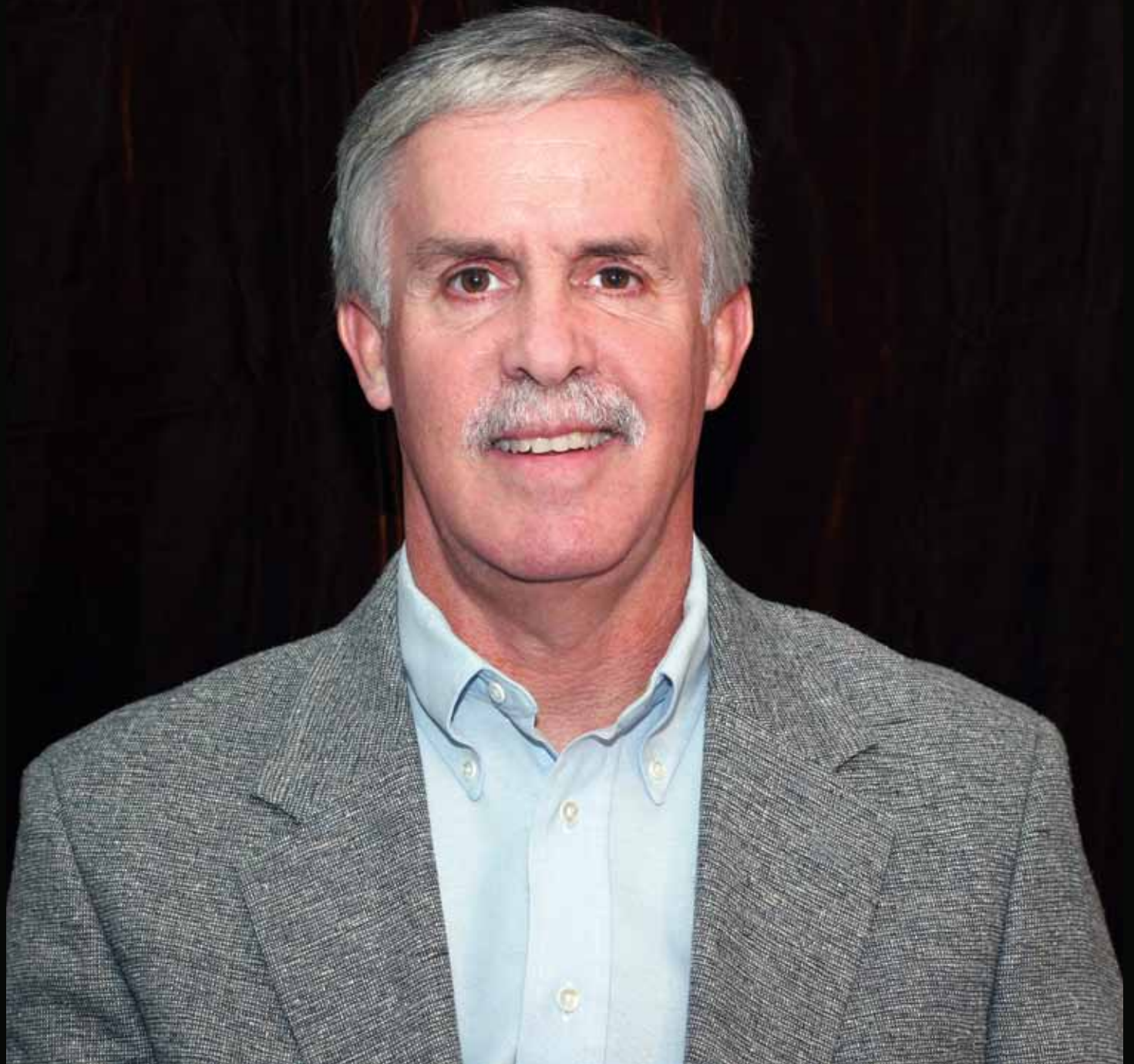


The role of  
**CORNERSTONE  
TASKS**

**in the next generation of theatre standards**

**An interview with assessment expert Jay McTighe**



BY JAMES PALMARINI

JAY MCTIGHE and colleague Grant Wiggins are two of the most respected assessment experts working in education today. In their influential book, *Understanding by Design*, McTighe and Wiggins explain their widely embraced approach to curriculum building. The UbD model suggests a “backward design” strategy for creating a curriculum and assessments with performance ends in mind. Their three-stage planning process begins by first specifying desired knowledge, skills, and understanding; then, identifying the assessments that will provide evidence of achieving those results; and finally, developing the needed instruction and learning activities. The foundation of their system includes cornerstones tasks and their sub parts: essential questions and enduring understandings. Cornerstone tasks focus on what we want learners to be able to do with the knowledge and skills that they have acquired. The enduring understandings and companion essential questions provide the overarching framework for the tasks. The enduring understandings highlight what expert performers understand, while the essential questions help to cultivate those understandings in our students.

McTighe, along with his wife Daisy, has been working as a consultant for the Next Generation Arts Project, the initiative to re-write the 1994 National Standards for Arts Education. The project is being sponsored by the National Coalition of Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), eight groups including all the major arts education organizations, as well as the Washington D.C.-based Arts Education Partnership, the College Board, and the State Arts Agency

Directors of Arts Education, the Educational Theatre Association, along with the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, is managing the theatre standards writing team. Writing teams in dance, media arts, music, and visual arts are currently creating standards



drafts for their disciplines. To learn more about the project, visit [nccas.wikispaces.com](http://nccas.wikispaces.com).

In a recent phone interview, McTighe offered a detailed overview of cornerstone tasks and enduring understandings and essential questions and how they might help shape the new arts standards. Full disclosure: besides being editor of this journal, I also serve as EdTA’s director of educational policy and as a member of National Coalition of Core Arts Standards leadership committee.

Here’s what McTighe had to say.

*Could you talk about how you and Grant Wiggins formulated the cornerstone tasks approach to assessment?*

**MCTIGHE:** The idea of the cornerstone tasks came in large part due to the emergence of high-stakes accountability testing that has gripped the nation over the last decade as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Because of the extreme pressures that administrators and teachers feel to continually raise test scores in the tested subjects, educators have increasingly focused on teaching the tested content and engaging in focused “test prep.” There are several well-documented impacts of this accountability high stakes testing: One is that those subjects that are not tested are getting less and less attention in the classroom and fewer