

**The Challenge of Diversity and Community:
Preparing Teachers To Teach For Understanding and Democracy**

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The pressure on teacher educators has increased in recent years in response to changes in the goals of education and changes in society. Once, pre-service teachers simply needed content knowledge and adequate methodology to meet their students' needs for information and skills, but now we find that these students have been able to acquire knowledge & routine skills without understanding their basis or when to use them. Further, as social institutions' responsibilities have changed, it has become fundamental for teachers to know how to involve their students as empowered participants in their increasingly diverse communities. The population entering the teaching profession is increasingly White, female, and middle class (Gay & Howard, 2000) and studies have shown that prospective teachers have experienced limited interaction with cultures outside of their own (Garibaldi, 1992; Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Nieto, 2000). By weaving multicultural service-learning into the fabric of curriculum design (Wiggins & McTighe's model Understanding By Design) that aims at deepening conceptual understanding, pre-service teachers are designing units of study that will increase understanding and engage all of their students during the student teaching experience.

The approach of integrating the Understanding By Design curriculum format with multicultural service-learning addresses all of the INTASC performance standards for new teachers as it delves into big ideas that cross cultures and time with community and social justice. Neither teaching for understanding, nor using only service-learning, is as powerful an approach to learning as is the intersection of the two approaches where, if the intersection is carefully designed, understanding occurs. Through this unit design, learning becomes a journey where each person (student and teacher) seeks meaning through inquiry, continually acting upon the environment and refining their beliefs and perspectives as they gain new information (Kinsley, 1997), thereby placing teachers as those professionals who nurture an ethic of caring in building a civil society.

Traditional approaches to teaching have yielded students who can spew formulas, but not solve problems, students who can correct grammar exercises, but not write, students who know dates and facts, but who cannot explain foundational concepts. The focus has been on reproduction of knowledge, not production of knowledge. As David Perkins put it, "Knowledge and skill in themselves do not guarantee understanding. People can acquire knowledge and routine skills without understanding their basis or how to use them." (Perkins, 1993, p.8) As early as 1983 Boyer noted the skills that would be considered basic by the year 2000. These included the ability to abstract, wherein students have the capacity to order and make meaning of massive amounts of information; the capacity for systems thinking, where they can see the parts in relation to the whole. In other words, students can see why problems arise. Students needed to demonstrate self-directed experimental inquiry with the capacity to set up procedures to test and evaluate alternative ideas. And finally, students need to be collaborative, demonstrating strong interpersonal skills with the capacity to engage in collaborative dialogue in order to create

consensus and solve problems. Needless to say, as we stand at the beginning of 2005, we are far from achieving the attainment of these “basic skills. At the same time we are grappling with such academic concerns, we are also being called upon to focus on character development. (*Helping Your Child To Become a Responsible Citizen*, 2003)

In this recently re-released U.S. Department of Education booklet, Secretary of Education Rod Paige noted that character education is foundational to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. He noted, “cornerstone to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is academic achievement and professional success that is built upon a foundation of moral strength and civic virtue where we must not simply teach children to count, we must teach them what counts.”

Clearly, the task of classroom teachers involves much more than academic issues. It is the job of teacher educators to help the young people who want to teach approach this daunting task. Fundamental to achieving such a mission is recognition that teachers must engage students if learning is to occur. It is the intersection of teaching for understanding and service-learning that provides the impact on both teacher and student. It is that intersection where self-knowledge meets empathy and perspective. At that intersection understanding, diversity, and community thrive. When this strong force for good is woven into curriculum and instruction that mines big ideas crossing time and culture, teachers can provide the needed leadership to move forward in spite of shifting sands of demographics, societal trends and educational goals. (De Roche & Williams, 2001)

Let us look at the major components of this exciting intersection.

Teaching for Understanding

Wiggins & McTighe’s (1998) approach to curriculum design begins by acknowledging that teachers are designers. The better the design, the better the product. The product for teachers is a student who understands what s/he has been taught and can use that knowledge in uses a conceptual lens, rather than a topical one. Teachers will consistently say that they want their students to “understand.” Strangely enough, however, we may not adequately understand our goal. Understanding as a commonly sought, but ill-defined objective. For example, some teachers believe their students should “really understand,” others desire their students to “internalize knowledge.” Still others want their students to “grasp the core or essence.” Do they all mean the same thing? Specifically, what does a student who “really understands,” do that he does not do when he does not understand? At the heart of the confusion is that understanding is different from knowledge and it is knowledge that most teachers teach. Knowing the facts and doing well on tests do not automatically mean a student understands. The “basic” skill requirements for this new decade demand that students be able to apply knowledge in new and unpredictable contexts. If “correct” answers can offer inadequate or misleading evidence of understanding, or if good test results can hide misunderstanding, then what is genuine understanding? Wiggins & McTighe developed a multifaceted view of understanding that include explanation, interpretation, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge. When one truly understands, one

- Can *explain*, providing thorough, supported, and *justifiable* accounts of phenomena, facts, and data,

