Essential Questions: What, Why, and How

Lindsay Williams, Shayna Pond
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Time Frame -60 minutes

Essential Question(s)

- How do Essential Questions promote higher-order thinking and engagement?
- Why are Essential Questions an effective instructional tool?

Summary

Participants will experience a workshop session that provides the fundamentals of Essential Questions. They will then discover how they can use Essential Questions as a focus when lesson planning by creating their own content-specific Essential Questions.

Learning Goals

- Identify the characteristics of Essential Questions.
- Recognize the role of Essential Questions in lesson planning.
- Develop Essential Questions for a lesson.

Standards

Educator Standards 6–12 (6th - 12th)

E.K.1.3: Understand the key academic, financial, social, and cultural expectations associated with college and career readiness to better support students and families in preparing for the transition.
E.S.1: Proactively stay informed about evolving postsecondary education opportunities, admission requirements, and the skills needed for success in diverse career pathways. Attend professional development sessions, network with industry professionals, and explore resources to better support students in aligning their interests and goals with realistic college and career options.
E.K.4: Understand that students' ability to set, plan, and monitor goals varies based on their developmental stages, learning preferences, and unique challenges or strengths.
E.K.6: Recognize that personal and academic goals are interconnected and support students in aligning their academic pursuits with personal interests, values, and long-term aspirations.
E.K.10: Recognize how academic knowledge and skills build progressively from middle school through high school, forming a foundation for success in postsecondary education and career pathways.

InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards (K-12th)

1: The teacher understands how learners grow and develop, recognizing that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas, and designs and implements developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences.
3: The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self motivation.
9: The teacher engages in ongoing professional learning and uses evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice, particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (learners, families, other professionals, and the community), and adapts practice to meet the needs of each learner.

Attachments

- Card Sort Answer Key—Essential Questions.docx
- Card Sort Answer Key—Essential Questions.pdf
- Card Sort Cards—Essential Questions.docx
- Card Sort Cards—Essential Questions.pdf
- Checklist—Essential Questions.docx
- Checklist—Essential Questions.pdf
- Jigsaw Reading—Essential Questions .docx
- Jigsaw Reading—Essential Questions .pdf
- Lesson Slides 1—Essential Questions.pptx
- Lesson Slides 2—Essential Questions.pptx
- T-Chart—Essential Questions.docx
- T-Chart—Essential Questions.pdf
- Types of Essential Questions—Essential Questions.docx
- Types of Essential Questions—Essential Questions.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides #1
- Lesson Slides #2 (Follow-up Activities)
- Card Sort Cards handout (one set per group of 2–3 participants)
- Card Sort Answer Key handout (one copy per group)
- T-Chart Essential Questions handout (one copy for each participant)
- Checklist—Characteristics of Essential Questions handout (one copy for each participant)
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet
- Jigsaw Reading handout

- Types of Essential Questions handout (print double-sided, one per participant)
- Highlighters
- Markers
- Chart paper

25 minutes

Preparation

Prepare the cards for Card Sort in advance. Photocopy enough sets to have one complete set for groups of 2 or 3 participants. Announce to participants that there is a second Card Sort activity in the Extend section that will use the same cards.

10 minutes

Engage

Show **slide 3**. Introduce the Card Sort Activity. Pass out **Card Sort Cards** to groups of 2 or 3. Have participants sort the cards into two different categories based on the instructions on the slide.

As groups are sorting their questions, briefly explain the T-Chart strategy, and distribute the **T-Chart Essential Questions** handout. Each group can record the common characteristics of their two question categories.

Invite groups to discuss the differences between the two types of questions among themselves and come up with a way to summarize the difference between the two types for the other participants.

Show **slide 4** to illustrate the T-Chart Essential Questions handout. Explain where each type of information should be recorded.

When groups have completed their card sorting, verbally confirm with them that they are satisfied with the information they have added to their T-charts. Take a moment to share the session objectives on **slide 5** before moving on to the whole group discussion.

Show **slide 6.** Ask a few groups to share the differences between the two types of questions with the whole group. Review the answers to the card sort activity posted on the slide. Then pass out the **Checklist—Characteristics of Essential Questions** handout.

Show **slide 7**. Review the Characteristics of Essential Questions on the slide. Allow participants to revise their grouping and explanations, if necessary, based on the information it contains.

Tech Note

To facilitate this activity in a digital format, you can use this Google Draw Card Sort template we've created. Open this slide and move items to the appropriate columns.

20 minutes

Explore

Facilitator's Note: Grouping and Reading Access

Count participants off by A, B, C, and D to correspond with the Jigsaw reading assignments. You have several ways to make the selections available to participants:

- Copy the individual sections (each section labeled as a separate document).
- Copy the entire article with all sections included.
- Have participants access the excerpt via the Google Doc link below.

After the discussion of the characteristics, ask participants to read excerpts from the **Jigsaw Reading** handout *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding* to deepen their knowledge regarding topical essential questions, nonessential questions, and metacognitive questions. Distribute copies of each of the individual Jigsaw reading assignments or have participants access the Google Docs version.

Share **slide 8,** which describes the Why-Lighting activity. Pass out highlighters to participants.

Share **slide 9**, which introduces the Jigsaw strategy and describes the assigned reading topics. Each section is labeled with a letter to denote the topic.

