Just ASK Publications & Professional Development

# Just for the ASKing!

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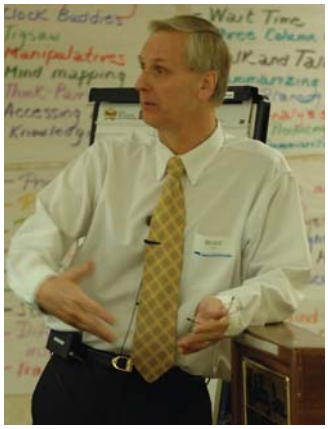
**January 2012**
**Volume IX**
**Issue I**

***Just for the ASKing!*** is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators The focus this month is on the importance of designing lessons and units based on big ideas, key concepts, and generalizations, often called essential understandings or questions.

## See the Forest AND the Trees



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

We have all heard the adage, "You can't see the forest for the trees." This proverb, which can be traced back to the 1500s, refers to the practice of becoming so immersed in seeing the details of a situation that one fails to see the big picture or the issue as a whole. This statement can be applied to the classroom as teachers plan and implement units and lessons. In order for professional educators to do their best work and to be as effective as possible, it is important for them to start with the forest and then see the trees.

### *Start with the forest…*

Teachers use different approaches as they plan their units. Some educators sort through their files or file cabinets and retrieve plans they have used in past years. Others begin by planning activities that will keep students busy. Some practitioners may start with the factual information students must master and plan lessons that will support the students' ability to learn or memorize these facts. Still other teachers go to the kits which have been purchased by the school and look for lessons or worksheets that accompany an adopted textbook series. Others may fit into the category known as "winging it" as they rely on their memory. They have a plan in their heads and plan day-by-day. Each of these processes is flawed in its inception and reasoning and most likely will not have the desired impact on student learning.

The best approach to use in planning units is to begin with the big picture (i.e., the forest) that captures the essential understandings students should derive from the unit. Embedded within these generalizations or understandings are concepts that are the cement that will tie the unit content together in meaningful ways. Concepts are broad, timeless, universal and abstract; examples include change, tension, loyalty, motion, influence, revolution, freedom, interdependence, adaptation, consequence, and power. In her book, ***Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction***, Lynn Erickson makes the strong case for framing units and lessons around concepts, key ideas and generalizations. She focuses on the overall impact on student learning when teachers think "big picture" instead of concentrating only on details and activities as they

plan their units. In her book, ***Instruction for All Students***, Paula Rutherford writes, "In addition to the fact that students learn at a high level when we use concept-based instruction, it is important to note that the instruction also leads to higher standardized tests scores as well. Even though many standardized test questions are written at a factual or recall level, when students learn at a conceptual level they are better able to sort through the possible answers in a multiple choice item and eliminate the alternatives that do not fit the big ideas of the question."

Teachers who have embraced concept-based instruction generally post the unit's big ideas, concepts, and essential questions in a conspicuous place in their classroom and continually relate learning experiences to them. The questions are left posted throughout the unit as the teacher and learners return to them again and again.

### *…then move to the trees*

With the concepts and essential questions/understandings identified, teachers take the next step in planning an organized and productive unit by determining the methodology that will help their students investigate and respond to the big ideas that tie the unit together. As the planned unit unfolds, the trees metaphorically represent the specific teaching and learning strategies that will enable the students to master the standards and essential questions under study. Additionally, the trees represent the necessary thinking that teachers must do in order to plan and carry out a well-structured and complete unit of study.

In order to ensure learning, lessons and units must progress in a well-structured, sequential manner. As teachers plan, they may view the "trees" in different ways. Many trees grow in clusters or groups; the groupings of trees can be represented by the different categories teachers must take into account as they plan. For example, a collection of ***evergreens*** or ***conifers*** can represent the ***curriculum*** that will be addressed. The teacher thus begins by identifying what students should know and be able to do. With these standards in mind, the teacher decides how to present the content in ways that will help students make real-world connections to their new learning, the multiple sources of information that could be used, and the specific thinking skills that will stimulate and challenge the students throughout the unit. At the outset of the unit, the teacher should help students make connections to prior learning as well as dispel any misconceptions about the upcoming topics that will impede the students' capacity to learn.

A second parcel of trees, perhaps depicted by ***redwoods*** or ***sequoias***, represents the strategies and learning experiences the teacher will use as ***instruction*** unfolds. The necessary specifics the teacher should consider include: framing the learning so that all students see the sequence and scope of the learning that will occur; making sure that an active, learner-centered environment is established and maintained; analyzing the tasks students are expected to complete to make sure they have the prerequisite knowledge and skills to complete those tasks; incorporating multiple teaching strategies in the plans to better meet the learning needs of all students; providing students with the opportunity to work in flexible groupings; and, thinking ahead about possible intervention or extension strategies to use as needed.

A third expanse of trees can be represented by ***oak*** or ***maple*** trees which are analogous with the ***assessment*** thinking that the teacher should address during the early stages of planning. Specific questions that the teacher should consider are: How can I plan my instructional delivery so that I better guarantee that students will be successful when their learning is assessed? What are specific formative as well as summative assessments I will use during the unit? How will I check for student understanding throughout each day's instruction to make sure students are learning at the desired level of thinking? How will I use assessment data I gather throughout the unit to adjust my instruction? How will I make sure my assessments match the standards I am teaching? How will I include both traditional assessment and performance assessment and communicate, in a precise and clear manner, the criteria that will be used to assess their learning?

In addition to seeing the trees as the specific components of a teaching unit, teachers should likewise think of the trees as the individual students that make up their classes. There are many terms that are often used to describe trees; the descriptors can also be applied to the wide variety of students who make up our classes. Ideally, the characteristics of trees we want our students to exhibit are ***majestic***, ***versatile***, ***inspiring***, ***vigorous***, or ***peaceful***. Realistically, however, not all trees (or students) fit these delineations. Some trees are described as ***tender*** or ***delicate*** meaning that they require protection from the elements in order to thrive. Other trees are described as ***brittle*** or ***changeable***. These terms can also be applied to the students we teach. Furthermore, trees may also be ***scrubby*** (smaller than normal), ***ephemeral*** (fleeting or temporary), and even ***petrified*** (hardened or unyielding). Our goal as strong, competent adults who work with young people is to help each and every student to become ***viable*** (able to live and grow in an independent way), ***tolerant*** (able to exist in different conditions), and ***perennial*** (lasting and thriving through multiple growing seasons).

An especially exciting and satisfying part of my work is to be able to talk with accomplished teachers about their work. Again and again, accomplished teachers tell me, with great humility, that reaching a level of competence and expertise involves hits and misses, making changes and adjustments on the spot, and lots and lots of upfront thinking as they make their plans. The one thing that these teachers have in common is that they always begin their planning by determining the big ideas and concepts that will permeate their units before moving to the specific ways they will carry out their units on a day-by-day basis. As one educator explained, "Good teaching is a long journey and hard work; however, when I consistently use this approach in the design and implementation of units, I reach a level of success that is completely inspiring and fulfilling."

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