

An excerpt from: **Gaining Clarity on Our Goals**

Wiggins, G.P. & McTighe, J. (2013). *Understanding by Design. 2nd Edition*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

.... Given that every topic typically encompasses more content than we can reasonably address, we are obliged to make deliberate choices and set explicit priorities. Having chosen what to teach (and what not to), we have to help the learners see the priorities within what we ask them to learn..... The big ideas connect the dots for the learner by establishing learning priorities...they serve as ‘conceptual Velcro’ – they help the facts and skills stick together and stick in our minds! The challenge then is to identify big ideas and carefully design around them, resisting the temptation to teach everything of possible value to each topic.

A big idea may be thought of as a linchpin. The linchpin is the device that keeps the wheel in place on an axle. This, a linchpin is one that is essential for understanding. Without grasping the idea and using it to ‘hold together’ related content knowledge, we are left with bits and pieces of inert facts that cannot take us anywhere.

From one perspective, the phrase ‘big idea’ is just right, since we want to signal that some ideas serve as umbrella concepts. But from another point of view, the term ‘big’ can be misleading. A big idea is not necessarily vast in the sense of a vague phrase covering lots of content. Nor is a big idea a ‘basic’ idea. Rather, big ideas are at the ‘core’ of the subject; they need to be uncovered; we have to dig deep until we get to the core. Basic ideas, by contrast, are just what the term implies – the basis for further work; for example, definitions, building-block skills, and rules of thumb. Ideas at the core of the subject, however, are ideas that are the hard-won results of inquiry, ways of thinking and perceiving that are the province of the expert. They are not obvious. In fact, more expert big ideas are abstract and counterintuitive to the novice, prone to misunderstanding.....

Erickson (2001) offers a useful definition of ‘big ideas’. They are:

- Broad and abstract
- Represented by one or two words
- Universal in application
- Timeless – carry through the ages
- Represented by different examples that share common attributes (p.35)

More generally, then as we see it, a big idea can be thought of as

- Providing a focusing conceptual ‘lens’ for any study
- Providing breadth of meaning by connecting and organising many facts, skills, and experiences; serving as the linchpin of understanding
- Pointing to the ideas at the heart of expert understanding of the subject
- Requiring ‘uncoverage’ because its meaning or value is rarely obvious to the learner, is counterintuitive or prone to misunderstanding
- Having great transfer value; applying to many other inquiries and issues over time – ‘horizontally’ (across subjects) and ‘vertically’ (through the years in later courses) in the curriculum and out of school.

Our last criterion, transfer, turn out to be vital, as suggested by what Bloom (1981) and his colleagues said about the nature and value of big ideas:

In each subject field there are some basic ideas which summarise much of what scholars have learned... These ideas give meaning to much that has been learned, and they provide the basic idea for dealing with many new problems... We believe that it is a primary obligation of the scholars [and] teachers to search constantly for these abstractions, to find ways of helping students learn them, and especially to help students learn how to use them in a great variety of problem situations... To lean to use such principles is to possess a powerful way of dealing with the world (p. 235)

In other words, a big idea, is not “big” merely by virtue of its intellectual scope. It has to have pedagogical power: It must enable the learner to make sense of what has come before; and, most notably, be helpful in making new, unfamiliar ideas seem more familiar. Thus, a big idea is not just another face or a vague abstraction but a conceptual tool for sharpening thinking, connecting discrepant pieces of knowledge, and equipping learner for transferable applications.

In pedagogical practice, a big idea is typically manifest as a helpful

- Concept (e.g., adaptation, function, quantum, perspective)
- Theme (e.g., “good triumphs over evil”, “coming of age,” “go West”)
- Ongoing debate and point of view (e.g., nature versus nurture, conservatives versus liberals, acceptable margin of error)
- Theory (e.g., evolution via natural selection, Manifest Destiny, fractals for explaining apparent randomness)
- Underlying assumption (e.g., texts have meaning, markets are rational, parsimony of explanation in science)
- Recurring question (e.g., “Is that fair?” “How do we know?” “Can we prove it?”)
- Understanding or principle (e.g., form follows function, the reader has to question the text to understand it, correlation does not ensure causality)

Note, then, that a big idea can manifest itself in various formats – as a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a question, and a formal theory are all about big ideas, expressed in different ways.