

What's the Big Idea?

Question-Driven Units that Develop Motivated Reading, Writing, and Thinking

STUDY GUIDE

Why Do Questions Matter in Curriculum? An Introduction

Engagement, understanding, and memory—three areas of urgent and growing concern for all middle and high school English teachers. How can we create a curriculum and individual lessons that not only teach the academic literacies students need to succeed in school but also those critical literacies required by the adult world and world of work in the 21st century? This section introduces the rationale and research to support the use of questions as your curriculum. After discussing what secondary and postsecondary schooling expects of students, we consider the new skills all students must cultivate if they are to succeed in the new era. Within the introduction you will find specific tools to help you develop such questions for both daily lessons and larger curricular units. This section serves to frame the core principles that I illustrate and articulate through detailed classroom examples throughout the units.

BEFORE (prior to reading the unit)

1. Why do *you* think “questions matter as curriculum”? Another way we might frame this question is to use a variation on one of my favorite questions: What is the problem for which questions are the solution?
2. Jot down a list of a few questions you find consistently engage students and enhance their ability to learn the material you teach.
3. Reflect on the list of questions you just made and identify those qualities that make them such effective, compelling questions.
4. Generate a list of questions and concerns you have about using “questions as curriculum” and briefly discuss the source and implications of those concerns.

DURING (as you read the unit)

1. Examine the “habits of mind” outlined early in the introduction. Reflect on and discuss professors’ perspectives as well as your own.
2. Respond to the different perspectives on 21st-century literacy as they relate to the workplace, classroom, and society in general. How do you incorporate these ways of working and thinking into your curriculum?
3. Consider Gardener’s “five minds” and Damon’s work on purpose as discussed in the introduction; note that they have worked together on related projects and concerns (see *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon, Basic Books, 2002). How might you connect their work, as discussed in this introduction, to your department, classroom, and students?

4. Evaluate your own curriculum in terms of the types of questions you and your students ask, using those questions in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 as well as the list of Big Questions included in Appendix C.

AFTER (when you finish the unit)

1. Revisit your earlier thoughts about questions (before you read this unit). What new insights, ideas, or questions have arisen after reading it?
2. Consider the various arguments—by Applebee, Langer, Wiggins, Tatum, and Sizer—toward the end of the unit for organizing your curriculum around questions. What is their central, unifying argument? Is it possible to teach using such questions despite the pressure to address state standards and prepare students for standardized exams? The rest of the book will argue that it is not only possible but also essential that we do this. What are your thoughts?
3. What enduring questions or concerns do you have about the notion of using questions as curriculum after reading this first unit?

Sample Unit 1: An Intellectual Rite of Passage

Engaging Students with Essential Questions

We often discuss the need for young adults to participate in rites of passage, but outside of culturally prescribed rituals we ignore these important experiences. At the heart of the educational process is change, a process whereby one discovers what they know (or want to learn more about) and can do (or want to learn to do much better). This unit looks at a semester-long project that allows students to investigate a subject of great personal interest while at the same time doing the work required by the district and other agencies (e.g., AP program) in preparation for the culminating exams at year's end. Designing such intellectual rites of passage requires long-range, big picture thinking and planning, which this unit goes into in some detail. It is organized around one Personal Inquiry Project, in this case assigned to senior AP students; I should add, however, that I have done variations on this same assignment with students at all grade and ability levels, as subsequent units about my freshman class will show.

BEFORE (prior to reading the unit)

1. Identify those projects or assignments you do that might serve as “intellectual rites of passage.” What do the units do and what is your rationale for them? What is your measure of the success and effectiveness of these units?
2. What are your biggest concerns about and frustrations with students, especially seniors, during second semester?
3. What do you want students leaving your class at year's end thinking and feeling about the work they did in your class? What specific words do you want them to use when they describe your class and the work they did there? Why these words—and what do you do to accomplish that end?

DURING (as you read the unit)

1. Respond to and discuss the “backward design” questions from Wiggins and McTighe at the beginning of Unit One. To what extent does their three-stage process of design describe your own curricular designs?
2. Analyze and discuss the actual design of the Inquiry Project assignment as it appears in the unit. What surprises and concerns you the most about such a unit?
3. Notice throughout the unit that I consistently provide examples or demonstrate for students, even in advanced classes, what a successful performance looks like. What role does modeling and the use of examples play in your own class when trying to help students perform at higher levels?

AFTER (when you finish the unit)

1. Discuss the meaning and implications of a “culture of inquiry” as represented in this unit. You see students engaged in inquiry about big ideas, summer reading, and core texts, such as *Hamlet*, during which they formulate many questions about the texts. Who asks—and answers—the questions in your class?
2. Review your own (or your department’s) summer reading requirement and subsequent assignments. Note that my sample summer reading assignment here is organized around pairs of books about a common topic. Compare it to your own summer reading assignment (or independent reading during the year): Which one do you prefer—and why?

Sample Unit 2: Spirited Inquiry

Creating Questions to Access a Challenging Text

This unit looks at how to use questions to teach literature, in this case *Crime and Punishment*. Even though you may not teach this particular novel, the more important point is how to use questions to teach such complex books in ways that all students can enjoy and learn from them. The unit not only looks at the use of questions as a means of inquiry for an entire work but also as a method for holding students accountable and getting them to think about the work on a more daily level. It serves as a case study of this unit, taking you through all of it from start to finish, then concluding with students’ reflections on the unit and what they learned from it.

