixth-graders had a visceral experience that helped them understand what all cultures have in common.

- What did you see as the Big Idea in this Unit?
- How did the organization of the unit help students understand the Big Idea?
- How are Big Ideas important in guiding curriculum and the sequence of instruction?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Questions for Segment Two:

In the second segment, eighth-graders gained a deeper understanding of what makes their neighborhood special.

- What were the Big Ideas in this teaching example?
- Where did you see evidence that a Big Idea focuses student learning?
- What are some other ways of guiding student learning within an arts-integrated context?

Questions for Segment Three:

In the third segment, we saw students studying history through the lens of the play *Our Town*, gaining insights into the past, present, and future.

- What were some of the instructional strategies you observed?
- How do the learning experiences we see in this example take students beyond their understanding of the play, to wider concepts or skills?
- What Big Ideas might the students understand as a result of studying this play and time period?

As a group, discuss ways to tune your instruction toward the teaching of Big Ideas. (20 minutes)

Consider these questions:

- Is teaching using Big Ideas a new concept for you?
- How do you typically go about planning your curriculum?
- How do you go about deciding what you want students to get out of a particular unit?
- In planning your curriculum, do you tend to start with a Big Idea that you want students to come away from the unit with, or do you let the Big Ideas emerge out of the material concentrated on during the unit?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Additional Resources

Web Resources

Backward Design for Forward Action
http://www.ascd.org/articles/el200302_mctighe.html

Reviews the key concepts and essential questions that underlie content standards

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
<http://www.nbpts.org>

The National Board's influential teaching standards, including early adolescent generalist standards

Print Resources

Wiggins, Grant, & McTighe, Jay. *Understanding by Design*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000. ISBN: 0-13093-058-X

What enduring knowledge is worth understanding? How will we know that students truly understand and can apply knowledge in a meaningful way? This book explores these and other important questions and provides practical solutions for the teacher-designer.

Wiggins, Grant, & McTighe, Jay. *The Understanding by Design Handbook*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development. 1999, ISBN: 0-87120-340-5

The handbook offers the practical side: a unit-planning template, worksheets, exercises, design tools, design standards and tests, and a peer review process for learning and applying the ideas in *Understanding by Design*.