resources in the school. I have observed a second phenomena around the nation—because most standardized tests use a multiple-choice format, there is a tendency for educators to fixate on that format and engage in what I refer to as “multiple choice teaching” with a focus on single, correct answers. A related tendency involves the growing use of benchmark or interim assessments that mimic the format of state tests. Whether these are developed by school districts or purchased as off the shelf products as formative assessment, Grant Wiggins and I think that their use

reflects a misconception regarding test scores and how to improve them. That is, the belief that the best way to get the scores up is to “practice” the test. This practice confuses the measures with the goals. It would be like practicing for your physical exam in order to improve your health. We chose the name, cornerstone tasks, to distinguish these kinds of tasks from benchmark, practice tests. Cornerstone tasks are decidedly more authentic and contextualized than multiple choice tests. Moreover, they should reflect important performances we most value, not just those things that are easy to test on a large scale. Of course, such authentic performance is the norm in the arts



and the other subjects should learn from them.

*Do you think there is still value in formative tests?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, but there's a distinction that I would like to note. In the academic areas, the benchmark or interim assessments that are meant to be formative are often way too narrow, focusing on de-contextualized testing of discrete knowledge and skills. Clearly there is a time and place for working on specific skills and assessing those. However, we don't want to lose sight of the reason we're teaching these skills, which is to enable the meaningful performances we're after. To use an athletic analogy, we need to distinguish between the game and the drills we use in practice. So for me, the questions are: what "game" do we want students to be able to play with the knowledge and skills we teach? If a solid performance in the game is what we're after, then how do we best prepare for game performance? The answer is familiar to athletic coaches as it is for arts educators. The most effective formative assessments for the game are the scrimmages, not isolated skill drills. In other words, replicating game conditions in practice and constantly assessing and providing feedback during play is the best way to improve authentic performance. To say it another way: we can teach and formatively assess the individual parts, but they won't automatically add up to a successful performance. Likewise, in theatre, there are certainly needed components. For example students have to learn their lines and the crew needs to construct the set, and we can assess and give feedback on these elements. However, the most robust formative assessments occur as we rehearse individual scenes and engage in dress rehearsal-type performances where the actors, director, and stagehands put it all together and give and get feedback. The formative assessments leading up to that performance are like a video camera

that is always on, providing ongoing feedback, and always with the "game" performance in mind. This is a qualitatively different approach to formative assessment than to stop everything and take a snapshot practice test.

