Essential Questions

In recent years, that has been a great deal of discussion centered around the use of essential questions in the classroom. Essential questions are not strictly content-related questions; they differ from lesson objectives and assessments in the sense that they are designed to open the minds of students to more broad ideas and to get them thinking about more abstract concepts. When we teach a lesson that is designed to prevent the marginalization of Hmong students, what are we really asking students to consider? Does it really have anything to do with Hmong students in particular? Essential questions are meant to encourage further exploration on a level that cannot be reached in the classroom alone.

Dr. Grant Wiggins explains that within the context of essential questions, the word “essential” has several connotations. It refers to important questions that occur throughout ones life, to key inquiries within a discipline, and to what is needed for learning core content. With that in mind, he proposes that a question is essential when it “causes genuine and relevant inquiry into the big ideas and core content...stimulates vital, on-going rethinking of big ideas, assumptions, and prior lessons” and “naturally recurs, creating opportunities for transfer to other situations and subjects” (Wiggins, Authentic Education Blog).

Examples of an essential questions: Is art subjective, or must it be based on certain principles? How can fiction reveal truth? Is there really a difference between a cultural generalization and a stereotype? Why did that particular species/culture/person thrive while the other one barely survived or died? (Examples suggested by “Authentic Education”.) These questions rarely have one obvious answer, and they are not meant to be easily answered and put to rest.

**KEY FEATURES OF AN ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

1) They sum up the core content and key inquiries within a discipline.

2) They promote metacognition; in order to answer them, we must consider our assumptions, think about prior lessons, and connect content to big ideas.

3) They help us to consider the ways in which a specific content area applies to other situations.

4) They can and must be asked more than once through our lives, and the answers may change as we learn and grow.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. P. (2013). *Essential questions: Opening doors to student understanding*.

<http://www.authenticeducation.org/ae_bigideas/article.lasso?artid=53>

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/essential-questions>

<http://questioning.org/mar05/essential.html>