

# Leading for Understanding

*Adrian Lim*

*Victoria School, Singapore*

## **Abstract**

In 2006, Victoria School implemented its TLLM (Teach Less Learn More) school-based curriculum innovation by adopting the Teaching for Understanding (TfU) framework – a framework developed at Project Zero, Harvard University Graduate School of Education - as a school-wide curriculum innovation to spearhead its TLLM strategy and initiatives to enhance students' holistic development and teacher capacity. This paper describes how a school leader helped develop a culture of understanding and promote specific actions that seek to increase the level of thinking and learning for all members in the school community by using the Leading for Understanding (LfU) framework. The paper will also show how the LfU framework can be employed by school leaders to (1) support teachers in using the TfU framework to improve student learning; and (2) structure their thinking as they employ tools and strategies in the school that build their own leadership skills and engage colleagues in collaborative inquiry to improve learning in their journey to become reflective school leaders.

## **Background**

In 1996, Project Zero, Harvard University Graduate School of Education (HGSE), together with the leaders and over fifty office managers of a university - the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano (UJTL) in Bogotá, Columbia – sought to cultivate a culture of learning and understanding throughout their organization. Under a project called Learning at Work, led by Daniel Wilson (2005), the researchers aimed to discover how organizations understand and enhance knowledge creation, capture, sharing, and application in order to develop the cutting edge practices and supporting technologies that foster learning throughout an organization.

## **Compass of Inquiry**

Building on the extensive research and knowledge of understanding and learning for understanding, the collaborative work of UJTL and Project Zero resulted in a simple yet powerful language, called the Compass of Inquiry, for supporting personal and organizational inquiry toward community understanding. The language of the Compass of Inquiry invites individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole to reflect on and orient their actions around four central ideas:

- *Dreams:* What are your dreams? For yourself, those who work closely with you, and your surrounding community and context?
- *Mysteries:* What are the big questions, puzzles, issues, and concerns that face you in making your dreams come true?
- *Action:* What actions can you take to make your dreams come true?

- *Evidence*: What evidence will you be looking at and reflecting on to see that you make progress, and what else you may need to do?

These four elements are used to design and engage in actions toward making personal and organizational dreams come true through the development of understanding. The mechanism by which individuals and their community build these understandings is through the careful and critical design and engagement in "action projects": projects of action which move people toward their dreams and toward answering their big questions, continuously reflecting on the evidence necessary to learn from one's actions.

## **Teaching for Understanding**

In 2006, Victoria School adopted the Teaching for Understanding<sup>1</sup> (TfU) framework as a school-wide curriculum innovation to spearhead its school-based curriculum to enhance students' holistic development and teacher capacity. The school is one of twenty nine schools selected by the Singapore Ministry of Education to prototype its school-based curriculum innovation under the Teach Less Learn More (TLLM) – a national initiative to encourage schools to embrace new pedagogies that engage students' interests and move students beyond simply learning knowledge to really understanding how to apply it.

The big idea of TfU is to bring knowledge to life by engaging students in active learning. It is predicated on the assumption that knowledge is a human construct and that learners must play an active part in changing their minds, making sense, connecting prior ideas with new ones, thinking with what they learn, and creatively applying knowledge in novel situations i.e. understanding requires thoughtful application of ideas that are meaningful in the performance context.

Essentially, TfU is a constructivist approach to teaching and learning through 5 interacting elements used in planning and carrying out instruction when understanding is the goal:

- *Generative topics* are study selections that are both important in some discipline and engaging to students and teachers.
- *Understanding goals* is reflected through explicit and public statements about what has been developed and achieved so that students can understand what they are expected to learn.
- *Throughlines* are indicated by course length understanding goals.
- *Performances of understanding* provide opportunities for students to use what they know actively and thoughtfully in new situations and ways that develop and demonstrate the understandings regarding the understanding goals.
- *Ongoing assessment* is accomplished through frequent checks by students and teachers of how understanding is developing throughout a sequence of instruction. It is formative and not merely summative.

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<sup>1</sup> A framework developed through a 6-year project at Project Zero of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in close collaboration with a number of teachers of varied subject matters in a range of schools.

