

Key Instructional Moves:

Strategies to Promote Transcendent Thinking

Directions for using this tool:

As our educator partners across the country have grappled with how to promote transcendent thinking in their classrooms, tried new things, and learned from them, we have been gathering those insights to share more broadly. You might take inspiration from these educator moves, or come up with your own strategies to test! You don't need to use all three moves, and they are also not necessarily a sequence. You can start with whatever feels most relevant to your work.



Anchor in Big Ideas, Compelling Questions & Multiple Perspectives p.2

Educator Move

Organize learning around questions, problems, and perspectives that are genuinely open-ended, unresolved, and connected to students' lives and the world.

Student Experience

Students engage deeply because the questions feel both real and relevant. This emotional and intellectual investment pushes thinking beyond the immediate task toward broader patterns, systems, and values, which is a hallmark of transcendent thinking.



Embed Meaningful Choice & Voice p.5

Educator Move

Create space for students to make meaningful decisions about their learning and treats students' identities, perspectives, and experiences as legitimate intellectual contributions.

Student Experience

Students feel agency and ownership over their learning. Bringing who they are to academic content is itself a form of intellectual work, and it is precisely this kind of identity-connecting thinking that transcendent thinking asks students to practice.



Integrate Constructive Reflection Prompts p.8

Educator Move

Build in regular, structured opportunities for students to make meaning, connecting what they are learning to their values, identities, and the world beyond the classroom.

Student Experience

Students develop a habit of meaning-making that bridges personal insight, universal questions, and civic issues. Over time, this habit becomes internalized, and students begin asking transcendent questions on their own, without needing to be prompted.



Anchor in Big Ideas, Compelling Questions & Multiple Perspectives

Organizing curriculum around enduring, open-ended questions connects academic work to larger human concerns and students' own values and experiences, fostering sustained interest rooted in both emotional and intellectual engagement. When students grapple with complex questions without single answers, they draw on memory, emotion, prior experience, and their relationships to construct what it all means to them.

EXAMPLE

Choose one core question you'll revisit throughout the learning arc

Use open-ended questions that anchor student inquiry in big ideas. Effective questions have no single correct answer, create productive tension, and require evidence, reasoning, and perspective-taking.

That might sound like:

"To what extent...?"

"Is it fair...?"

"How does ___ affect...?"

"What matters more...?"

"How should we decide...?"

"What is our responsibility to...?"

Arts	Who decides what a work of art means: the artist or the audience?
Humanities	What can stories teach us about how we should live? Should we trust them?
Math	How do we decide which math model best represents a real-world situation?
Sciences	To what extent should humans change the environment to meet our needs?

EXAMPLE

Introduce conflicting perspectives

Begin with a "tension hook," presenting students with two or more credible sources or viewpoints that genuinely disagree. The conflict should be authentic — exposing students to the real complexity, uncertainty, and competing values that make an issue worth investigating.

That might look like:

A forced-choice dilemma

"Would you rather have with maximum freedom or maximum safety?"

A visual or data contradiction

Two graphs showing opposite conclusions from similar data.

An artifact or object prompt

Show a historical artifact and ask: "Progress or exploitation?"

Arts	Emotional vs. technical evaluation; Artist intent vs. audience interpretation
Humanities	Different fictional character perspectives; Primary sources from different groups
Math	Data as objective vs. subjective; Accuracy and limitations of models
Sciences	Different research theories; Economic implications vs. ethical responsibility

EDUCATOR EXAMPLE

LEARNING PLAN

How Free Should We Be?

SUBJECT

U.S. Government

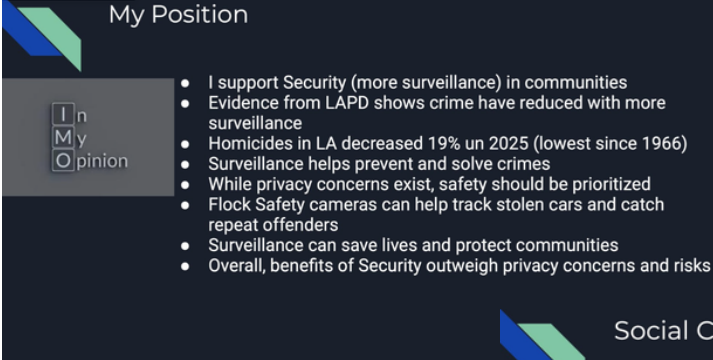
In a high school government class, an extended project is anchored in the big idea of the social contract through this enduring philosophical question: How free should we be? In other words, how do we balance personal freedom with collective security?