*What is the goal of a cornerstone task?*

**MCTIGHE:** Like a cornerstone anchors a building, we think that these tasks should anchor a curriculum because they reflect the most important things we want students to *do* with their learning. And that's different from say-



ing that we want students to simply know certain facts, rules, or skills. Cornerstones are meant to be authentic, performance-based tasks, and they should, essentially reflect *why* we teach what we teach. In other words, cornerstone tasks bring the standards to life. While Grant and I have been promoting cornerstones throughout the curriculum, they have a natural home in the arts and always have. The arts are all about authentic performance, much more so than other academic areas.

*So when we talk about "doing" in the arts, are we describing a demonstration of knowledge?*

**MCTIGHE:** In any subject, the arts in particular, it's important to look at the strands of knowledge, as well as

performance, that we seek to develop across the years. In other words, what do we want students to be able to do at different points in their school career? In theatre, for example, we may want students to learn about character development, about interpreting theatrical works, about development of a screenplay, and about critique. Such strands suggest the performances we want and the associated cornerstone tasks can guide the building of the curriculum around those strands.

*And should we expect those performances to re-occur across the grade levels?*

**MCTIGHE:** Absolutely. Here's a way of thinking about the cornerstones—envision the performances that you want high school students to be able to accomplish on their own. Then, plan backward to develop a set of less sophisticated versions of the same kind of tasks. Consider baseball as a good example of such recurring tasks. Little kids learn to hit a baseball with a large bat and a Whiffle ball, then they move to T-ball, and eventually in high school and beyond they're hitting

fast pitch. Similarly, we always want to be crystal clear about the game we're working toward and then build toward it in a scaffolded, systematic way across the grades. Here's a thought experiment—If you were to look at a series of cornerstone tasks across the grades, without anything else, even standards, you should be able to see the tasks building, becoming increasingly more sophisticated, authentic, and creative. And you should be able to infer the standards from them.

*Do you think the use of cornerstone tasks in the new arts standards will help create reliable assessments?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, I think so. Standards come to life in the assessments. In the tested academic areas, we have at-



tempted to try assessing achievement of the standards through high-stakes state tests, which are inherently narrow and, in truth, don't honor all the standards. For example, state tests do not assess listening and speaking even though they are part of all English Language Arts Standards. Whereas in the arts, you have the opportunity with the next generation of standards to clarify and highlight their meaning through rich tasks that build across the grades. A key point is that assessments in the arts are not likely to be constrained by the demands of large-scale standardized testing. The cornerstone tasks can and should be implemented as part of the regular curriculum. Moreover, since they reflect the authentic performances that the standards proclaim, then practicing for these tasks is the right thing to do!

*Could you give an example of what a cornerstone task might look like in theatre?*

**MCTIGHE:** Let's start at high school level, where perhaps students would be expected to critique a performance. An authentic context for that would be to write an article for the community or school newspaper, or be interviewed by the local radio station in response to the opening of a show. The point is, there is an authentic context, purpose, and audience to what you're doing. Creating a context for learning is always important. So in the critique example, the task should include an analysis of the set design, the costumes, the acting, and all the other elements of the production that make it come to life. Since there would also be criteria established for the task, students have clarity about what they should consider and include in their critique. In other words, "Your review should include this and this and this."

*You're talking about a rubric?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, but there are a couple of wrinkles to that. I characterize cornerstone tasks as rich learning tasks

that also serve as assessments. In other words, I do not want people to focus on the word assessment, and think, "Oh I have to stop everything and give a test and grade it." We do assess, the way you might assess the opening night of the play and make some adjustments. An assessment also should be a valuable learning activity that embodies everything we want the kids to do well. Yes, we're going to assess and give feedback based on the criteria in a rubric because we think it will help a student get better. It's not simply about a measure or a grade.



