

“A big idea is a concept, theme or issue that gives

oxford big ideas

humanities

meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills.”

(Wiggins & McTighe, Understanding by Design, 2e, 2005)

Helping students learn **how to learn**

Research tells us that students retain information better when that information is connected to major ideas and themes. **big ideas** underpin all disciplines, and can be powerful pedagogical tools to frame methods of enquiry and make sense of seemingly disparate pieces of knowledge. A philosophy of big ideas enables students, over time, to develop deep, transferable understandings and skills.

big ideas help establish learning priorities for students:

- What's most important?
- How does it all fit together?
- What should I really understand?

big ideas foster better, more effective teaching:

- Focus on the disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge that students need most
- Teach ways of thinking that increase students' chances of success
- Organise teaching around a few **big ideas** and revisit those ideas with increasing levels of complexity
- Ongoing assessment for, and as, learning

Thinking

Thinking skills can be developed – they are not innate or finite! Where thinking skills are explicitly taught in conjunction with content, they have a positive effect on students' perceptions of their own strengths and their ability to learn. Flexible thinking optimises learning opportunities and helps students develop real understanding.

Understanding and connecting ideas

Connections, not breadth of coverage, are important. Understanding ultimately derives from making meaningful connections about important topics. By exploring a few big ideas in great depth – not necessarily having the answers – students transcend simple knowledge acquisition and start to develop rich understandings.

Transferring ideas

If students understand, then it follows that they will be able to apply their understanding to new and unfamiliar problems. They will be able to engage in rich dialogue from multiple viewpoints; they will be able to bring critical perspectives to issues and engage in robust debate. Transferable skills are the hallmark of true subject mastery.