



Learning Point

What is ambitious teaching?

For a long time in the U.S., the prevalent teaching approach was one of transmission: Teachers have knowledge which they transmit to students, who, in turn, receive knowledge as passive learners.

Building on more incremental reforms to standards, college- and career-ready standards (CCRS) have prompted a rethinking of teaching in order to ensure that all students have access to the deep and rigorous learning needed to achieve the CCRS' demanding goals. This rethink —“ambitious teaching”— is grounded in a deep understanding of subject matter, and entails teaching practices that are interactive and discourse-based, and that enable students to engage in sense-making with others about what they are learning. Ambitious teaching also requires that teachers take account of who children are, including their prior experiences inside and outside school, and the funds of knowledge¹ that they bring to the classroom from their families and communities.²



“ In classrooms where ambitious teaching and learning practices have taken hold, students have opportunities to learn deeply, to acquire important inter- and intra-personal skills, and to develop positive identities as learners for the here and now and for the future. ”

Students who have been on the receiving end of a transmission teaching approach may need support to rethink their work as learners, moving from being passive recipients of information to actively involved in the learning process and engaging in the social aspects of learning. They need to learn how to take responsibility for their own learning as well as the learning of their classmates.

In this vein, since the early 2010s or so, broader educational goals have also been advanced with a view to equipping learners with the agency and the competencies to positively support individual and collective well-being in our rapidly and profoundly changing societies. A case in point is a 2018 position paper published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It outlines important goals for today's students, including 1) exercising agency, understood as setting goals and taking actions to achieve them; 2) developing social and emotional skills such as empathy, self-efficacy, and collaboration; and 3) acquiring the

attitudes and values to mediate their knowledge, for example, motivation, trust, and respect for diversity. The goals of CCRS combined with wide-range goals such as the ones proposed by the OECD drive the impetus for ambitious teaching.

A closer look

The chart on the next page takes a closer look at ambitious teaching practices. The first column identifies what students will be doing in a classroom characterized by ambitious teaching. The second column describes what teachers are doing to promote deep and rigorous learning for all students. It will be evident that ambitious teaching practices are at some distance from those exemplified in a transmission approach to teaching. As we can learn from the chart, in classrooms where ambitious teaching and learning practices have taken hold, students have opportunities to learn deeply, to acquire important inter- and intra-personal skills, and to develop positive identities as learners for the here and now and for the future.

¹“Funds of Knowledge” refers to knowledge that is learned at home through interactions with others.

²The variety of funds of knowledge generated by families accumulate over time as their members engage in their daily living within specific communities. Students of all backgrounds bring these accumulated funds of knowledge with them to school.

What are students doing?

Thinking critically and creatively.

Apprenticing to a discipline (e.g., thinking like a scientist, a historian, an artist) and applying the tools of the discipline.

Asking questions, reasoning, solving problems, using understanding in new ways.

Using the knowledge they bring from their lived experiences to support understanding of concepts and analytic practices.

Engaging in discourse with the teacher and with each other to explore disciplinary ideas through reasoning, explaining, analyzing, evaluating, arguing, and justifying.

Building on each other's contributions to create coherent lines of thinking and develop deep, common understanding.

Listening to and respecting each other's funds of knowledge as resources to help them make connections between their lived experiences and what they are learning in school.

Thinking metacognitively.

Adapting learning strategies when needed to move learning forward.

Making decisions about if and how to use feedback.

Developing self-regulated learning processes: setting, monitoring and revising goals.

Learning with and from each other.

Collaborating with peers to develop a shared understanding of important ideas and practices.

Responding positively and constructively to other's ideas.

Offering peer feedback.

What are teachers doing?

Planning activities and tasks in multiple modes that require students to engage with powerful disciplinary ideas and practices.

Scaffolding what is ripening so that student's emerging ideas can develop into mature understanding.

Asking questions that promote reasoning and further thinking and support making connections among ideas.

Drawing on students' funds of knowledge to support sense-making.

Structuring activities for student talk to explore disciplinary ideas.

Asking questions to provoke in-depth discussions.

Listening carefully and steering discussions to help students to clarify, compare, challenge, and defend their various views to one another.

Prompting students to draw on their funds of knowledge.

Scaffolding what is ripening through discourse so that student's emerging ideas can develop into mature understanding.

Creating a shared understanding of learning targets and success criteria to guide learning.

Providing improvement-oriented feedback and giving students time to use it.

Providing opportunities for developing and using skills in self-assessment.

Helping students to set, monitor and revise goals.

Establishing and sustaining interpersonal norms of a collective orientation to learning (e.g., respectful listening, giving others time to think).

Modeling active listening and positive interactions.

Providing opportunities for developing and using skills in self-assessment.

Expressing caring about their students by projecting warmth, and promoting feelings of trust between teacher and students.

References

- Heritage, M. & Wylie, E.C. (2020). *Formative assessment in the disciplines: Framing a continuum of professional Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Shepard, L.A. (Fall, 2021). *Ambitions teaching and equitable assessment: A vision for prioritizing learning not testing*. *American Educator*, 6(7). Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2018). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030*. Paris, France: Author.
- 4 Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.

TO LEARN MORE

Formative Assessment in the Disciplines: Framing a Continuum of Professional Learning, by Margaret Heritage and Caroline Wylie, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. <https://hep.gse.harvard.edu/9781682534663/formative-assessment-in-the-disciplines/>

Ambitions Teaching and Equitable Assessment: A Vision for Prioritizing Learning, Not Testing, by Lorrie A. Shepard. *American Educator*, Fall 2021 www.aft.org/ae/fall2021/shepard

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