Rather than introducing the concept of a social contract simply by providing students with the differing socio-political thoughts of historical figures like Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, students first engage in a brief, fun, self-reflective survey activity that connects this central tension of individualism vs. collectivism real scenarios to their own lives (e.g., airport security, COVID-19 pandemic controls). Then, after they have established meaningful questions to examine, they are provided ideas from Enlightenment thinkers and relevant legal case studies of the U.S. Supreme Court. They digest and debate the differing viewpoints on the issues of each case they study, reflecting on their own evolving perspective in light of the readings and their peers. Then, students thoughtfully choose an issue that interests them to further research and present as a case study for the final culminating activity of this unit.

This sequence allows them to build knowledge while developing evidence-based positions informed by debate and grounded in a personally meaningful inquiry.

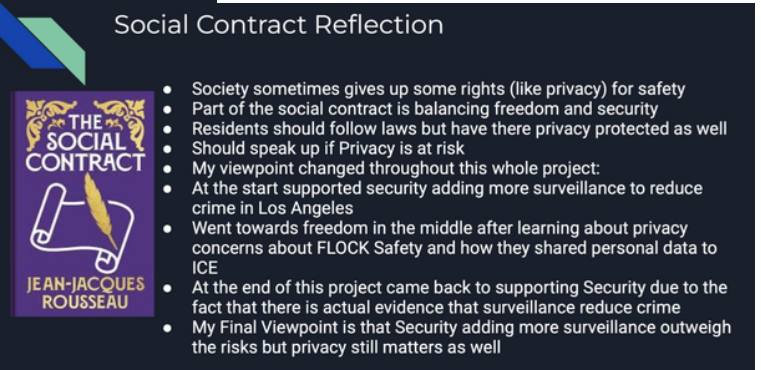
STUDENT WORK

“Should The Government Increase Surveillance in High-Crime Areas?”



My Position

- I support Security (more surveillance) in communities
- Evidence from LAPD shows crime have reduced with more surveillance
- Homicides in LA decreased 19% in 2025 (lowest since 1966)
- Surveillance helps prevent and solve crimes
- While privacy concerns exist, safety should be prioritized
- Flock Safety cameras can help track stolen cars and catch repeat offenders
- Surveillance can save lives and protect communities
- Overall, benefits of Security outweigh privacy concerns and risks



Social Contract Reflection



- Society sometimes gives up some rights (like privacy) for safety
- Part of the social contract is balancing freedom and security
- Residents should follow laws but have their privacy protected as well
- Should speak up if Privacy is at risk
- My viewpoint changed throughout this whole project:
- At the start supported security adding more surveillance to reduce crime in Los Angeles
- Went towards freedom in the middle after learning about privacy concerns about FLOCK Safety and how they shared personal data to ICE
- At the end of this project came back to supporting Security due to the fact that there is actual evidence that surveillance reduce crime
- My Final Viewpoint is that Security adding more surveillance outweigh the risks but privacy still matters as well

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**EDUCATOR EXAMPLE (contd.)****STUDENT WORK****“Financial Censorship & How Payment Processors Affect Online Speech”**

In today’s digital world, many people use online payment systems to support businesses, creators, journalists, and organizations. Financial institutions and payment processors sometimes restrict accounts or block transactions. This is often called financial censorship, and it raises an important debate about the balance between security and freedom of speech online.

Payment processors argue that restricting accounts can be necessary because companies must follow laws that prevent fraud, illegal activity, and funding for harmful organizations. Payment services often monitor transactions to make sure their platforms are not used for money laundering, scams, or criminal activity.

People on the other hand argue that financial censorship can threaten their free speech. Online creators, businesses and organizations often depend on digital payments to fund their work. When a payment processor blocks access to funds, it can stop these groups from making money and posting the content they want. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) says that when payment companies decide who can receive money, they may also influence what ideas people can share online. If a group cannot accept donations or payments, it may not be able to continue its work, even if what it is saying is legal. This can make it harder for these voices to stay active online.

I think payment processors should be allowed to restrict accounts when there is clear evidence of illegal activity or fraud. Rules are important to protect users and prevent financial crimes. However, these companies shouldn’t be able to restrict accounts simply because they disagree with someone’s opinions or viewpoints. Financial censorship is a hard issue to write about because it involves both safety and freedom. Payment processors play a powerful role in the digital economy, and their decisions affect whether organizations and individuals can continue their work online. Finding a balance between protecting security and protecting free expression will be important as the internet continues to grow.