*Do you think this is an opportunity for the arts to be at the cutting edge by using these kinds of tools to assess student learning?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, I really think that is the case. I've shown the NCCAS default draft framework in some of my presentations this summer, and I can't tell you how many people, most of whom are not arts educators, have expressed their admiration for it. They like it because most other subject areas haven't framed their standards quite this way. Most standards require that they be "unpacked" by local school districts or individual teachers to identify the enduring understandings, essential questions and cornerstone tasks. I predict that arts educators will

really appreciate the fact that the NCCAS project is bringing some of the best minds in the country to help craft this framework for the new standards. There is still going to be a great deal of teacher freedom and creativity in curriculum planning under these new standards, but what I think the NCCAS coalition has created is the conceptual scaffolding that will make the standards clearer and will enhance and support curriculum development and, ultimately, teaching and learning. The new arts standards have the opportunity to highlight and reinforce, in a very concrete and tangible way, the good work that arts teachers have always done, as well as help non-art educators better understand and appreciate the arts.

*The cornerstone task approach is based on an Understanding by Design (UbD) strategy to curriculum. Do you think that school districts that don't use UbD will still be able to adapt and use the new arts standards?*

**MCTIGHE:** I think that's a very good question. Grant Wiggins and I think of Understanding by Design

as a framework as opposed to a program. It's a way of thinking and a way of conceiving content, curriculum design, instruction, and assessment, more than anything else. It's proven to be a very flexible framework. For example, there are Montessori schools that are using UbD and adapting it for their context, even as there are STEM schools and bi-lingual schools that are using it. The fact that the arts standards are framed with essential questions and enduring understandings does not mean that it's narrow or prescriptive or that a teacher or a school district must use UbD or the EQs and EUs. The standards are *not* a curriculum. They suggest outcomes that need to be translated into curriculum. The way the arts standards are being framed will facilitate that.

*So, you're saying that even though an educator is not following a particular set of essential questions and enduring understandings, they may be seeking those same outcomes?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, that's right. Clarity about the outcomes of learning that we seek is all to the good, regardless of what curriculum framework you end up translating it through. There are a variety of ways that these outcomes can be demonstrated. Cornerstones typically include a cluster of standards or skills. In subjects like history and science, some state standards are pages and pages long for one grade level. It's often very discrete stuff, like knowing the date of Andrew Johnson's vice presidency. The point here is that, when we're translating standards into assessment, we don't want to get so discrete and de-contextualized that we lose sight of why we're teaching the knowledge and skills. While I think that's less an issue for the arts, I still think it's worth bearing in mind.

*Is there anything else you'd like to touch upon about cornerstone tasks?*

**MCTIGHE:** The only summary point I'd like to make is a thought experiment with the new theatre standards—imagine that the first thing you saw when you clicked on the website page were a series of cornerstone tasks, laid out across the grades. Ideally, you could infer from those tasks the learning strands and the ultimate goals of a theatre education program. And click on the next screen and you would see the standards themselves, fleshing out the knowledge and skills. The message that should be communicated is that this is a performance-based enterprise that we're involved in and we need clarity about the performances we're after. We need to see how these build from simple to more sophisticated across the grades. And when I say performance, I'm speaking in general to mean that students are producing something—it might be our critique example or it might be a stage performance. Too often, standards specify grade-level

standards that are too discrete and then it's very easy to lose sight of the overall purpose. Teachers are often driven to look at what they have to teach or "cover," as opposed to thinking about what the long-term learning goals really are.

*So at the end of the day, the purpose of cornerstone tasks is improving student learning?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, improving student learning is the ultimate goal, but also improving teacher pedagogy. Ideally, if a teacher is intellectually honest and open, the assessment should include not only what the kids did well and what do they need to work on, but what adjustments the teacher needs to make. Assessment should be as much a reflection on the teacher as the student. I think the best teachers are open to feedback through student performance that reflects on what they might do differently.

*Do you see these new arts standards will create more accurate and appropriate measures of teacher effectiveness?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes. And my assumption is that within the standards there will be models or examples of some spotlighted tasks to encourage teachers to modify them or create their own. The idea that there is an assessment system in place that people can look to when they ask, "What are the benefits of theatre education?" For theatre, whether it's a performed play, set design, or a thoughtful critique, you have things that will uphold the value of theatre in the curriculum and the effectiveness of those who teach it.

