



THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

I was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in the early 90s when I first encountered [Dr. Michael Apple](#). He raised a series of questions in a class about the nature of curriculum in our public schools that significantly altered the way I thought about education. The conversation boiled down to this: *Whose knowledge is of most worth?* If you are interested, he later [fleshed out that thinking here](#).

This comes to mind today because it might have been the first time, as either a student or a teacher, that I recognized the power of an [essential question](#). It was as if someone turned the light on in a dark room. The question elegantly illustrated, not only a practical educational issue, but the arguably more important social, political, and economic implications of deciding what gets taught in schools. I was simultaneously aware of what I didn't know and curious to explore what was illuminated. It immediately sparked new questions and new ideas.

Essential questions are broad and timeless, with no singular answer. They encourage a search for

meaning and engage us in critical thinking and analysis. They inspire new questions.

Essential questions anchor our teaching to [big ideas](#), and move us beyond simply relaying factual information. Instead, facts become the basis for analyzing essential questions and big ideas. **Foundational questions**, (or “what is” questions) help us access factual knowledge, developing the building blocks for learning and allowing us to grapple with larger, more complex issues. This facilitates a return to the essential question and big ideas that a course is built on.

As I construct a syllabus, **I look for an over-arching essential question that can anchor the entire semester**. Next, I develop more focused, foundational questions that can propel the course each week throughout the semester. Those questions become the outline of my syllabus. For each class session, foundational questions drive my planning and work with students. We use this developing knowledge base to analyze the essential question, which is revisited constantly throughout the course.

For example, in a Sociology of Education course I taught, the over-arching essential question

was: Are schools a reflection of society, or do they shape society?

To grapple with this question, we had to answer several foundational questions. Just a few examples are: What is the purpose of a public school education? Historically, what have been the major influences driving school curriculum? What is the nature of a bureaucracy, and how does school organization impact educational practice?

These questions draw students in, generate curiosity, and provide the foundational knowledge to begin to grapple with the essential question. They also force me to work at finding relevant readings and engaging activities for each class that motivates students to wrestle with the questions and the concepts upon which they are built.

Creating essential questions isn't particularly easy, given their nature. Don't be discouraged. [The Wiggins' article](#) and the work he did with McTighe in the 2000's (referenced in the linked article) are helpful sources for getting started...and we [can also help!](#)



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ENGAGING PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

*Laurel Byrne, Assistant Professor,
Education shares:*

Vital to our growth as a class over the course of the semester is documenting shared learning experiences and making connections to future learning. From the first day, I emphasize how our learning community creates a rich, vivid story just waiting to be told. The **role of class historian** does just that.

Over the course of the semester, each student is assigned a class to hold the role of class historian. Class historians document the session through pictures, video, and anecdotal notes, capturing details of our story, then recreating it to share at the start of the next class.

The historian's presentation of our work from the previous class provides an opportunity to review past learning, highlight key concepts and content, align learning experiences with planned learning outcomes, design exam questions, and provoke a connection to the new content. A Canvas module is created as a repository for the class historian presentations, providing an opportunity for reflection and review throughout the semester. We learn from each other by recognizing connections between experiences, while identifying disconnects that arise. The collection supports review and preparation for exams, with the mid-term/final including questions posed by class historians.

The work of the class historian fosters higher-level thinking, underscores analysis and synthesis, and leads to a deeper understanding of course content. There is also opportunity for creativity, as students choose a personalized theme tying the shared learning experience together. They also experience applying assessment strategies, such as observation and documentation. As a final benefit, I utilize the presentations to consider my own future practice.

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED SoTL?

I was recently working on a short column to highlight an article that suggested replacing student presentations with student-led lessons. After sharing a draft, a colleague reminded me of a paper we both read that demonstrated less than desirable outcomes for an activity called "jigsaw." Perhaps you are familiar, much like student-led lessons, jigsaw asks individuals to take responsibility for a portion of the content, then return to class to share it with one another, creating a meaningful whole.

