

The TRU Conversation Guide: A Tool for Teacher Learning and Growth¹

Teachers' work is remarkably complex—in particular when the goal is not just to present facts and formulas for students to memorize, but to Teach for Robust Understanding. Because of this, there is *always* room for learning and growth, for *every* teacher regardless of prior training, years of experience, or current successes. Indeed, ongoing learning is the essence of teaching.

Our experience as teachers, coaches, and researchers has been that our most meaningful learning occurs when we interact with others, developing and sustaining relationships that simultaneously challenge and support us. These relationships push us to expand our vision of teaching and learning. They offer perspectives on our work that differ from our own. And they respect our intelligence, skill, and intentions—as well as our need to continually grow. These supportive relationships not only help us to alter our practice but also to deepen our understanding of the complex work we are undertaking.

Unfortunately, much of the professional development that we have experienced has focused less on these aspects of learning and more on “experts” sharing “best practices” that we are supposed to simply import to our own classrooms. Here, we have tried to create a professional development tool that builds on what teachers, coaches, and professional learning communities know.

¹ This is a working document. We hope that reflecting on teaching in the ways suggested here will be productive. We also welcome comments and suggestions for improvement. Please contact Nicole (nlouie@wisc.edu) and Evra (evra@berkeley.edu) with your feedback.

This Conversation Guide is part of a collection of tools and papers supporting Teaching for Robust Understanding, which are available at <http://truframework.org>. This version of the Conversation Guide is a domain-general adaptation of the TRU Math Conversation Guide. More details on each dimension in the framework and the research base behind it are provided on the website. An updated version of this Conversation Guide may also be available online.

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FIVE DIMENSIONS OF POWERFUL CLASSROOMS

This Conversation Guide represents our best efforts to use research to support teacher learning and growth in a way that accounts for both how people learn and the complexity of teaching practice. Instead of prescribing instructional techniques or tricks, we offer a set of questions organized around five dimensions of teaching identified by research as critical for students’ learning.

The dimensions are summarized in the table below. Together, they offer a way to organize some of the complexity of teaching so that we can focus our learning together in deliberate and useful ways. They include attention to content, practices, and students’ developing identities as thinkers and learners. There is necessarily some overlap between dimensions; rather than capturing completely distinct categories, each dimension is like a visual filter, highlighting different aspects of the same phenomena in everyday classroom life. We encourage you to think about interactions between dimensions when it is useful for you. The questions on subsequent pages of the Guide will also direct your attention to particular kinds of overlap.

The Five Dimensions of Powerful Classrooms	
The Content	How do important disciplinary ideas and practices ² develop in this lesson/lesson sequence? How can we create more meaningful connections?
Cognitive Demand	What opportunities do students have to make their own sense of ideas? To work through authentic intellectual challenges? How can we create more opportunities?
Equitable Access to Content	Who does and does not participate in the intellectual work of the class, and how? How can we create more opportunities for each student to participate meaningfully?
Agency, Ownership, and Identity	What opportunities do students have to see themselves and each other as powerful thinkers and learners? How can we create more of these opportunities?
Formative Assessment	What do we know about each student’s current thinking? How can we build on it?

² See page 12 for a note on what we mean by “important disciplinary ideas and practices.”

WHAT THE CONVERSATION GUIDE IS FOR

The purpose of this Conversation Guide is not to tell anyone how to teach, but to facilitate *coherent* and *ongoing* discussions in which teachers, administrators, coaches, and others *learn together*. We hope that the questions in the Conversation Guide will support educators with different experiences, different expertise, and different strengths to work together to develop a common vision, common priorities, and common language, in order to collaboratively improve instruction and better support students to develop robust understandings.