Jigsaw Reading Assignments (Photocopy attachments or Link to Google Doc version)

1. **A -** Two Sides of a Coin
2. **B -** Three Connotations of Essential Questions
3. **C -** Size and Scope Matter
4. **D -** Non-essential Questions

As participants read their sections, have them highlight the main ideas and make notes in the margins noting what is important.

When all participants have completed the reading/highlighting activity, have them write a summary of their designated section.

Ask pairs who read the same section to share their Why-Lights and synthesize their ideas into a shared summary statement.

Once summaries have been completed, have groups from each letter assignment share their summaries with the whole group.

Facilitator's Note

Show **slide 10** (hidden slide) if you have a group of at least 16. Consider using the Inverted Pyramid strategy as a way to consolidate and synthesize ideas around the readings. When participants have finished reading their assigned passage, have them find a partner who read the same section. Ask them to share their Why-Lights. After the initial sharing, ask them to form a group of four who read the same section. Ask them to share their ideas in order to expand their understanding. Finish the discussion of the article by having the groups (A, B, C, and D) get together and select a spokesperson to summarize and explain their section to the whole group.

15 minutes

Explain

Once the participants have a clear understanding of essential questions through reading, ask them to reflect on the essential questions. Show **slide 11** to share instructions for the Gist strategy.

- How do Essential Questions promote higher-order thinking and engagement?
- Why are Essential Questions an effective instructional tool?

Ask participants to answer the questions individually by taking into consideration all four parts of the reading as shared to the whole group. Have participants write their summary using only 28 words or fewer.

20 minutes

Extend

Advise participants that the lesson culminates with them writing their own essential questions.

Ask participants to form small groups (3–5) with teachers who teach the same content area. Designate space on a board (if possible) or provide a large sheet of chart paper to each group.

Display **slide 12** and explain that as a group, have participants develop an essential question using a provided topic, or a concept of choice from their content area, (both of which could be based on content standards). Remind participants to use their **Checklist—Characteristics of Essential Questions** as a guide while formulating their questions.

10 minutes

Evaluate

Teacher's Note

Have a checklist posted with each question and ask groups to annotate with tally marks to indicate whether or not that question meets the characteristics.

Display **slide 13**. After everyone has formulated an essential question, ask participants to do a Gallery Walk around the room. Have them read each other's essential questions and anonymously evaluate them according to the Characteristics of Essential Questions criteria.

Display **slide 14** to share research resources.

30 minutes

Follow-up Activities (EXTEND)

Teacher's Note

Photocopy or print the Types of Essential Questions handout, double-sided, one for each participant. Prepare and print cards with a variety of educational standards that would be relevant for your participants, one standard on each card.

If more time is available, continue to expand on the lesson content with an extra Extend activity on Overarching and Topical Essential Questions. Refer to **Lesson Slides #2** for Follow-up Activities.

Show **slide 3**. Before Card Sorting into the general categories of **Overarching** and **Topical** Essential Questions, review definitions from the earlier Jigsaw reading.

Review definitions on **slides 4–5.**

Hand out the **Types of Essential Questions** handout and inform participants that they will be watching a video.

Show **slide 6**. As they watch the video, ask them to complete the table on the first side of their handout. Following the video, discuss how the teacher in the video encouraged inquiry and developed students' critical thinking through the use of *Overarching* and *Topical* EQs.

Show **slide 7**. Have participants flip their handout over to the back side and fill in the table for their own content lesson objective.

Show **slide 8**. Explain the Think-Pair-Share strategy. Ask participants to partner to discuss the video and the strategies used in the video. Explain that essential questions are more than just having preset questions. The teacher in the video listens to student responses and rather than just answering the questions, he prompts more questions, which either leads to further investigations or more responses.

Show **slide 9**. Pass out the printed standard cards based upon the needs and size of your group. For example, if you are working with high school teachers, print a few secondary cards. Or ask teachers to pick a lesson idea they will teach in the future and develop the objective for that lesson.

Pass out sheets of chart paper and markers. Have participants read the lesson objective and develop the Overarching and Topical Essential Questions. Ask each participant to write their questions on the chart paper and hang it on the wall.

This can be done with partners from similar subjects or as a cross-curricular activity.

Have participants walk through the room (Gallery Walk) and discuss each other's questions.

Research Rationale

Using essential questions to guide lesson development and implementation is a proven process that increases academic rigor and deepens understanding (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013). The criteria used to determine whether or not a question is essential could also be a list for what makes a classroom or lesson engaging and one that promotes critical thinking. The criteria include the following:

- open-ended
- thought-provoking
- calls for higher-order thinking and important transferable ideas
- raises additional questions
- requires support and justification
- is recurring

When engaged in learning that extends beyond the four walls of a classroom, students see connections to other subjects, topics, and their own lives. These types of experiences foster authentic learning environments, which have been correlated to higher student achievement (Newmann, King & Carmichael, 2007).

Resources

- Higginbotham, T. (2018, October 23). Essential Questions overview Wiggins and McTighe [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcYsi81PADU
- Keely, P. (2008) *Science formative assessment: 75 practical strategies for linking assessment, instruction, and learning.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Card sort. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/147
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Gallery walk / carousel. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/118
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Inverted pyramid. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/173
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- K20 Center. (n.d.). Think-Pair-Share. Strategy. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/139
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- McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2013). *Essential questions: Opening doors to student understanding*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Newmann, F., King, M., & Carmichael, D. (2007). *Common standards for rigor and relevance in teaching academic subjects.* Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Education.