Embed Meaningful Choice & Voice

Meaningful choice and voice give students real ownership over what they study, the questions they pursue, and how they demonstrate their learning. When students' perspectives, questions, and experiences are treated as legitimate intellectual contributions, they are positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients.

EXAMPLE

Creating space for personal connections as intellectual work

As we understand from the research on Transcendent Thinking, personal connection can be much more than a “nice to have” way to build investment, but a legitimate mode of meaning-making. When students connect content to their own lives, identities, communities, and prior knowledge, they are doing intellectual work that deepens and broadens understanding and contributes to creating purpose and identity.

That might look like:

- **Class time reserved** for generating and discussing personal connections (not saved for “if we have time”).
- **Participation grades** that include personal contributions.
- **Assessments** and **rubrics** that explicitly include personal connections.
- **Your own personal connections**, shared to model and create a safe space.
- **Validation** and **feedback** (respond to students, encourage them to respond to each other).

Prompts for eliciting personal connections might sound like:

Entry Invitations	Begin class with a question that draws on lived experience before introducing content. E.g., “When have you been asked to follow a rule you thought was unjust?”
Where I Stand	Have students physically locate themselves on a spectrum in relation to a debate or issue. After the learning, revisit their positions.
Who Taught You That?	When a student shares a belief or assumption, ask them to trace where it came from: a family member, community, personal experience, or previous teacher.
Connection Logs	Ask students to track moments where the content reminds them of something from their life, community, or culture. Then use those connections in discussion.

EDUCATOR EXAMPLE**LEARNING PLAN****Short Story Comparison +
Connections****SUBJECT****English Language Arts**

In a 10th grade ELA class, students complete a culminating project that includes a comparative literary analysis, a personal reflection, and a creative representation with an artist statement. The class is an integrated general education and special education setting, and students are provided a variety of structures and concrete graphic organizers to scaffold, as needed, the different pieces of this project.

Across the unit, the students read at least six stories, and they discuss and debate in small groups and whole class formats the themes of each along the way. They are also asked to reflect on how these stories connect to their own thinking and lives. For the culminating essay, students choose which two stories they want to compare, and are provided latitude in the kind of artistic representation they make, from writing a skit or making a visual art piece (drawing, painting, collage), to creating a poem or musical song. In writing their reflective journals and artist statements, the students are given the options of articulating a connection with the themes of the stories to something personal about who they are, and/or to a larger issue or societal pattern that is important to them.

This structured flexibility and the opportunities for choice allow students to meet appropriately rigorous expectations while shaping the intellectual and expressive direction of their work.

STUDENT WORK**Reflective Journal:**

In September of 2014, I moved from Kosovo to the United States. At this point in my life, I consider myself extremely assimilated and Americanized. I feel American before Kosovar Albanian... I felt deeply represented and understood by The Spaces Between Stars by Geeta Kothari... My family had left behind Islam, left behind speaking Albanian at home, left behind friends and family, and adapted to doing things like watching the Super Bowl, celebrating Christmas and Thanksgiving, and so much more. I think it's fair to say that no one was completely comfortable with this newfound culture, but we felt forced to adapt to it, and fit in...we stopped celebrating Eid, and Ramadan. From my experience, I wish I kept more of my culture, and I think more representation of other cultures is necessary. People like Maya and my parents shouldn't be forced to do things their not used to. A country created out of Western colonization shouldn't enforce these same Western values on less privileged groups of people.

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**EDUCATOR EXAMPLE (contd.)****STUDENT WORK****Artist Statement:**

My creative element is a drawing of a figure angrily looking at, and judging animals in a cage it's holding... The animals, all being native to China, are representative of Chinese culture... The figure has an element of fear in its face, where it obviously has power over the caged animals, but it also seems scared of them. This is significant because it expresses how American assimilation is prominent because Americans have a lack of understanding of other cultures. This element of fear is inspired by the statement "We fear what we don't understand".





Integrate Constructive Reflection Prompts

Reflection is often treated as a superficial wrap-up, focused on recalling what was learned rather than making meaning. This move reframes reflection as an ongoing habit in which students examine their own thinking by identifying patterns, asking deeper questions, considering implications, and engaging with their emotional responses to learning. When embedded across lessons and units, these activities help students bridge personal insights, universal questions, and civic issues, encouraging them to consider both “What does this mean to me?” and “What does this mean for us?”