*Can we talk a bit about transfer goals, enduring understandings and essential questions?*

**MCTIGHE:** Here are the underpinning ideas of enduring understandings: one of the main goals of learning in school is to prepare students for life beyond school. Or, to put it more bluntly, the goal of school is not to get good at school—the goal is to develop knowl-

edge, skills, and capacity to do something with what you've learned. And so, the reason Grant Wiggins and I have used the term "transfer goals" is to try to make that point very overt—that we want students to be able to transfer their learning in meaningful ways, both in and outside of school. Rote learning will not enable transfer—in theatre, rote learning can help you learn your lines, but it will not help you improvise. Rote learning in mathematics means that you can plug numbers into a memorized algorithm, but you won't know what to do when the problem changes. In our view, the alternative to rote learning or just learning discrete facts and skills in a mechanical way is learning by understanding. Learning needs to embody transferable ideas and processes and having students learn those in ways that they can use them and apply them in new and different situations. Another way to say it is that the understandings specify what the best performers understand that a novice doesn't. We use the modifier, enduring, to suggest that the understandings are what should endure after students have forgotten some of the facts. The essential questions are like the flip of side of the coin to the understandings. By exploring the EQs, students will develop and deepen their understanding of important ideas and processes.

*On transfer, are you talking about all learning or just across arts learning?*

**MCTIGHE:** I would go even narrower. The research on transfer of knowledge is pretty sobering. In summary, it says that it's not the case that students who learn something in one subject domain can automatically transfer that learning easily into another. Even within the arts, one might be creative visually, but that doesn't imply or presume that they can be creative musically or dramatically. The transfer is pretty context- and discipline- dependent—that's the bad news. However, the good news is that we do have evidence that you can teach for transfer within domains

and arguably, that's what we should be doing. Another way of thinking about it in the arts world is to ask, "What does a highly effective director, actor, producer, set designer understand about their craft that a beginner or less effective person doesn't?" We may find an outstanding director who might say something like, "Here are five things that I've learned over my career that really make a difference." If that director has come to understand something about working effectively with a team of actors then that understanding should be transferable to different theatrical productions or films. How we work collaboratively to achieve an artistic end is, in itself, a transferable principle.

*I think that's a very good example.*

**MCTIGHE:** Another way of looking at enduring understandings is that they make the invisible visible. They make more overt what the skilled performer or the highly effective performers understand and act on intuitively that may not be obvious to a novice or an audience that is not deep into the discipline. That's why, to me, it's important that you make these understandings so explicit. Potentially, an experienced theatre teacher would look at an enduring understanding about how to work with actors and say, "Well, duh, everybody knows that..." But my experience is that's not the case—not everyone *does* know. Beginning actors don't know it. Beginning directors don't know it. And it's taken years for the expert to develop that expertise. Often it might just be in their head. We're saying, "Let's make it explicit and visible." The notion of enduring is simply a modifier to say we want to distinguish between factual knowledge that is fleeting or might change, and it's the underlying principles that will really endure.

*Regarding the arts standards, do you think there should be both overarching and discipline-specific enduring understandings and essential questions?*

**MCTIGHE:** I do think there should be discipline-specific essential questions and enduring understandings, but they should still be overarching, in the sense that they should not be tied to a particular grade level or course or unit topic. And I do believe there are EUs and EQs that are applicable to all the disciplines. Historically, different arts disciplines have cast or framed their subject in different ways. For example, Daisy and I have had discussions about this because she brings a visual arts orientation and when she looks at some of the ways music people work she says, "I understand why it works in music but it's not quite the same in visual arts." I am very sensitive and appreciative of the nuances of disciplines and cautious about imposing an overarching structure that doesn't honor each of them. But I think settling this issue is very important for the arts standards project. Grant Wiggins and I call it the Goldilocks problem. Some understandings and essential questions may be too big. "What is the nature of art?" would be an example. On the other hand, "How do artists develop and refine their ideas?" is, I think, an appropriately broad, overarching question for all the arts.

