

Designing Key Understandings

Quite often, developing powerful and meaningful key understandings is an area that teachers struggle with as they create and plan authentic rich task units. This is a critical step that many teachers can gloss over in planning but can make a profound difference to having clear, powerful units that provide great learning opportunities.

What we have experienced when teachers have begun the process of extracting “understandings” from the Australian Curriculum (or any curriculum documentation for that matter) what results is a long list of statements, understandings, and facts being written down. This is an important step in the process but it is not the final step. Quite often it is treated as a final step because the teachers themselves are used to teaching students “knowledge” rather than having the students learn. This is a consequence of the Industrial Education paradigm that has existed in our society for the past 200 years. If the teachers just use the lengthy list of “understandings” in their planning documentation without sequencing the “understandings” into a coherent and consistent whole, then there is a subtle but long reaching impact.

What we have found is that teachers take this mass of “understandings” and, with the mindset of they have to “cover” all this and make sure the students “learn” this, crowd the unit with too much material. All of this is with the hope that the students will gain the “understandings” articulated in their planning documents. This is shotgun learning. This approach fundamentally undermines the opportunity students can gain to frame their understanding inside a powerful context. If we, as a teaching profession, want to develop students to be performance oriented in their learning, we must first clearly and logically articulate what we are intending the students to understand and what skills they are to develop and then align the learning to accomplish those goals.

Key understandings are created to clearly define the purpose of the learning within the unit. They articulate the fundamental deep learning that the unit is being created to achieve. The key understandings not only have the scope of addressing what the Australian Curriculum achievement standards require to be understood, but also the passion and self-expression of the teaching team, as well as the values and expression of the school.

Clear key understandings will allow teachers to create authentic essential / fat / fertile questions that can be used to guide and challenge student thinking in particular directions. The sequence of understandings also allow for an authentic and meaningful sequence of learning throughout the unit. Teachers and students alike will actually know what they are fundamentally out to learn in the unit and what would indicate successfully achieving that understanding.

The following steps highlight the process and the thinking behind designing powerful key understandings.

Part A

Reflecting on the information extracted, as well as your own personal experience in teaching this content and what you feel is important for the students to grasp at this stage in their learning that will set them up for powerful future understandings in the area, it is time to create an Overall Goal Understanding.

The Overall Goal Understanding is accomplished by asking the question:

Having looked at what is required in the Australian Curriculum, what do I REALLY want them to understand by the end of this unit?

This is an opportunity to be creative and masterful as a teacher. What do you REALLY want them to have grasped by the end of this unit? What understanding is important to them as a human being as well as to their understanding of the content to be covered? What understanding can address the material but also reflect the values that the school espouses?

This is normally a big picture sort of statement that can reflect a greater breadth of knowledge and understanding in the world. It can allow for cross-linking to other subjects. It can tie the understanding for one subject / domain to other domains and broader understandings.

For example, a team of teachers from a Catholic secondary college expressed their Overall Goal Understanding for a Year 7 English unit as:

To bring about change that positively affects ourselves and others requires us to create narratives and actions.

This Overall Goal Understanding could be used to address any or all of the following Australian Curriculum English understandings:

- Understand the way language evolves to reflect a changing world, particularly in response to the use of new technology for presenting texts and communicating (ACELA1528)
- Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619)
- Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying a point of view (ACELT1620)
- Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts (ACELT1621)
- Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622)
- Create literary texts that adapt stylistic features encountered in other texts, for example, narrative viewpoint, structure of stanzas, contrast and juxtaposition (ACELT1625)
- Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements to promote a point of view or enable a new way of seeing (ACELY1720)

Equally it could be linked to understandings within History (or Civics, or other areas) as well to create an integrated unit. For example, the above Overall Goal Understanding would address in part the Year 7 Australian Curriculum History achievement standard:

By the end of Year 7, students suggest reasons for change and continuity over time. They describe the effects of change on societies, individuals and groups. They describe events and developments from the perspective of different people who lived at the time. Students explain the role of groups and the significance of particular individuals in society. They identify past events and developments that have been interpreted in different ways.

Part B

Once the Overall Goal Understanding has been articulated then we can unpack that understanding into a sequence of logical understandings that need to be understood to conclude that Overall Goal Understanding.

The sequence of key understandings can be unpacked by asking the question:

If the students are to understand the Overall Goal Understanding (OGU) by the end of the unit, what do they logically need to understand to reach the OG Understanding?

Keeping in mind the skills and understandings extracted in step one, this is an opportunity to unpack different understandings contained within the Overall Goal Understanding.

Using the example from Part A where the Overall Goal Understanding was,

To bring about change that positively affects ourselves and others requires us to create narratives and actions

What we need to address includes elements such as change, the link between change and storytelling/narratives, and the effects of change.

The teachers unpacked the sequence in the following manner:

- i) We all undergo change and it is inevitable*
- ii) Change has effects on our relationships, beliefs, actions, and ideas.*
- iii) Change is often spread through storytelling*
- iv) To bring about change that positively affects ourselves and others requires us to create narratives and actions*

Whilst these understandings still need to be somewhat refined, the unpacking into a logical sequence allowed for several openings for the teachers:

- The sequence of understandings that the students must accomplish across the unit is now defined. This will guide teaching and learning throughout the unit.
- Articulating these understandings “essential” / “fertile” / “fat” questions can now be designed within each key understanding such that students are exploring the understanding deeply.
- These key understandings now can be used as the overarching learning intentions for the unit and the teachers can now define the success criteria that would indicate that a student has successfully accomplished the specific understanding.
- The key understandings (learning intentions) and success criteria can now be given to the students so the direction and intention of the learning required in the unit is clear to them.
- The way these key understandings are worded allow for easy linkages to student passions, learning styles, current affairs and topics, and to topics that the students can relate to – no matter their background. In some ways the understandings are statements where teachers and students can uncover a wide range of evidence for - no matter the topic.

