

Introduction & Theoretical Foundation

Do students perceive what they are studying to be relevant or valuable? Is the student able to connect course material to personal interests and professional aspirations (Blais, 2015)? According to Taylor, one of the reasons students leave college is due to a lack of relevance (Taylor, 2010). Learning activities that help students identify the relevance and connections between what they are learning and their personal goals and curiosities are needed in curriculum.

One such activity noted by Bain (2012) is the use of essential questions. Bain noted that students who found relevance and transferred learning across contexts were able to do so because they were seeking in-depth answers to their own questions, challenges or problems (2012). Unlike other problem-based methodologies where students are given a question or problem to address, essential questions are created by students and based on their own curiosity. We have incorporated essential question activities in the following undergraduate business and communications courses: human relations, professional and personal communications and public speaking.

In this session we will share what we have learned about how essential questions help students find relevance and make connections between coursework and co-curricular activities on and off campus. We will also outline the process used with students and incorporate it in this session with participants.

The following “Using Student-Constructed Essential Questions in the Classroom” will provide background on our work with students followed by the session learning objectives and description of the activity for MOBTS participants.

Using Student-Constructed Essential Questions in the Classroom

Students are accustomed to answering questions provided by instructors or a textbook rather than crafting questions themselves, much less questions that will spark curiosity and help them think more broadly about their business courses and college experiences. Therefore, more time up front is required to help students develop an essential question that is meaningful to them and one that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no response. To do this, we recommend dedicating 30-45 minutes of class time to discuss the rationale and purpose of essential questions, characteristics of essential questions and why they can be useful to students. An area of research that can be shared with students is how the ability to make connections contributes to creativity and innovation which is valued by businesses.

According to McTighe & Wiggins (2013), there are seven defining characteristics of a good essential question. An essential question is:

1. Open-ended; that is, it typically will not have a single, final and correct answer.
2. Thought-provoking and intellectually engaging, often sparking discussion and debate.
3. Calls for higher-order thinking, such as analysis, inference, evaluation, prediction. It cannot be effectively answered by recall alone.
4. Points toward important, transferable ideas within and across disciplines.
5. Raises additional questions and sparks further inquiry.
6. Requires support and justification, not just an answer.
7. Recurs over time; that is, the question can and should be revisited again and again.

What we have found is business students often design questions that focus on their current major or intended career which is definitely acceptable as long as the design of the question meets the criteria outlined above. For example, a student might craft this question: What is the path to obtaining a marketing job? Although this question might not have one single answer (characteristic #1) since there may be multiple paths to a career, it does not contain many of the other characteristics of an essential question such as thought-provoking (#2), or requires higher-order thinking (#3). Instead an alternative question which would fit more of the criteria might be “what does it mean to be a marketing professional? This version is more open-ended and includes room for more analysis, interpretation and inquiry.

Students at first may feel overwhelmed when trying to craft an essential question that meets all of the criteria. Therefore, it is important that the instructor dedicate at least half of this time to circulating around the classroom to assist students. If the class size makes it difficult to assist each student in the allotted time frame, another helpful strategy is to have students pair up with a partner for feedback and assistance. Instructions are given to the partner to listen to the essential question and identify which criteria are met to determine if the question is essential. We also recommend that the instructor collect each student’s question after class to allow for additional feedback.

Once students have designed an essential question that is meaningful to them, it is important that they find ways to revisit the question on a regular basis. We instruct students to consider posting the question somewhere in their residence where they will see it on a daily basis, or including it in the background on their desktop computer.

As a way to provide structured time for students to answer their essential questions, two guided reflection activities are used in class, one at the semester midpoint and the second at the end of the semester. Both activities are the same, first asking students to list their current courses and then reflect on and articulate any connections between their coursework and answers to their

essential question. Then, upon completing that portion of the activity, students reflect on and articulate connections to their essential question based on outside activities (e.g. work/internships, dorm/home life, interactions on-campus with clubs or friends/family, etc.).

In completing these reflective activities, students should be able to articulate answers to their essential question as well as make connections between academic (business courses, and other) and co-curricular experiences. Students may understand how one business course connects to and builds upon others, as well as how knowledge and skills learned within disciplines and within co-curricular experiences are transferable and relevant to their future career and life. Additionally, students should have a greater appreciation for required, non-business courses and the benefits of searching for connections to other courses and experiences in terms of their personal and professional development.

Session Learning Objectives:

1. Participants will learn how to utilize student constructed essential questions in their courses.
2. Participants will understand the value and challenges related to using this type of activity.
3. Participants will construct their own essential question and receive feedback from the presenters and others in the session.
4. Participants will leave with ideas as to how they can incorporate this activity into various courses.

Exercise Overview:

The student-centered essential question exercises highlighted in the above sections will be replicated with participants in this session. Namely, we will provide background information regarding the value of essential questions, we will guide participants in constructing essential questions, and we will share debriefing and reflective activities.

Session Description

- 1.. We will first provide an informal overview of our backgrounds so participants understand our interest in incorporating student constructed essential questions in course activities: 5 minutes

2. We will explain our process in collaborating with other staff and faculty on our campus in order to discover where to best align (courses) essential question construction and reflection activities: 10 minutes

3. We will share the background of essential question activities and provide guidelines and examples in order for our participants to construct their own essential questions. In having participants do this as an exercise, they will observe our coaching styles and experience what a student would experience. There will also be time to exchange ideas and questions. This is meant to be a lively interactive exchange among all participants and the presenters, as opposed to a structured question and answer period: 30 minutes

4. During the above timeframe, we will also share examples of student work such as their connections made in their reflections.

5. We will finish by having participants discuss their ideas for how they could incorporate this work into their own curriculum, with time to receive feedback from others: 15 minutes

References

Bain, Ken (2012). *What the Best College Students Do*. The Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Blais, Christine C., (2015). *The Art of the Individualized Learning Plan: A Case Study (dissertation)*

Taylor, Mark C., (2010). *Crisis on campus: a bold plan for reforming our colleges and universities*. Random House, Inc., New York