The Conversation Guide can be used to support many different kinds of conversations, including (but not limited to):

- Conversations to develop common vision and priorities across groups of educators (such as subject-matter departments, grade-level teams, or an entire school faculty)
- Conversations between teachers and administrators and instructional coaches around classroom observations (see also the TRU Observation Guide, available soon at <http://truframework.org>)
- Conversations between teachers around peer observations
- Conversations around video recordings of classroom teaching and learning
- Conversations about planning a particular unit or lesson
- Conversations about a particular instructional strategy or set of strategies (not necessarily content-specific)
- Ongoing individual reflection

We have found that the Conversation Guide can be useful for facilitating a one-time conversation. *But its real power lies in its support for creating coherence across conversations.* The Guide can help individuals as well as groups of educators to set an agenda and work on it consistently over time. For example, a teacher team (such as a grade-level team or a subject-matter department) might decide to spend a semester focusing on issues of Equitable Access to Content (Dimension 3). Meeting time might then be spent reflecting on the kinds of access that are currently available to students and planning lessons with the goal of monitoring and expanding access in mind, using the Equitable Access to Content questions and prompts in this Guide. Members of the team might observe each other's classrooms with a focus on these same questions and prompts. The principal might find ways to support teachers to attend workshops related to the theme of Equitable Access to Content, rather than supporting a series of disconnected trainings.

In the remainder of this document we provide an overview of each dimension; discussion questions for each dimension, for your use in reflecting on and planning instruction; and a set of suggestions for how to use the discussion questions.

We hope you will find the Conversation Guide useful. Happy teaching and learning!

HOW TO USE THIS CONVERSATION GUIDE

Our field tests and our experiences as instructional coaches have led to a few suggestions that may help you make the most of this Conversation Guide. In this section, we share these suggestions and give some examples of how conversations using the Conversation Guide might look.

1. Set a long-term learning agenda.

Complex learning—like learning how to teach for robust student understanding—has so many facets that it is easy to jump from one thing to another, without making clear progress on anything. Setting a long-term learning agenda can help us focus our energies, whether we're full-time classroom teachers or people who support classroom teachers. Opportunities to have deep conversations about practice are few and far between, but if we have a core learning agenda that we can return to again and again, we stand a better chance of leveraging all our strengths to learn together about something that matters.

The process of setting an agenda can unfold in many different ways. Various stakeholders may come in with clear (and perhaps competing) ideas about what they want to focus on, or it may happen that no one has a particular preference. Whatever the case may be, it is important that all participants, especially classroom teachers, feel connected to the learning agenda. Our learning is much more powerful when we get to learn about things that trouble or inspire us.

Some examples of long-term learning agendas might be, “This semester, I want to focus on getting students to share their reasoning, not just answers or steps,” or “This year, I want to get better at engaging students who get frustrated and give up easily.” As you consider your own learning agenda, it may be useful to read through the dimensions and discussion questions, to see if anything jumps out as particularly important or exciting.

2. Use the discussion questions like a menu. Pick and choose.

You might have noticed that there are a lot of questions in this Guide! Our design assumes that you WILL NOT try to discuss every bullet, one by one, each time you use it. Instead, we hope you will identify areas of the Conversation Guide that are appropriate for your learning agenda and return to these areas again and again. We expect that some of the questions will be difficult to answer – and that by discussing them together you will find new ways of understanding teaching and learning and come up with ideas for things to try in order to improve both.

3. Ground discussion in specific, detailed evidence.

We've all made statements like, “My kids are bombing this poetry unit,” or “They're really struggling with fractions.” While these statements convey a picture of student understanding in a quick and concise way, they need to be followed up with more detailed information. Otherwise, it is difficult to make instruction responsive to student thinking, and easy to miss opportunities to build on students' strengths or address their misconceptions. One way to make our observations more specific is to talk about content with as much detail as possible; for example, instead of saying, “My kids are really

struggling with fractions,” you might observe that “Even though I’ve seen my kids do just fine with finding equivalent fractions and even adding them, they just seem to shut down every time they see a fraction,” or “they’re reducing fractions in a mechanical way, but they don’t seem to see that $\frac{4}{6}$ of a chocolate bar and $\frac{2}{3}$ of a chocolate bar represent the same amount.”

