

Teaching for Understanding

Understanding by Design, Wiggins and McTighe (1998, USCD)—selections from pp. 45ff

Six facets of understanding

1. Explanation: Sophisticated and apt explanations and theories which provide knowledgeable and justified accounts of events, actions and ideas.
 - Why is that so?
 - What explains such events?
 - What accounts for such actions?
 - How can we prove it?
 - To what is this connected?
 - How does this work?
 - What is implied?

Understanding is not mere knowledge of facts, but knowledge of why and how.

2. Interpretations; interpretations, narratives and translations that provide meaning
 - What does it mean?
 - Why does it matter?
 - What does it illustrate and illuminate in human experience?
 - How does it relate to me?
 - What makes sense?

The meanings we ascribe to all events transform our understanding and perception of particular facts. Making sense involves translation and interpretation.

3. Application: ability to use knowledge effectively in new situations and diverse contexts
 - How and where can we use this knowledge, skills, or process?
 - How should my thinking and action be modified to meet the demands of this situation?

To understand is to be able to use knowledge.

4. Perspectives: critical and insightful points of view
 - From whose point of view?
 - From which vantage point?
 - What is assumed or tacit that needs to be made more explicit and considered?
 - What is justified or warranted?
 - Is there adequate evidence?
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the idea?
 - Is it plausible?
 - What are its limits?

To understand in this sense is to see things from a dispassionate and disinterested perspective.

5. Empathy: the ability to get inside another person's feelings and world view
- How does it seem to you?
 - What do they see that I don't?
 - What do I need to experience if I am to understand?
 - What was the artist or performer feeling, seeing, and trying to make me feel or see?

Empathy is a learned ability to grasp the world from someone else's point of view.

6. Self Knowledge: the wisdom to know one's ignorance and how one's patterns of thought and action inform as well as prejudice understanding
- How does who I am shape my view?
 - What are the limits of my understanding?
 - What are my blind spots?
 - What am I prone to misunderstand because of prejudice, habit or style?

Our capacity to accurately self-assess and self-regulate reflects understanding. Metacognition refers to self-knowledge about how we think and why, and the relation between our preferred methods of learning and our understanding.