Samples of Key Understandings

The following are examples of Overall Goal Understandings and their subsequent unpacked key understandings from a range of schools and a range of topics.

A. Grade 1 Integrated Unit

The Grade 1 Teaching team at this particular primary school were designing an integrated inquiry based learning unit that covers elements of History, Humanities (geography), Civics and Citizenship, and Indigenous Australians. There was a previous unit called Paddock to Plate with a food theme and the teaching team wanted to review and update that unit to make it consistent with the AUSVELS and be more intentional in its development of student learning.

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

To make good / responsible choices about what and how we consume, we need to understand where our food comes from and what processes it goes through.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings that lead to the overall understanding the teachers wanted to achieve.

- i) The food we consume comes from a variety of sources.*
- ii) The food undergoes different processes on its journey to your home.*
- iii) These processes have an impact on the environment, the food quality, and the nutrition of food, and these processes have changed over time.*
- iv) To make good / responsible choices about what and how we consume, we need to understand where our food comes from and what processes it goes through*

The intent of the unit was for the students to explore where food came from, what happened to it along the way, its effects on the world around them as well as on them. The beauty of creating the key understandings like this is that they allow for bringing in food of different cultures, look at historical food processes, as well as linking to what indigenous people ate and did.

B. Year 6 Australian Curriculum History

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

To be in charge of our own destiny requires us to be informed by the past and to understand how we can effect change in the future.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings that lead to the overall understanding the teachers wanted to achieve.

- i) Australia is a democracy shaped by individuals and groups fighting for their voices to be heard equally.*
- ii) Historically, factors such as migration, equality, indigenous rights, global social and economic reasons, etc., have impacted the shaping of Australia's identity and voice.*
- iii) To effect positive change for our country's future that is equitable for all we must be informed by our past.*

iv) *To be in charge of our own destiny requires us to be informed by the past and to understand how we can effect change in the future*

C. Year 7 Australian Curriculum Science

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

Our society relies upon extracting valuable resources for living.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings that lead to the overall understanding the teachers wanted to achieve.

- i) *Everything is a mixture of different substances and some are useful and some are not.*
- ii) *The value (or usefulness) of these different substances depends on their use and value to others*
- iii) *To make use of these substances we need to be able to extract and isolate them.*
- iv) *Our society relies upon extracting valuable resources for living.*

D. Year 7 Australian Curriculum History

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

The impact of historical events, individuals and groups affects our ideas, thoughts and cultural practices today.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings that lead to the overall understanding the teachers wanted to achieve.

- i) *Ideas, thoughts and cultural practices begin in response to events, individuals or groups.*
- ii) *Individuals, groups, and events can have a far reaching historical impact.*
- iii) *What allows for long term impacts in ideas, thoughts and cultural practices include elements like: narratives, storytelling, groups spreading ideas and beliefs, and networks (like empires, community groups, etc.)*
- iv) *The impact of historical events, individuals and groups affects our ideas, thoughts and cultural practices today.*

Another example of an unpacking from another school for the same topic looked like:

The Overall Goal Understanding:

To understand our society needs us to understand what happened in the past

which unpacked into:

- i) *All societies and civilisations are built on rituals, beliefs and social structures*
- ii) *These rituals, beliefs and social structures affect individuals and groups differently depending on their place in that society or civilisation.*
- iii) *When change inevitably comes, it can have long lasting impacts – even over thousands of years*
- iv) *To understand our society needs us to understand what happened in the past.*

E. Year 7 Australian Curriculum English

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

To be a responsible citizen requires us to formulate our own informed opinions based on considering a range of evidence.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings:

- i) *We live in a media rich world where opinions, beliefs and attitudes are thrust upon us via different forms of media.*
- ii) *Media uses a range of techniques to influence or manipulate our opinions, beliefs and attitudes.*
- iii) *Informed opinions arise from considering a range of evidence and creating arguments based on evidence.*
- iv) *To be a responsible citizen requires us to formulate our own informed opinions based on considering a range of evidence.*

F. Year 9 Australian Curriculum History

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

We live in a world of massive movements of people and our understanding of the impacts and effects of movement is critical.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings:

- a) *People move for a range of reasons, most often beyond their control, generally to achieve a better life.*
- b) *The movement of people has a massive impact on the biomes, indigenous people, cultures, thinking, economics, and politics.*
- c) *The movement of people transfers ideas, technologies, and cultural practices and can bring an extraordinary richness to our lives.*
- d) *Different cultures have different viewpoints and these points of view can limit the transfer of ideas, technology and practices that can make a difference*
- e) *We live in a world of massive movements of people and our understanding of the impacts and effects of movement is critical.*

G. Year 10 Australian Curriculum English

The Overall Goal Understanding that the teachers designed was:

To have a just society we have to have respect for, and understand, the different perspectives and stories of each individual, group and culture.

This was then unpacked into the following sequence of understandings that lead to the overall understanding the teachers wanted to achieve.

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- i) People, groups and cultural beliefs and practices are built upon a set of consistent values and perspectives developed over time.*
 - ii) Each perspective is valid and to be respected.*
 - iii) For a just society, we may not agree with another's perspective, but we must understand it.*
 - iv) To have a just society we have to have respect for, and understand, the different perspectives and stories of each individual, group and culture.*