Pressing for specific examples also makes observations more accurate and concrete, helping us get away from our general impressions and closer to actual student thinking. Talking about specific students—and ways that their thinking is or isn’t typical of the class—is another strategy. Not only does this strategy give us a more detailed and accurate picture of the thinking that is going on in our classrooms, but it also opens up instructional possibilities. For example, noticing that today, Jessica and Miguel each came up with beautiful metaphors (even though they’re struggling with other aspects of writing effective poems) could lead you to invite Jessica and Miguel to share their poems with the rest of class, creating a learning opportunity that is invisible in “My kids are bombing this poetry unit.”

Finally, attending to particular students can help us think about patterns of marginalization in society at large (e.g., fewer resources for ELLs, or stereotypes that link race, gender, and academic success or failure), and how our classrooms might work to replicate or counter those patterns for our own students.

If you are able to ground your conversations in shared experiences of the same classroom (from peer observations, co-teaching, instructional coaching, etc.), you will benefit from more eyes and more perspectives on the details of classroom activity. But even if this isn’t possible in any particular conversation, working with evidence of specific students’ thinking and understanding will make your conversation a richer resource for your own learning.

4. If you are conducting a classroom observation, pre-brief.

Classroom observations are generally accompanied by a debrief conversation. Pre-brief conversations can be just as important. If you can, have a conversation prior to each observation. In this conversation, clarify the goals not just for the lesson, but also for the observation of the lesson. Talk about goals for students, so that observers can understand what the teacher is trying to accomplish. Also remind each other of the teacher’s learning agenda so that you can discuss how the observer can be most helpful. We have found this question especially useful: “What do we want to be able to talk about in our debrief conversation?” From there, you might discuss what the observer should be looking for (e.g., recording the questions the teacher asks, or focusing on a particular student), and what kinds of interactions (if any) the observer should have with students.

The pre-brief conversation is one way of capitalizing on the focus and organization that a learning agenda offers. Without it, it’s easy to get distracted during the observation. It’s also easy for the observer to notice things that are not interesting or important to the teacher, which are less likely to help the teacher learn and grow.

The Conversation Guide includes prompts for planning, which can be used for planning observations as well as for planning lessons. Discussing these prompts should bring to the surface ideas about what is likely to happen in the lesson, given the tasks students will be given, the participation structures that

will be used, and so on. This kind of anticipatory thinking might lead to tweaks in the lesson plan, but just as important, it can establish common focus between the teacher and observer. This adds richness to the debrief after the lesson; everyone can then reflect on the ways that things worked out the way they were intended to, ways they were surprising, and next steps in light of that information.

5. Link planning to reflection and vice versa.

This Guide includes prompts for “planning” and prompts for “reflecting.” We do not mean to suggest that you restrict each conversation to a focus on one or the other; rather, it will be useful to connect these perspectives in many conversations. Reflection is most practical when it leads to next steps, and next steps (planning) should be firmly grounded in reflection on what has already happened. It is worthwhile to make space for thinking about what has already happened without jumping to next steps too quickly, however. Reflecting on the details of what we have observed opens up possibilities for future action that might otherwise remain hidden (as described above). In addition, different people see different things, and sharing our observations can enrich everyone’s understanding of what students have been doing, thinking, and learning.