- Can *interpret* by telling meaningful stories, offering apt translations, providing historical or personal dimension to ideas and events, making them personal or accessible through images, anecdotes, analogies, and models,
- Can *apply* effectively using and adapting what one knows in diverse contexts,
- Have *perspective* wherein one sees points of view through critical eyes and ears, seeing the big picture,
- Can *empathize*, finding value in what others might find odd, alien, or implausible, perceiving sensitively on the basis of prior direct experience,
- Have *self-knowledge*, perceiving the personal style, prejudices, projections, and habits of mind that both shape and impede one's own understanding. One is aware of what one does not know, of why understanding is hard, and of how one comes to understand (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

The process of designing curriculum for understanding is a 3- stage backward design process. Teachers first identify desired results. Next, they determine acceptable evidence, and finally they plan learning experiences and instruction. The process is what is all about what should be uncovered, as opposed to what should be covered—how most teachers approach their content. This process takes state and national content standards and asks, “why?” The answer to the question should

- Represent a big idea with enduring value beyond the classroom, or
- Reside at the heart of the discipline, the “doing” of the subject in context, or
- Offer potential for engaging students.

Some examples of these elements might include principles, laws, theories, or concepts that are likely to have meaning for students. Another example might be counterintuitive, nuanced, subtle, or otherwise easily misunderstood ideas, like irony, gravity, etc. Finally, an example might be the conceptual or strategic elements of any skill—such as persuasion in writing.

This approach does not say throw out teaching facts. The relevant facts can be surfaced through the use of questions that give rise to the content knowledge in the first place. Wiggins & McTighe call these questions “essential,” so called because

- They go to the heart of a discipline,
- Recur naturally throughout one's learning and in the history of a field, and
- They raise other important questions.

These questions lead us to the over-arching statement of a unit—the moral of the story. This is the understanding that we seek our students to attain, that they will remember regardless of the context. An example might come from Spiderman's realization, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Multicultural Service-Learning

Teacher education and service-learning share common interests: nurturing caring perspective, providing means for serving, engaging students in learning, and empowering students to be proactive members of diverse communities. (Kingsley, 1997) Service-learning has its roots in Dewey and Piaget who believed that learning occurs best when students are actively involved in their own learning and when that learning has a distinct purpose. Service-learning links stakeholders in genuine, meaningful, and powerful partnerships that improve some aspect of the

community while increasing engagement in learning. Service-learning is a process in which learning is enhanced by doing service. Service contributes to learning in two distinct but related ways. People learn well when doing service because direct service combined with thoughtful reflection is a good teacher and a terrific motivator. Service-learning is a two way street. Instead of a simple process where a student provides service to enhance his or her classroom learning, we see a multilayered sequential process built on reciprocity of both service and learning.

In order for students to produce knowledge instead of reproducing knowledge, they must be engaged. Service-learning engages students in learning activities that also address real-life community needs. It is not an add-on; it is simply a powerful methodology that can be used across the disciplines to help students grow personally, socially, and academically while at the same time benefiting schools and communities. Research has shown that students improve their academic performance, school attendance, interest in learning and behavior and attention in class (Root, 1997). These students also tend to graduate from high school and continue their education.

A multicultural education approach is a critical component in service-learning, however. Service-learning can too easily reinforce inequality with the theoretical underpinnings provided by a concerted analysis of power and oppression in the service experience. Without a multicultural perspective, service-learning can perpetuate racist, sexist, ageist, or classist assumptions about others in a “do good” or “charity” orientation. Several benefits come out of this:

1. It can be an important avenue for helping pre-service teachers expand their “emotional comfort zones” (Dahms, 1994, p.2)
2. Pre-service teachers can gain an increasing ability to view the world from multiple perspectives.
3. A multicultural approach can provide the opportunity to reflect on one’s own social position in the world in relation to others.
4. Multicultural education can provide a vehicle to connect service-learning to social justice. (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001).

Contribution:

The benefits of learning how to design curriculum infused with service-learning become evident to both pre-service teachers and their future students.

- Engagement is an effective pedagogy for teaching and learning.
- The model is a means to foster social understanding, civic participation, and/or social transformation.
- The model provides civic, social, moral and personal benefits for both teacher and student.
- The model prepares students for the workforce by fostering interpersonal and collaborative skills.
- The model aligns with both K-12 content standards and INTASC standards.

By learning how to construct curriculum that demands engagement and connection, teachers will meet with less “why do we have to learn this” from their students. Students will see relevance to

what they are learning as they experience success in applying knowledge in diverse contexts that address social issues in their own communities and in the world. Further, teachers who increasingly are different from their students will have reason to connect to their students and their community. When teachers weave components of service-learning into units of study that focus on big ideas that span time and culture, students learn, understand, and connect with their communities. They become citizens of today, not just tomorrow and their teachers become reflective practitioners linked to other community stakeholders as collaborative problem-solvers whose personal and professional understanding of diversity and community is deep. They become the professionals who nurture an ethic of caring that contribute to the building of a civil society.

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