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?