6. Work from teachers’ strengths.

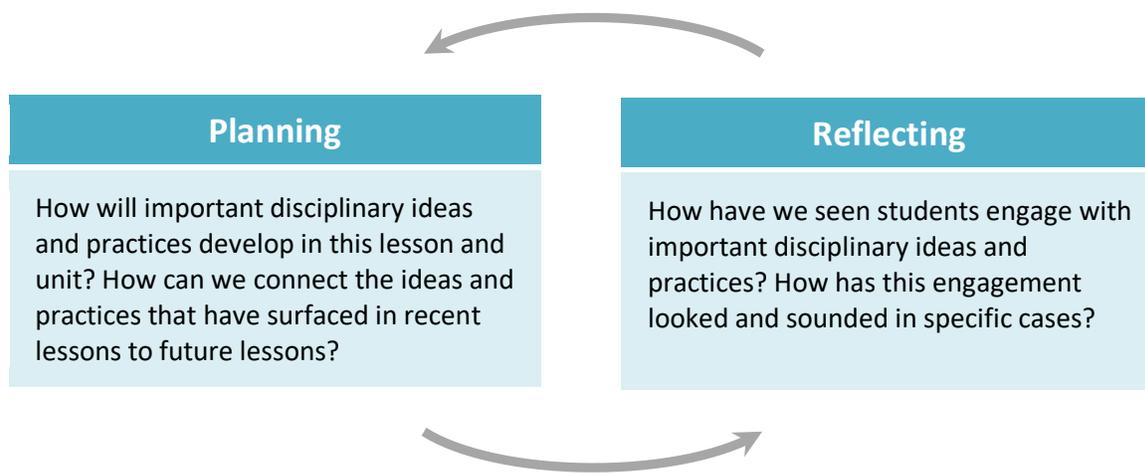
Our culture often prompts us to focus on our weaknesses, and on the areas where we need improvement. But our *strengths* are huge assets when it comes to learning and improving our practice. Knowing our strengths supports us to engage with challenges, giving us a starting point to work from and a reason to believe that we can be successful. Identifying teachers’ strengths, making them explicit, and using them as authentic resources for growth can therefore support teachers to think deeply and critically about their practice, to strive for improvement, to actually improve by building on their strengths, and to develop productive relationships with supportive others, all at once.

In practice, this might mean prompting teachers (not just supervisors) to share *their* observations, interpretations, and ideas for moving forward; creating diverse opportunities to identify what teachers already do well, including planning together, reflecting together, and observing various kinds of interaction with students (e.g., leading discussions, intervening at small groups, and building rapport with individual students); and building next steps around strengths instead of deficits (e.g., working on supporting students who have been reluctant to participate by building on a teacher’s skill at noticing something that each student is good at).

The Content

Core Questions: How do key disciplinary ideas and practices develop in this lesson/lesson sequence? How can we create more meaningful connections?

Students often experience schooling as a presentation of isolated facts, procedures and concepts that they are to rehearse, memorize, and apply. Our goal is to instead give students opportunities to experience coherent and meaningful disciplinary ideas and practices. This means identifying the important ideas behind facts and procedures, highlighting connections between skills and concepts, and relating concepts to each other—not just in a single lesson, but also across lessons and units. It means engaging students with centrally important disciplinary ideas in an active way, so that they can make sense of concepts and ideas for themselves and develop robust networks of understanding. It also means engaging students in authentic performances of important disciplinary practices (e.g., reasoning from evidence, communicating one’s thinking to various audiences, etc.).



