

Student “Look Fors”: Evidence and Coaching Prompts for Transcendent Thinking

What does Transcendent Thinking look like?

Transcendent thinking has two essential elements, (1) abstraction beyond the immediate and (2) emotional engagement with subject matter and ideas. When these two elements are present, students’ transcendent thinking can take many forms. The following tool dives deeper into those possible forms of thinking, what you might see as evidence, and how you can both invite it and deepen it with students.

That might look like...

Exploration of Significance (p.2)

Students interpret significance, implications, or lessons, asking “why this matters” as well as “what it is.”

Connection to Identity and Values (p.3)

Students relate what they are learning to who they are, what they care about, and what they believe is important or right.

Future-Oriented Thinking (p.4)

Students consider consequences, possibilities, responsibilities, or imagined futures for themselves or the broader world.

Integration Across Contexts (p.5)

Students connect ideas and information across disciplines, time periods, situations, or perspectives rather than treating knowledge as isolated.

Directions for using this tool:

This tool is meant to support educators in recognizing and deepening transcendent thinking as it emerges in student work and conversation. Use it during planning, observation, or reflection. Prompts are starting points, not scripts!

LOOK FOR...

Exploration of Significance

Students interpret significance, implications, or lessons, asking "why this matters" as well as "what it is."

What you might see or hear from students:

Notes:

Shifting between describing what something is and explaining why it matters

E.g., "So the law changed in 1964, but what matters is that it only changed because enough people made it impossible to ignore anymore. That's the real lesson."

Articulating implications or consequences beyond the immediate context

E.g., "If this becomes normal, I think it changes what people expect from each other. It's not just about this situation, it shifts what the standard is."

Making value judgments and defending them with reasoning

E.g., "I think the scientist made the wrong call, even if the outcome was good. You can't just decide the ends justify the means, because then anyone can justify anything."

Asking questions about stakes: "Who is affected?" "What changes if this is true?"

E.g., "Who actually benefits from this, though? Because from what I can tell, it's not the people it was supposed to help."

Connecting ideas and learning experiences to their own self-concept

E.g., "I've never organized a book club before. I see myself as a leader now. I've started taking on more important roles in other places too, like with my soccer team."



When you see it, deepen it:

Ask for evidence.

"You said this is important, now convince me. What's your evidence?"

Ask them to describe emotions.

"I can see your passion for this issue. Can you describe what you're feeling?"

Ask them to think through the impact.

"Now, who benefits or loses from this? Who else should care, and why?"



When you don't, invite it:

Build on understanding.

"Good, you've explained what it is. Now make the case for why it matters."

Prompt them to engage emotions.

"How should we feel about this? Surprised, excited, worried? Why?"

Try perspective-taking.

"What lesson should other people take from this information?"

LOOK FOR...

Connection to Identity and Values

Students relate what they are learning to who they are, what they care about, and what they believe is important or right.

What you might see or hear from students:

Notes:

Explicitly naming a personal value while discussing content

E.g., "I've always believed people deserve second chances, so I think this character should forgive their friend and let them prove themselves."

Describing how content relates to their own background or experience

E.g., "I don't think this report is fair, it's written by an adult who hasn't had a good experience with video games, but that's not what it's like for me at all."

Reconsidering or affirming a belief because of new learning

E.g., "I used to think that, but now I'm not so sure. This kind of changed how I see it."

Positioning themselves within a larger group or identity

E.g., "Disabled people shouldn't have to explain that all the time, we want people to educate themselves."

Expressing a personal stake or commitment tied to the content

E.g., "As someone who wants to go into medicine, this is something I would never do."



When you see it, deepen it:

Ask them to trace the origin.

"Where does that idea or value come from for you?"

Push toward action or commitment.

"Now that you see it this way, what would you actually do differently?"

Invite complexity.

"Does everyone who shares your values see this the same way? Why or why not?"

When you don't, invite it:

Ask directly.

"Does this connect to anything you personally care about?"

Offer an entry point.

"Who are you in this story, or who could you imagine being?"

Try a values lens.

"What would someone who believes _____ think about this?"

LOOK FOR...

Future-Oriented Thinking

Students consider consequences, possibilities, responsibilities, or imagined futures for themselves or the broader world.

What you might see or hear from students:

Notes:

Projecting forward to imagine outcomes or consequences

E.g., "If they keep ignoring it, eventually there's not going to be a way to undo the damage."

Naming a responsibility they or others hold going forward

E.g., "I feel like it's on my generation to actually fix this, since we're the ones inheriting it."

Imagining alternative or possible futures

E.g., "There are a few ways this could go. One version is way better than the other, and it's going to depend on how well they communicate."

Connecting current choices to future selves or goals

E.g., "The way I handle this now is probably going to matter later, like when I actually have a job and people are depending on me."

Asking what should happen next, not just what did happen

E.g., "So in the past, it's always ended badly. Next time, how can we not fall into the same trap?"



When you see it, deepen it:

Ask for specifics.

*"What would that future actually look like?
Walk me through it."*

Push on responsibility.

"Whose job is it to make that happen?"

Compare possible paths.

"What's the alternative future, if things go differently?"

When you don't, invite it:

Ask them to project forward.

"What do you think might happen next?"

Connect to their own future.

"How might this matter to you five or ten years from now?"

Prompt imagination.

"What would you picture as the best possible outcome of this situation?"

LOOK FOR...

Integration Across Contexts

Students connect ideas and information across disciplines, time periods, situations, or perspectives rather than treating knowledge as isolated.

What you might see or hear from students:

Notes:

Drawing parallels between current content and prior learning in another subject

E.g., "This is kind of like what we studied in science, when one small change throws off the whole system. It's the same idea here, just with people instead of chemicals."

Referencing patterns across different time periods or historical moments

E.g., "This happened before, just in a different decade with a different name. The pattern keeps repeating."

Applying a concept learned in one context to a completely different situation

E.g., "We studied momentum in science, but I think ideas can have momentum too. Once enough people believe something, it's really hard to stop."

Noticing when ideas from different sources conflict or complement each other

E.g., "The article says one thing, but what we read last week kind of contradicts it. I'm not sure which framework actually fits better here."

Considering multiple perspectives or disciplines to explain a single event or idea

E.g., "You could look at this as a political issue, but it's also an economic one, and honestly a personal one too, depending on who you ask."



When you see it, deepen it:

Ask them to name the connection explicitly.

"You're linking this to something else. Can you say exactly what the throughline is?"

Push toward a new context.

"Where else might this same pattern show up, somewhere we haven't talked about yet?"



When you don't, invite it:

Offer a bridge.

"Does this remind you of anything we've studied before, in this class or another one?"

Name two contexts and ask for a link.

"How might this connect to [other subject or time period]? What similarities do you see?"

Reflection

1. **What kinds of transcendent thinking** do you see (or, hope to see) in your students' work?

2. What might that look like? Write some **examples**.

3. What **coaching prompts** can you use to deepen or invite students' transcendent thinking in this learning experience?