

Framing Essential Questions

You may be fighting a long history of subject matter research. For years students have gone to the library to "find out about" an assigned topic. This tradition has led to information gathering but little analysis or thought.

Essential questions set students free from this tedious and wasteful ritual. Research becomes motivating and meaningful. A well crafted essential question has the following attributes:

1. Essential questions reside at the top of *Bloom's Taxonomy* (Bloom, 1954). They require students to EVALUATE (make a thoughtful choice between options, with the choice based upon clearly stated criteria), to SYNTHESIZE (invent a new or different version) or to ANALYZE (develop a thorough and complex understanding through skillful questioning).
2. Essential questions spark our curiosity and sense of wonder. They derive from some deep wish to understand something which matters to us.
3. Answers to essential questions cannot be found. They must be invented. It is something like cooking a great meal. The researcher goes out on a shopping expedition for the raw ingredients, but "the proof is in the pudding." Students must construct their own answers and make their own meaning from the information they have gathered. They create insight.
4. Answering such questions may take a life time, and even then, the answers may only be tentative ones. This kind of research, like good writing, should proceed over the course of several weeks, with much of the information gathering taking place outside of formally scheduled class hours.
5. Essential questions engage students in the kinds of real life applied problem-solving suggested by nearly every new curriculum report or outline curriculum standards such as the NCTM and the Science Standards.
6. Essential questions usually lend themselves well to multidisciplinary investigations, requiring that students apply the skills and perspectives of math and language arts while wrestling with content from social studies or science.

It would be best if students could learn to frame their own essential questions, but in most cases they will require several experiences with teacher generated questions before they can shed years of practice with trivial information-gathering questions.