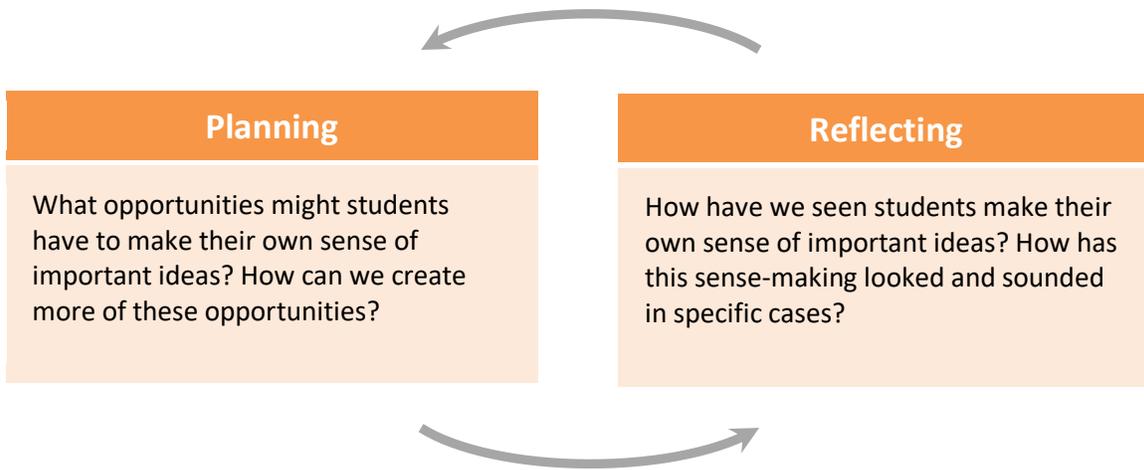
Things to think about

- What are the content goals for the lesson?
- What connections exist (or could exist) between important ideas in this lesson and important ideas in past and future lessons?
- How do important disciplinary practices develop in this lesson/unit?
- How are facts and procedures in the lesson justified?
- How are facts and procedures in the lesson connected with important ideas and practices?
- How do we see/hear students engage with important ideas and practices during class?
- Which students get to engage deeply with important ideas and practices?
- How can we create opportunities for more students to engage more deeply with important ideas and practices?

Cognitive Demand

Core Questions: What opportunities do students have to make their own sense of ideas? To work through authentic intellectual challenges? How can we create more opportunities?

We want students to engage authentically with important disciplinary ideas, not simply receive knowledge. This kind of learning requires that students engage in *productive struggle*, grappling with difficult concepts and challenging problems. As teachers, we must support students in ways that maintain their opportunities to do this grappling for themselves. Our goal is to help students understand the challenges they confront and persist in solving them, while leaving them room to make their own sense of those challenges.



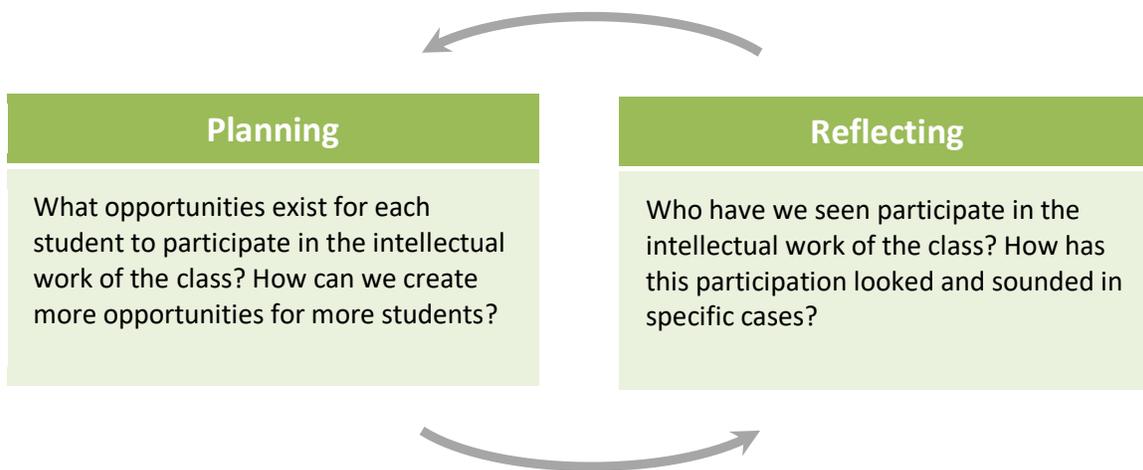
Things to think about

- What opportunities exist for students to struggle with important ideas?
- How are students' struggles supporting their engagement with important ideas?
- How does (or how could) the teacher respond to students' struggles, and how do (or how could) these responses maintain students' opportunities to develop their own ideas and understandings?
- What resources (other students, the teacher, notes, texts, technology, manipulatives, various representations, etc.) are available for students to use when they encounter struggles? Are there more resources we can make available?
- What resources are students actually using, and how might they be supported to make better use of resources?
- Which students get to engage deeply with important ideas?
- How can we create opportunities for more students to engage more deeply with important ideas?
- What community norms seem to be evolving around the value of struggle and mistakes?

