

determine whether it ends up being essential. (We have more to say on the culture of inquiry needed to make the most of essential questions in a later chapter.)

Size and Scope Matter: Overarching Versus Topical EQs

Questions such as “What margins of error are tolerable?” are essential in yet another sense. They offer relevance and transferability across disciplines, linking not only to units and courses in measurement, statistics, and engineering, but also to areas as diverse as pottery, music, and parachute packing. Such questions encourage and even demand transfer beyond the particular topic in which we first encounter them. They can (and thus should) recur over the years to promote conceptual connections and curriculum coherence within (and sometimes) across topics and disciplines.

Essential questions (and companion understandings) differ in scope. For example, “What lessons can we learn from World War II?” and “How do the best mystery writers hook and hold their readers?” are typically asked to help students come to particular understandings around those specific topics and skills. Such questions are not usually meant to be perpetually open or unanswerable. They refer specifically to the topic of a unit, in these cases, World War II and the genre of writing called mysteries, respectively. Other essential questions are broad and overarching, taking us beyond any particular topic or skill, toward more general, transferable understandings. For example, “What lessons can we and can’t we learn from the past?” extends well beyond World War II and can fruitfully be asked again and again over many years in several subject areas. Similarly, we need not inquire solely about how mysteries engage us. That topical question fits under the broader question that applies to all writers and artists: “How do the best writers and artists capture and hold our attention?”

We refer to specific essential questions as “topical” and the more general questions as “overarching.” (The same idea applies to understandings.) Here are some paired examples of these two types of essential questions:

Overarching Essential Questions

- Whose “story” (perspective) is this?
- How are structure and function related?
- In what ways does art reflect, as well as shape, culture?
- How do authors use story elements to establish mood?
- What makes a system?
- What are common factors in the rise and fall of powerful nations?

Topical Essential Questions

- How did Native Alaskans view the “settlement” of their land?
- How does the structure of various insects help them to survive?
- What do ceremonial masks reveal about the Inca culture?
- How does John Updike use setting to establish a mood?
- How do our various body systems interact?
- Why did the Soviet Union collapse?