EXAMPLE

Use Transcendent Thinking Routines

Transcendent Thinking Routines are brief, repeatable prompts that students use consistently, not as a one-time debrief but as a regular cognitive habit. Over time, students stop needing to be prompted and begin asking transcendent questions on their own.

- **Keep them short and frequent:** 2–5 minutes, used across subjects, visually displayed so students internalize the structure.
- **Model responses out loud:** Teachers should share their own responses first, demonstrating that transcendent thinking is an adult practice, not just a student exercise.
- **Use across formats:** Responses don’t always need to be shared publicly; private journaling is often where the most honest transcendent thinking happens.

That might look like:

The Ladder

Moves students from concrete to abstract in three steps.

1. Here and Now: “What happened / what did we learn?”
2. Stepping Up: “Why does this matter? Who is affected?”
3. Above and Beyond: “What does this reveal about how the world works? What does it mean for who I want to be?”

Head, Heart, World

A short three-part prompt at the end of any lesson.

1. Head: “What is the most important idea from today?”
2. Heart: “What did you feel strongly about (positively or negatively)?”
3. World: “Where do you see this idea playing out beyond this classroom?”

Emotional Barometer

Prompts feeling as a form of cognitive engagement.

1. The Emotion: “Name an emotion the content brought up.”
2. The Why: “Say one sentence about you felt that way.”
3. The Connection: “Based on that, what would you next ask, act on, investigate, or express?”

Process Perspective

Students reflect on the experience of their own learning.

1. Recall: “What did you do in today’s class?”
2. Reflect: “What was that like for you? How did it feel?”
3. React: “What might that tell you about yourself as a learner? As a person?”

EDUCATOR EXAMPLE**LEARNING PLAN****Mathematical Modeling for Climate Data****SUBJECT****Algebra**

In an 11th grade advanced algebra (pre-calculus) class, students complete a multi-week project focused on the application of functions for mathematical modeling with real-life data to address the debate about impacts of climate change.

The students start by watching clips with differing views on the facts of issues at the heart of climate change, including reviewing substantiated claims from data trends. They write an initial reflection entry making meaning of what they are seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling. They then pursue various mathematical calculations using available datasets (e.g., global and local carbon dioxide emission and temperature trends) to build their own models. The students reflect in another journal entry on how the math content they are learning is informing their view on the issue of climate change before presenting their case to their teacher with evidence from their models. In parallel, they are also supported in engaging in a related community volunteer activity that affords them the chance to talk about these issues and what they are learning with people outside the school context. From these experiences, the students summarize their insights in a letter to a local elected official that is rooted in their math analysis as well as their volunteering and that offers some recommendations around approaching the climate change issue from a local perspective.

The project concludes with students writing a culminating reflection piece about what mattered to them about this project, how they think about the power of mathematical modeling, and what it felt like to engage in civic action.

STUDENT WORK**Initial Reflection:**

- This experience teaches me how the circumstances can influence people to believe what they feel is true. **Emotions can create bias and lead people to cherry-picking sources that support their beliefs.** Even if objective evidence is presented, not everybody will accept it as the cold truth.
- We all have a responsibility to do **thorough research to break down overwhelming issues. With research, we can move on to appropriate actions to tackle the issue** since we now have a better understanding of it.

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EDUCATOR EXAMPLE (contd.)

STUDENT WORK

Climate Change Report:

- After examining all three scatter plots, I see clear connections: as technology advanced and industries thrived, the global population increased rapidly, leading to higher CO2 emissions. **The data sets support this narrative. The rising trendlines in the scatter plots correspond closely**, and the accompanying bar graph further reinforces this correlation.
- I completed after each documentary or scatterplot. While doing them, I had to ponder about climate change in general, how the documentaries emotionally affected me, and how the math I did connected to the issue. **Taking the time to pause and reflect helped me organize my thoughts and process my feelings about climate change**, especially now that I had a deeper understanding of its severity

Final Reflection:

- If numbers cannot easily sway them, then other methods are needed to convince them, **such as allowing these people to see the consequences for themselves, or hear anecdotes of other people in the crisis.**
- My understanding of my own voice and power in society changed after writing to a real decision-maker when I realized that even if I am just one single voice, **I went from being a silent and passive citizen to an active and participating one that raised concern over an issue that matters to my community**