Equitable Access to Content

Core Questions: Who does and does not participate in the intellectual work of the class, and how? How can we create more opportunities for each student to participate meaningfully?

All students should have access to opportunities to develop their own understandings of important disciplinary ideas and practices, and to build productive disciplinary identities. For any number of reasons, it can be extremely difficult to provide this access to everyone, but that doesn't make it any less important! We want to challenge ourselves to recognize who has access and when. There may be rich discussions or other productive activities happening in the classroom—but who gets to participate in them? Who might benefit from different ways of organizing classroom activity?



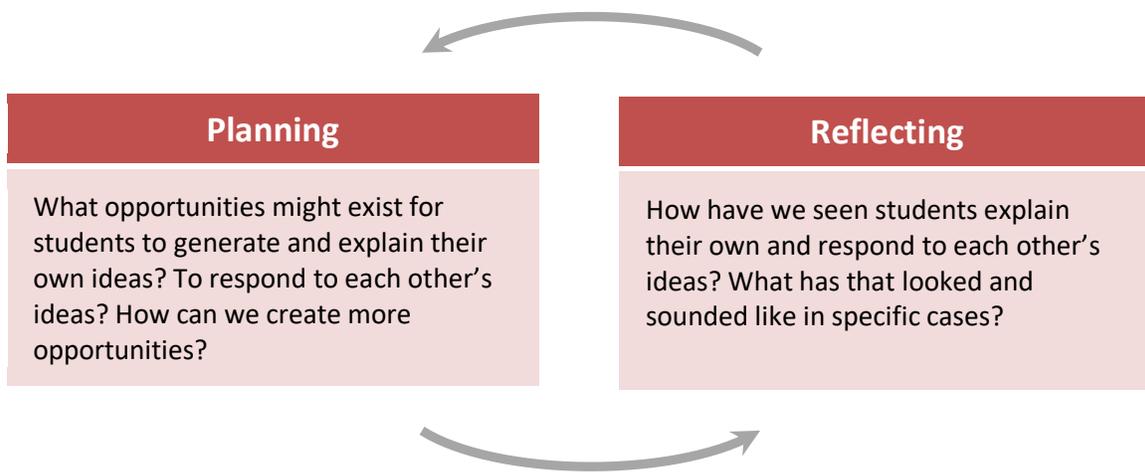
Things to think about

- What is the range of ways that students can and do participate in the intellectual work of the class (talking, writing, leaning in, listening hard; manipulating symbols, making diagrams, interpreting text, using manipulatives, connecting different ideas, etc.)?
- Which students participate in which ways?
- Which students are most active, and when?
- What opportunities do various students have to make meaningful intellectual contributions?
- What are the language demands of participating in the intellectual work of this class (e.g., academic vocabulary, discourse practices specific to a particular discipline)?
- How can we support the development of students' academic language?
- How are norms (or interactions, lesson structures, task structure, particular resources, etc.) facilitating or inhibiting participation for particular students?
- What teacher moves might expand students' access to meaningful participation (such as modeling ways to participate, holding students accountable, point out students' successful participation)?
- How can we support particular students we are concerned about (in relation to learning, issues of safety, participation, etc.)?
- How can we create opportunities for more students to participate more actively?

Agency, Ownership, and Identity

Core Questions: What opportunities do students have to see themselves and each other as powerful thinkers and learners? How can we create more of these opportunities?

Many students have negative beliefs about themselves and academics, for example, that history is just a bunch of facts that they’re supposed to memorize, or that they are just plain “bad at math.” Our goal is to support all students—especially those who have not been academically successful in the past—to develop a sense of agency and ownership over their own learning. We want students to come to see themselves as intellectually capable and competent—not by giving them easy successes, but by engaging them as sense-makers, problem solvers, and creators of meaningful and important ideas.



