

Teaching Foundations for Transcendent Thinking: Educator Self-Assessment

Each element in Teaching Foundations creates the container for students to engage in transcendent thinking, the kind of deep meaning-making that supports long-term academic, social, emotional, and identity development.. Each includes a description of how it supports transcendent thinking in students and what to look for in practice.

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Directions for using this tool:

Use the rubric on the following pages to self-assess the foundational teaching elements of your chosen unit, lesson, or project. Then use the reflection prompts to identify strengths and next steps.

A. Authentic Tasks

Inquiry- and Performance-Based Tasks with "Low Floor, High Ceiling"

Emerging Foundation	Growing Foundation	Strong Foundation	Students' Experience
• Tasks emphasize recall, completion, or single correct answers • Students follow prescribed steps with little autonomy or choice • Opportunities for extended thinking or creation are minimal and/or not be accessible across diverse learners • Differentiation lowers rigor rather than expanding access	• Tasks include some inquiry or performance components • Students have some choice in topics, approaches, or products • Opportunities for extended thinking or creation appear periodically and/or for only some learners • Some access points are provided, though depth may vary widely	• Tasks are consistently inquiry- and performance-based, with multiple valid solutions or conclusions • Students have meaningful agency over how they investigate, create, and demonstrate understanding • Extended thinking and original work are central, not optional, to the task design • Multiple entry points ensure access for all learners, while scaffolds maintain (rather than reduce) rigor	

When students move from following prescribed steps to sustained investigation with genuine intellectual stakes, they develop the capacity for creative, nuanced, transferable thinking.

Look for students making real choices, marshaling evidence across sources, and pushing their own thinking further than the task requires, not just completing it.

Notes:

B. Ambitious Content and Skills

Complex, Emotionally Resonant Content Paired with Rigorous Skill-Building

Emerging Foundation	Growing Foundation	Strong Foundation	 Students' Experience
• Content is oversimplified or decontextualized, without emotional engagement • Skills are taught in isolation, without meaningful application • Students encounter limited perspectives or real-world complexity • Little connection to students' emotions, identities, or lived experiences	• Content is grade-level and sometimes includes an emotional “hook” • Skills are applied in context at least some of the time • Students encounter multiple perspectives or real-world connections periodically • Some attention to students' emotions, identities, or lived experiences	• Content is consistently complex and authentic, engaging students' emotions about ideas • Rigorous skill-building is embedded in meaningful, intellectually demanding work • Students regularly grapple with multiple perspectives, ambiguity, and real-world issues • Learning connects explicitly to students' emotions, identities, and lived experiences	<i>When content is complex, emotionally resonant, and personally meaningful, learning stops being something that happens to students and starts being something they invest in.</i> <i>Look for students connecting the content to their own experiences and identities and to how they understand the larger world, expressing genuine curiosity or even discomfort, and doing the hard work of analysis and synthesis because the ideas actually matter to them.</i>
Notes:			

C. Purposeful Collaboration

Balanced Individual and Collaborative Activities to Engage and Deepen Thinking

Emerging Foundation	Growing Foundation	Strong Foundation	Students' Experience
• Learning is almost completely individual OR group-based, without clear purpose or balance • Collaboration lacks structure, intellectual accountability, or depth • Little attention to how collaboration leverages and supports social development • Individual work is just for students who aren't successful in groups	• Learning includes both individual and collaborative activities • Collaboration has some structure, though depth and purpose vary • Some attention to how collaboration leverages and supports social development • Individual work is largely for the teacher to assess students' ideas and skills	• Learning intentionally cycles between individual work, collaboration, and reflection • Collaboration is structured for intellectual depth, not just task division • Collaborative experiences thoughtfully leverage and support social development alongside academic growth • Individual work holds students accountable for developing their own ideas and skills	<i>Transcendent thinking is shaped not only by what students know, but by who they understand themselves to be. Cycling intentionally between independent thinking, collaborative dialogue, and reflection gives students the experience of constructing their own ideas and then testing and deepening them with others. In addition, teens are intensely social, and are developmentally fueled by working and interacting with others.</i> <i>Look for students maintaining and defending their own thinking in group settings, listening to understand multiple perspectives, adjusting their views based on evidence rather than social pressure, and walking away from collaborative experiences with strengthened relationships and a clearer sense of their identities as thinkers and contributors.</i>
Notes:			

D. Varied Assessment and Developmental Feedback

Ongoing, Varied Assessment Paired with Specific, Growth-Oriented Feedback

Emerging Foundation	Growing Foundation	Strong Foundation	Students' Experience
- Assessment is primarily summative, with limited formative insight - Feedback is infrequent, generic, or narrowly focused on correctness and compliance - Student thinking processes and emotions are rarely visible or examined - Students are passive recipients of feedback with little agency over next steps	- Assessment includes some formative and summative components - Feedback is given regularly and helps students improve the quality of their work - Student thinking processes and emotions are sometimes surfaced and examined - Students act on feedback to adjust their approach	- Varied, ongoing assessments (formal and informal) reveal student thinking in real time - Feedback is specific, timely, and actionable, focused on students' developing thinking, dispositions, identity, and future growth - Student thinking processes and emotions about ideas are consistently visible, examined, and responded to - Students develop agency and self-direction, monitoring their own growth as learners	<i>Assessment reveals what students know, but it also influences how they see themselves as learners. When teachers use a range of informal and formal assessments to understand how students are thinking and feeling, and pair that with feedback that gives students a specific, actionable next step, they position learning as a developmental process rather than a series of verdicts.</i> <i>Look for students articulating where they are in their thinking, what they are working toward, and how they plan to get there, treating struggle as information rather than failure.</i>
Notes:			

Reflection

1. Where is your unit/lesson/project currently **strongest** across these elements?
2. Where is the most **opportunity for growth**, within your locus of control?
3. What might you **see in your students' work** that tells you transcendent thinking is (or isn't) happening?