BEFORE (prior to reading the unit)

1. What makes a text or unit difficult? How do these make a text or a task difficult?
2. Respond to the epigraph by Philip Roth: What do *you* think literature should be “used” for?
3. How are your instructional units (aka your curriculum) currently organized for your class?
4. List the texts you teach and the question(s) each book invites you and your students to explore; for example, *Lord of the Flies* might invite you to consider, among others, the question, “What are we capable of?”

DURING (as you read the unit)

1. Discuss whether creativity, innovation, or intelligence can be taught or otherwise developed. On what do you base your response?
2. Choose one book (my chosen text is *Crime and Punishment*) and, using my example in Figure 2.1, generate a list of six to ten topics students could focus on throughout the book. Note that while some topics in a book might be interesting and even important, not all run throughout an entire book—an important quality of this assignment.
3. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages, your questions and concerns about using online discussion groups with students to explore these questions within a unit.
4. Explain the role discussion plays in general in your class. How do you use and configure it? What is your role during such discussions? What is the problem for which discussion—in class or online—is the solution?

AFTER (when you finish the unit)

1. Respond to the final project (Figure 2.10): What thoughts do you have about such a project in your class? How might you adapt it to better meet the needs of your own students or the culture of your school?
2. Describe the role that reflection plays in your classroom. How do you use the information to improve your instruction on the unit?
3. Discuss the content of this unit in light of the concerns and questions you had before reading the unit about using inquiry-based instruction.
4. Identify the most important or useful idea you take from this unit as it relates to your own teaching.

Sample Unit 3: Natural Curiosity

Using Questions to Explore Relationships

This unit focuses on creating a culture of high expectations for all students that is both intellectually challenging and personally meaningful. It looks at the ways we can use different tools and techniques to help all students do this more sophisticated work, focusing here on both *Romeo and Juliet* and their own personal choice reading books to show how to apply these ideas in a range of instructional contexts.

BEFORE (prior to reading the unit)

1. Discuss the role and importance of curiosity in your class.
2. Describe the qualities of good questions and how to use them for maximum instructional effect.

3. List the intellectual and academic skills students need to do the work in your class and discuss how you incorporate them into your curriculum.

DURING (as you read the unit)

1. Review the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) report on page 75: What are the implications of these for your instruction and curriculum?
2. Note that throughout the unit—and the book in general—you see students using different tools and technologies to explore topics and to help them think about complex ideas. Which tools and technologies do you have your students use to think critically and creatively? How do you *use* those tools to achieve the best instructional results?
3. Consider the importance of choice—of texts, tasks, topics—as illustrated throughout the unit. What choices do students have in your own class?

AFTER (when you finish the unit)

1. Discuss your own expectations regarding student performance in light of what you read here. Thinking of your own students, in other words, do you feel you expect more, less, or something different from your students? Explain.
2. Provide an honest answer to the question: Do you believe all students can learn what you teach and succeed, in some meaningful sense, in your class? What must they—and *you*—do to achieve this result?
3. What questions and concerns do you have after reading this unit?
4. What is missing from the instructional landscape I describe here that you feel is essential to an effective and legitimate English curriculum?

Sample Unit 4: Meaningful Conversations

Essential Questions as a Way into Required Text

This unit offers a case study of an entire unit for a novel in a freshman English class. The emphasis here is on organizing the study of required literature—*Of Mice and Men*, in this case—around meaningful questions such as “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This unit shows how to use a range of media and instructional approaches in a highly interactive but challenging classroom.

BEFORE (prior to reading the unit)

1. List the “essential conversations” you think adolescents need to discuss and think about with greater depth.
2. Generate several metaphor(s) that describe your role as a teacher, especially when it comes to “meaningful conversations.”
3. Discuss your thoughts about the literary canon, cultural literacy, and the Great Books concept.

4. Share your thoughts about the use of textbooks in the classroom: Do you use one? What do you like and dislike, think is effective and ineffective about the textbook you use?

DURING (as you read the unit)

1. Identify the required books you must teach. Generate a list of possible supplementary texts to examine in conjunction: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, art, film, websites, experiences, speakers, and so on.
2. Evaluate the Academic Essentials outlined in this unit and consider how you do or might apply those to your own class.
3. Compare the study guide questions and format to your own approach: What are the differences and similarities, strengths and weaknesses of each?
4. Discuss the use of blogging in the context of this assignment and how it, or some other social medium, might be used effectively in your class.

AFTER (when you finish the unit)

1. Use the Unit Plan template in Appendix E to plan or analyze your own unit around a big idea.
2. What questions and concerns remain after reading this unit?

Using Essential Questions to Design Your Own Units: Some Final Thoughts

Unit Study Intro

I have tried throughout to articulate and illustrate the principles outlined in this book. In the end, however, what matters most is that you can take these concepts and examples from my class and use them to design and implement units within your own class. The following questions invite you to think about how to make these connections while also asking you to further examine your own thoughts about instructional design.

1. Respond to Schmoker's definition of a community of learners at the beginning of the unit. How does this compare with your classroom or vision of teaching?
2. Discuss Darling-Hammond's three principles of learning and the list of actions that follow (see pp. 156–7). How do these accord with—or differ from—your principles of teaching?
3. Reflect on the unit you created using the guidelines in the final unit. What are you trying to achieve? How is this similar to or different from the units you would normally create for your classes?