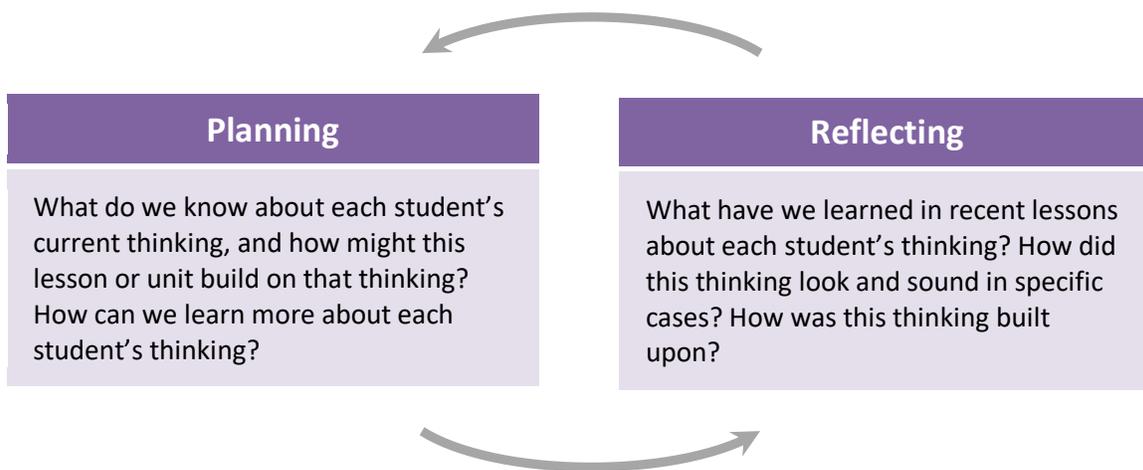
Things to think about

- Who generates the ideas that get discussed?
- What kinds of ideas do students have opportunities to generate and share (strategies, connections, partial understandings, prior knowledge, representations)?
- Who evaluates and/or responds to others’ ideas?
- How deeply do students get to explain their ideas?
- How does (or how could) the teacher respond to student ideas (evaluating, questioning, probing, soliciting responses from other students, etc.)?
- How are norms about students’ and teachers’ roles in generating ideas developing?
- How are norms about what counts as disciplinary activity (justifying, experimenting, taking different perspectives, practicing, memorizing, etc.) developing?
- Which students get to explain their own ideas? To respond to others’ ideas in meaningful ways?
- Which students seem to see themselves as powerful thinkers right now?
- How might we create more opportunities for more students to see themselves and each other as powerful thinkers?

Formative Assessment

Core Questions: What do we know about each student’s current thinking? How can we build on it?

We want instruction to be responsive to students’ actual thinking, not just our hopes or assumptions about what they do and don’t understand. It isn’t always easy to know what students are thinking, much less to use this information to shape classroom activities—but we can craft tasks and ask purposeful questions that give us insights into the strategies students are using, the depth of their understanding, and so on. Our goal is to then use those insights to guide our instruction, not just to fix mistakes but to integrate students’ understandings, partial though they may be, and build on them.



Things to think about

- What opportunities exist (or could exist) for students to develop their own strategies, approaches and understandings?
- What opportunities exist (or could exist) for students to share their ideas and reasoning and to connect their ideas to others’?
- What different ways do students get to share their ideas and reasoning (writing on paper, speaking, writing on the board, creating diagrams, demonstrating with materials/artifacts, etc.)?
- Who do students get to share their ideas with (a partner, a small group, the whole class, the teacher)?
- What opportunities exist to build on students’ thinking, and how are teachers and/or other students taking up these opportunities?
- How do students seem to be making sense of the content in the lesson, and what responses might build on that thinking?
- What might we try (what tasks, lesson structures, questioning prompts, etc.) to surface student thinking, especially the thinking of students whose ideas we don’t know much about yet?

