

Transcript Video 3 Principle 2: Course Design around Big Themes and Essential Questions

In this video, we will explore how you can organize your course and syllabus design around essential questions and big themes.

The second principle of an inclusive syllabus design suggests providing a coherent narrative arc of what students will learn throughout the course. By using questions, you frame your syllabus as containing a “promise” through language that invites students to enter the course with a sense of curiosity and high expectations about how the course will be meaningful for them.

Use a backwards design process for your course design. Begin with the end in mind: What are the essential questions, big ideas and themes that you want to explore with your students? How do these connect to create an arc of learning throughout the course?

Wiggins and McTighe define essential questions as those that “push us to the heart of things – the essence” (p. 107) and that “serve as door-ways through which learners explore the key concepts, themes, theories, issues, and problems that reside within the content, perhaps as yet unseen” (p.106).

When you write the course description, make it engaging. Include some of these thought-provoking, intriguing questions or statements to stimulate student curiosity.

Introduce the class sessions in your course schedule with the essential questions or big ideas that you will explore instead of just providing the topic or chapter title.

The use of questions and big ideas signals inquiry-based learning. It lets students know that this will be an interactive class with high student engagement. It also tells them that questions are OK. Framing learning by posing essential questions indicates commitment to active learning and deep thinking.

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Here is an example from one of my syllabi. Instead of simply labeling the first class session of the semester, “Introduction to Class”, I ask “Who are You? Who are we? What’s this course is about?” In this way, I signal to my students that it is important for me to cultivate a learning community, which means that we need and will get to know each other.

For the second class session, I ask “How do we want to learn together?” and provide “Setting norms for courageous conversations” as the theme for the session. In doing so, students can understand why I am asking them to read the assigned texts and what the rationale is for the writing assignment.

I do this for every class session. You could also combine multiple class sessions into a unit around such essential questions or big themes.

It's time to pause again so that you can reflect on your own course. Think about the following:

1. What are the essential questions and big themes that you and your students will explore throughout the course?
2. For each session?
3. How do these themes and questions provide a coherent narrative arc through the course content?
4. How do you communicate these questions and themes in your syllabus?

Check out the next video to learn how you can apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to your syllabus to strengthen the organizational structure of your curriculum.

References:

Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.