While the subjects of the meta analysis on jigsaw were middle school students, the lack of evidence for its effectiveness made me reconsider the column. However, I do wonder if college students could teach their peers (and do it better than 6th graders), and how such an experience might impact the learning of both those doing the teaching, and the classmates they are instructing.

I did a little searching to see if peer teaching at the university level had been studied. Indeed, [Guerrero and Wiley \(2021\)](#) examined the question. However, realizing that there might not be time for everyone in the class to actually teach, they wondered if simply *expecting to teach* was a useful learning tool. Turns out the results were promising for "supporting durable learning from expository texts."

The opportunities for us to study questions like this, in our own classrooms, in a structured manner; collecting and analyzing data, and compiling and sharing our findings is certainly rich! This is called the **scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)**, and **it is a high priority for the DLSI**. We can work with you to develop and support your project. SoTL projects are a great way to improve teaching and learning in your own discipline, and there are numerous opportunities for publication and building a research trajectory.

Here at La Salle, we currently have a learning community comprised of colleagues who have been regularly meeting and discussing SoTL ideas and projects. This summer, a few of us are reading a useful primer titled [SoTL in Action edited by Nancy L. Chick](#), with a plan to discuss it during the upcoming semester. If you would like to **join the conversation**, are looking for inspiration, or already have a SoTL project in mind, [please let us know](#).

As an alternative to “any questions?”, at any point in class, place students in pairs or small groups to come up with a question they think is crucial for you to answer right now. Everyone is engaged, considering the content, and you get a quick assessment of their thinking.



CAN THE HIGHLIGHTER BE HELPFUL?

Despite decades of work as an educator, with experience in a variety of settings and across the developmental spectrum, it was really an eye-opener to recently realize that we don't spend much time at all teaching children and young adults **how to learn**. Regardless of the educational setting, the vast majority of instructional time is focused on communicating subject matter, while little, if any time is spent on developing an understanding of cognitive processes and the actual strategies and tools that should be employed to facilitate the learning of that content.

This is partly the result of historical and cultural practices in education, and partly the slow pace that new developments in cognitive and neuroscience trickle into our teacher preparation programs, schools, and universities. It is also because we have had an obsession (generally driven by social, political, and economic pressures) with the reproduction of knowledge over problem solving and critical analysis.

Be that as it may, it is no wonder that **most students employ learning strategies haphazardly**, and most make use of highly inefficient tools at best. For example, we know from cognitive and neuroscience, that simply re-reading notes and documents, and highlighting text are not very productive strategies for learning. Yet, many students rely heavily on these approaches as study aids.

Part of the issue is that students have a difficult time identifying **what to pay attention to** when studying or working on assignments. That's why I found [How Highlighters Can Help Students Write Better Research Papers](#) to be a very helpful article.

Rather than using the highlighter to guess at what might be important, author Susan Plachta, has her students bring the markers to class for a peer review activity. Students are taught to use the highlighters for a very clear and specific purpose – identifying “information in their papers that they learned through reading a source.”

Using this activity, students can assess the balance of personal opinion and evidence, identifying where citations are necessary. There are additional tips in the article, including how to approach the activity in a virtual environment.

What I like here, is the provision of **an effective tool** and how to employ it as a **useful strategy**. Now, the highlighter has a focused purpose, and what is highlighted is actually worth one's attention. In this case, providing a clear path to better student compositions, and a more comprehensive understanding of how to approach the use of sources in a research paper.

The larger message here, of course, is that our students seldom come to us with knowledge of how to learn. They mostly make use of inefficient and ineffective learning and study strategies, perhaps retaining knowledge for short periods of time, and in order to pass a test.

We are in a position to help them identify, understand, and apply evidence-based learning strategies, often by simply building them into our own teaching activities and homework assignments, then being explicit about how they work to facilitate learning. Several of these strategies appear in earlier versions of [the DLSI Newsletter](#). Take a look and/or be in touch with us to explore further. We are always interested in hearing how it is going. Let us know!



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