*So you think it makes sense to apply the same enduring understandings and essential questions across all grade levels?*

**MCTIGHE:** This is where it's hard for me to separate the essential questions from the enduring understandings because, as I said earlier, I often see them as two sides of the same coin. Potentially, we could use the same essential question across disciplines and these would be overarching. For instance, "How do people come up with ideas for stories?" might be a broad question. And that question can be played out, beginning with elementary kids. In turn, you could craft an understanding about how people come up with ideas from experiences in their lives or from experiences around them, or things that are interesting and funny or unexpected. In some cases, with very young children, the wording of an EU or EQ might need some devel-

opmental considerations. For example, "What was the author, director, or performer trying to say to us?" While that's a great question that does apply across the grades, you might rephrase it slightly for first or second graders. But the essential question remains the same, no matter the grade level. With older kids, the question I just posed for elementary students might lead to much deeper philosophical insights about the nature of common themes across humanity. The reason why I think of EUs and EQs as two sides of the same coin is that, to me, a good essential question is one that you come back to again and again, across the grades to create enduring understandings.

*You're suggesting that there should be clear alignment between enduring understandings and essential questions?*

**MCTIGHE:** Operationally, whether in a standards document or a teacher's unit plan or course design we should be able to draw lines back and forth between the two. I don't mean to suggest by the two sides of the coin analogy that there has to be a one-to-one relationship but there should be a relationship that's discernible. For example, we might have one essential question that yields three or four rich understandings, and vice versa.

*Should the enduring understandings and essential questions serve as a guide for both educators and students?*

**MCTIGHE:** That's a good question. To begin, adults need to be clear about what they're after and formulate rich intellectually and aligned understandings and essential questions that can be linked to the standards in a well-organized system. Then we can think about how to adjust the language of the questions to make them kid-friendly and accessible. Here's the related point that's often missed: while it's imperative for the teachers and educators to be crystal clear about the understandings that they want to cultivate over time with their students, I generally advise people not to give their stu-



dents the understandings, at least not in the beginning. Here's why: The phrase "come to understand" is suggestive that understanding must be earned. It's constructed in the mind of the learner, and the student has to make or construct meaning to really understand something. A teacher can't just transmit an understanding by telling. You develop understanding over time, and one of the ways you do that is by considering and reconsidering related essential questions.

*Thus the value of rephrasing a question.*

**MCTIGHE:** Thus the value of rephrasing. And this suggests that understandings require a small "c" constructivist conception of learning. That means that the understandings are not identical to what some teachers do with objectives. It's fine to tell kids that their job is to learn the five types of poems in a unit, but the real understanding we want them to come to should be that poetic structures impose limitations but also offer opportunities. This is not to say that we never tell a student an understanding. The point is, we want students to earn that understanding and "make meaning" on their own.

*The key word here being "earned?"*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes, and that's an example to me of how standards are not the curriculum. In the standards we want educators, especially the beginning ones, to realize that, when we teach this, it's an important idea and we want the kids to truly understand. From a curriculum and teaching point of view, I'm not going to write three understandings on the board. I am going to put the essential questions on the board and my goal in teaching is to get students to come to these insights in their own words and their own ways.

*So for theatre, the kinds of insights that you might include are an understanding of the story or the play, the context of a scene, what a character's objective might be, and other similar things?*

**MCTIGHE:** Yes. Those are perfect examples of the movement from both standards as a set of discrete knowledge and skills, to the larger understandings that pull it all together into a rich, meaningful performance. The best theatre teachers do this. We have a good friend who's an outstanding high school theatre director because she lives this. She said to me, "I don't need someone to tell me the essential questions because this is what I do naturally." My response was, "Not everyone is as good or as experienced as you." This is another example of making the invisible visible. By that, I mean being explicit to those for whom this way of thinking does not come naturally. There have been studies focusing on the notion that the best coaches in athletics were not the star performers themselves because the star performers were so intuitive that they never had to analyze their craft, while the benchsitters were the ones watching, trying to understand.

*A final question: do you think these new arts standards are an opportunity for us to move to the center of education?*

**MCTIGHE:** I would say it this way: I think that this is absolutely the right way of framing national standards within the arts disciplines and I think it is the right model for our entire profession. Having said that, I'm less confident in venturing an opinion of what this will mean for arts education, especially given how resources for education have been so depleted in the last several years. But the best way of promoting anything is to do high quality work, and I think that's what these standards are doing. They're going to both highlight the importance of the arts and support continuation of high quality arts programs and that is the ace in the pocket. I admire so much the work of the arts education community in general. It would be so easy to just repackage the former set of standards with a glossy cover and a few tweaks. Instead, you're making fundamental structural improvements and I think that's the very model that other subject areas should follow.

