Clues that Teaching and Learning Might Be Focused on Understanding

Is the curriculum generative?

- Is the unit focused on a single, central topic?
- Is the topic personally significant for both students *and* teachers?
- Are students making connections between what they're doing in the classroom and what they're doing outside of school or in other classes?
- Do students seem genuinely curious about the topic and engaged in their work?

Are understanding goals clear and explicit?

- Are the understanding goals for the unit posted prominently in the classroom?
- Are the understanding goals worded in a way that is accessible to students?
- Do both students and teachers refer to the understanding goals in the course of the lesson and connect their classroom activities to those goals?
- Can students explain what they're learning from what they are doing? Can they say why that learning is important?

Are students working on performances of understanding most of the time?

- Are students being asked to use what they know in new ways? To apply what they know in order to solve new problems or address novel situations?
- Across the unit, do students have the opportunity to build and demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways (for example, writing essays, constructing models, sketching diagrams, etc.)?
- Do all performances help students to develop and demonstrate the understandings articulated in the understanding goals?
- Does the teacher spend most of her/his time coaching, conferencing, leading, participating in discussions (and only occasionally lecturing)?

Is there evidence that ongoing assessment processes are being used?

- Do the students and teacher share responsibility for assessing the work?
- Are students engaged in cycles of drafting, reflecting, critiquing, responding to, and revising their own and others' work?
- Is work assessed according to criteria that are explicit, public, and closely related to the understanding goals?
- Do the students and the teacher engage in assessment spontaneously, casually, and informally as well as more formally?

[Adapted from Lois Hetland's chart on page 105 of *The Teaching for Understanding Guide* (T.Blythe & Associates, 1998, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).]

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