A NOTE: What We Mean By “Important Disciplinary Ideas and Practices”

“Important ideas” are notoriously hard to define. Which ideas are important? Which are not? What even counts as an “idea”? Who should have the authority to decide? Our intention with the Conversation Guide is to support discussions about these questions rather than to offer answers. To us, it is much more important to keep pushing our students and ourselves as educators toward more interconnected and fundamental understandings of our disciplines than it is to decide exactly which ideas are most important. This pushing is crucial, because traditional views of many school subjects—and many of today’s textbooks and standards documents—define the content to be learned in terms of isolated topics, facts, skills, and sub-skills. This organization represents disciplinary ways of thinking poorly; it is also alienating for many students.

One way of finding connections among apparently isolated topics is to focus on important disciplinary practices. For example, *constructing an argument* is a practice that is central to mathematics (and to many other disciplines, including history, language arts, and science). Creating opportunities for students to develop skill in constructing mathematical arguments can bridge the otherwise disparate topics that math courses are typically supposed to cover. (Note the differences between a skill like constructing an argument and a skill like adding fractions.) Yet a focus on important disciplinary practices does not eliminate the need to identify important disciplinary ideas and use these ideas to organize instruction.

We find the questions below useful for shifting our focus from facts and procedures to ideas that have disciplinary importance. We hope they will be helpful for you as well.

- What do we want students to understand about the relevant disciplinary objects in this lesson? In this unit? (For example, mathematical objects might include fractions, negative numbers, the coordinate plane, and triangles; historical objects might include timelines, maps, and primary sources.)
- What relationships, patterns, or principles do we want students to understand in this lesson? In this unit?
- How might students connect ideas in this lesson/unit with ideas that came before or will come later? Are there overarching principles or relationships or patterns that they might work toward understanding?
- What are different ways of representing the content in this lesson/unit? How might different representations be connected to each other and how might these connections deepen our students’ understanding?
- How do the ideas we’re considering develop across multiple lessons/units?
- What are some ways to make connections to this idea in different lessons/units/content areas?

Some examples of ideas that might be considered “important”:

- Relationships between two variables can be represented using equations, tables, graphs, and verbal descriptions. Parameters of the relationship between the variables (e.g., the rate of change) can be identified in each of these representations and connected across representations.
- Language can be used to express emotion, not only through the literal meaning of the words chosen but also through a variety of literary devices such as similes, metaphors, and rhythm.
- Historical documents reflect the perspectives of their creators; there are always multiple perspectives from which historical events could be considered.
- Organisms both adapt to their environments and shape their environments to better suit them.

One characteristic of all of these ideas is that they go beyond naming topics and skills. For example, we might know that we want students to learn about feudalism or to be able to solve proportions. However, without consideration of the important underlying ideas that we want our students to make sense of, we are likely to get lost in facts and procedures. We are likely to miss opportunities to support students to build conceptual understandings, to make connections, and to develop a sense of themselves as powerful learners and thinkers.

Our hope is that as teachers and observers think together about teaching, they can continuously push each other to think about the content that students need to learn in bigger, deeper, richer and more interconnected ways. So while our discussion questions frequently refer to “important disciplinary ideas and practices” as though there were a set list of such ideas somewhere that you could simply consult, we hope that you will instead find ways to explore and interrogate what the phrase “important disciplinary ideas and practices” means to you.

Some resources you may find useful:

- [The Common Core State Standards for Mathematics](#), especially the [Standards for Mathematical Practice](#)
- [The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts](#), especially the Anchor Standards
- [The Next Generation Science Standards](#)
- *Reading Like a Historian*, from the [Stanford History Education Group](#)
- The idea of “essential questions,” for example, Grant Wiggins’ 2007 article, [“What is an essential question?”](#)