Philosophic Framework

Topic:

Identifying "great ideas" | Acquiring cognitive tools

Identifying "great ideas"	Close observation	Seeking and appying general schemes	Tracing implications
What great organizing or causal principles can be used to explain the topic? What gives the events or ideas around this topic an importance far beyond their own particulars? *The world is a vast and complex place. The search for underlying forms of order has been one of the perennial themes of human culture. Philosophic thinking infers the world from a grain of sand: by attending to particular instances it seeks evidence of general schemes.* *The most difficult task here is to recapture the sense of possibility and discovery that was felt by earlier thinkers about a topic, before their work became simply part of the way we see the world (or was supplanted by a more successful narrative). The unit is then structured so that students themselves experience this narrative— so that the clarity eventually imparted by a successful general scheme is linked to the emotional satisfaction of discovery.*	*What features of the world pose the problem to be investigated and explained? What information about them best reveals the organizing power of general schemes?* *Every field of inquiry has its characteristic tools of investigation. Sometimes these are literally tools, as in many of the sciences (the microscope and telescope are two obvious examples). Sometimes they are tools in a more metaphorical sense: mathematical symbols, chemical techniques, psychological tests, methods of linguistic analysis. These tools capture the philosophical imagination when they uncover (or seem to) hidden structures or layers of meaning.*	*How can general schemes be developed, applied and tested within the unit? What features of these schemes make them particularly interesting, useful, or significant?* *The wealth of information that becomes available as one focuses on a topic, perhaps using new investigative tools to do so, only becomes fully meaningful as it is used to develop, test, or apply general ideas. If these ideas seem to successfully explain one small sphere of experience, the philosophic mind looks for ways to apply them more broadly, or to define the range of their application.*	*What does this way of thinking imply about the nature of the world and our relationship with it?* *Ultimately, philosophic understanding is bent on working out the essential characteristics of human existence: the possibilities and limitations of our ways of being, knowing, and acting in the world. Every advance in understanding seems to point to new terrain for exploration, new vistas of possibility.*

Deepening Understanding		Conclusion: Theory Made Visible	Assessment
Introducing anomalies	**Alternative schemes**	*How can the overall development of understanding in this unit be summarized and represented?*	*How can we know whether the content has been learned and understood, whether students have developed a theory or general idea, elaborated it, and attained some sense of its limitations?*
What problems confront the general schemes developed so far? How might they be dealt with?	*What other general schemes have been or might be advanced to challenge the reigning narrative?*	*One wants to end a philosophic unit in a way that makes the theoretical framework visible — enacted or represented in some way. This might involved a change in genre, for instance: using a literary theory to shape a dramatic performance, representing a scientific theory graphically or as a game, incorporating a social theory in a work of literature. If time allows, it might involve an original research project applying the theory to a case not explored within the unit itself.*	*In some ways this is easier than with Mythic or Romantic understanding, since Philosophic understanding involves making ideas explicit, justifying and defending them on the basis of evidence. One can involve the students in challenging one another (through debates, peer review, and other means), and one can examine their success in applying theories to new phenomena and in explaining away anomalies. The activities chosen for the conclusion of the unit should lend themselves to this kind of assessment.*
An important component of philosophic understanding is an appreciation of the tentative and incomplete nature of all general schemes. One wants to begin with minor anomalies and gradually and sensitively challenge the students' general theory so that they make the theory increasingly sophisticated.	*More challenging than isolated anomalies are completely different schemes for framing our thinking about a topic. If students can be challenged to respond to even one of these in some depth, it will greatly enhance their understanding and appreciation of the dominant scheme.*		