



The InTA Signature Planning Tool

Designing Teaching Around Fundamental Understandings

Putting learning back at the center without increasing mental load

Why This Resource?

Being a teacher today has become deeply demanding. It is no longer just about delivering a subject, but managing a constant mental load:

- accumulating tasks,
- numerous institutional initiatives,
- less time,
- and students with increasingly complex needs.

In such a context, it's natural to invest energy in what's visible: activities, materials, lesson plans, and tools.

We try to explain better.

To vary tasks.

To fine-tune documents.

All of this is useful.

But it is not what guarantees learning on its own.

What students truly retain does not depend on the number of activities, but on what they deeply understand.

WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE IS THE UNDERSTANDINGS THEY BUILD.

In other words, it's not so much what the teacher does that matters, but what the student manages to grasp and retain over time.

Designing teaching around fundamental understandings helps shift the focus.

From: "What am I going to do in class?"

To: "What do my students truly need to understand?"

THIS SHIFT IS ESSENTIAL.

As McTighe and Wiggins remind us, a common trap is to think first in terms of teaching: planned activities, materials, lesson flow.

Yet, the key issue lies elsewhere:
on the side of learning—
what the student truly needs to build durable,
transferable, and meaningful understanding.

Fundamental understandings serve exactly that purpose.
They provide a clear direction for teaching.
They guide decisions.
They avoid overload.

And most importantly, they refocus educational work on what matters:
the meaning students construct through what they learn.

How to Use This Resource

You don't have to do it all:

- Read the text if you need perspective and meaning
- Use the infographics to keep the essentials in mind
- Watch the videos for further clarification
- Use the checklist when concretely planning

Take what helps now. The rest can wait.

What Are Fundamental Understandings?

A fundamental understanding is not:

- An activity
- A list of concepts
- A procedure to follow
- A lesson objective

It is a key idea full of meaning, which helps students understand:

- Why things work the way they do
- What relationships exist between concepts
- How to transfer this understanding to new contexts

Fundamental understandings are like a pedagogical compass: they guide the choice of tasks, language, assessment, and sequencing— without multiplying requirements.

Effects on Student Learning

When teaching is built around fundamental understandings:

- **Learning becomes deeper**
Students learn to connect, explain, interpret, and justify, rather than memorize or apply mechanically.
- **Learning becomes more durable**
Students retain core principles and structuring ideas, not isolated facts quickly forgotten.
- **Transfer becomes possible**
Students can use what they understood in new situations, both in the same subject and across disciplines.
- **Language becomes a tool for thinking**
Students demonstrate understanding through explanation, argument, comparison, and reflection—not just by giving the right answer.

Effects on Teaching

Designing from fundamental understandings also allows you to:

- Clarify pedagogical choices
- Avoid activity overload
- Better align objectives, tasks, and evaluations
- Reduce mental load before and during class

When understanding is clear, everything else becomes simpler.

Visualize the Essentials

This visual emphasizes a key principle of evidence-based pedagogy: clarity of learning goals.

Knowing precisely what students should know and be able to do by the end of a lesson is a powerful lever to support their learning.

EVIDENCE-BASED TEACHING STRATEGIES

Ensure clear Lesson Goals

(Australian Institute of Teaching and Leadership)

It is crucial that you are clear about what you want your students **to know** and **to be able to do** throughout each lesson (not only at the beginning).

The effect of such clarity has on student results is **32% greater than** the effect of holding high expectations for every student.



Champion high-quality teaching and learning for all



Go Further (Optional)

To go deeper or learn how to formulate fundamental understandings concretely, this video offers further explanation and examples:

 [Watch the video](#)

Take Action: The Checklist

Ready to try? This checklist guides you step-by-step in formulating strong fundamental understandings:

 [Download the checklist](#)


It helps verify that your understandings truly support learning.

1. Start From Learning (Not Activities)

- Have I stated what students should understand, not just what they'll do?
- Is it an idea beyond a single task, exercise, or lesson?
- Would this understanding still be relevant after the unit?

2. Go Beyond Facts and Procedures

- Does it begin with "Students understand that...?"
- Does it avoid listing concepts, rules, or steps?
- Does it highlight a meaningful idea, principle, or relationship?

 "Students know that..."

 "Students understand that..."

3. Check for Depth

- Does it help students explain why something works?
- Does it require thinking, interpreting, or connecting ideas?
- Could it lead to discussion, justification, or nuance?

If the answer can be recited, the understanding is not yet deep enough.

4. Test Transferability

- Can it be applied in another context or task?
- Does it apply beyond a specific example?
- Does it help students link with other situations or subjects?

5. Confirm It Can Be Expressed Through Language

- Can students explain, argue, compare, or justify this understanding?
- Does it support high-level thinking tasks (analyse, evaluate, create)?
- Is language used as a thinking tool, not just a form to produce?

6. Craft the Wording Carefully

- Is it stated in one clear, readable sentence?
- Does it contain one strong idea without overloading?
- Is it understandable when rephrased at the students' level?

7. Check for Pedagogical Alignment

- Do planned activities truly lead to this understanding?
- Do assessments require students to use it—not just recall?
- Does this understanding guide my choices, not the other way around?

8. “Teacher Mental Load” Test

- Does this help me make clearer decisions?
- Does it help me know what to keep or drop?
- Does it simplify my planning instead of complicating it?

Final Validation Question

🍀 If my students remember only one thing from this unit in a year, is it this?

If the answer is yes, the understanding is strong.

InTA Anchoring

Learning is not primarily about doing or producing.

Learning is understanding.

At InTA, we begin with meaning before form,
understanding before production.

Fundamental understandings help structure that path:
they clarify what students must truly understand
and guide pedagogical choices without adding to mental load.