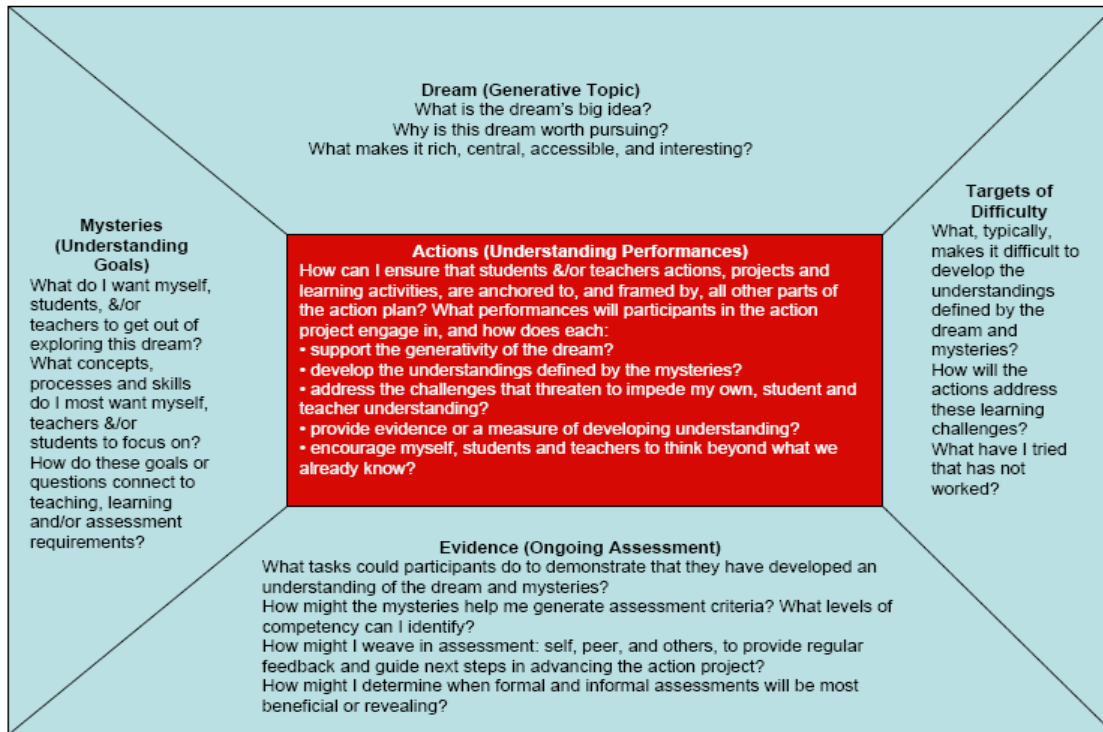
## **The Leading for Understanding Framework - Integrating Teaching for Understanding and Learning at Work Compass of Inquiry**

The TfU framework was originally crafted for the classroom. It makes sense to teachers, assisting them in creating curricula and learning experiences for their students. Learning at Work researchers discovered that while the key concepts of TfU were very useful, educational administrators and school leaders found that different vocabulary fit better with their leadership and management experience in schools. The researchers at Project Zero looked deeper at how the Teaching for Understanding Framework and Learning at Work Compass of Inquiry can provide educators with synergistic structures to focus the attention on concrete action. Consequently, the researchers associated with the Learning at Work project developed a different set of terms based on the TfU concepts:

- i. Generative Topics - **Dreams** (What we really want to achieve? What vision, goals, aspirations, or objectives do we strive to realise?)
- ii. Understanding Goals - **Mysteries** (What are our questions, worries, enigmas, or aspects of a situation that we want to understand to achieve the dreams?)
- iii. Understanding Performances - **Actions** (What might we do to achieve the dreams and understand the mysteries? What cycles of actions, plans, processes or activities should we engage in?)
- iv. Ongoing Assessment - **Evidence** (What do we look for to evaluate progress? What feedback, data or observations gauge our advancement toward attain our dreams and resolving our mysteries?)

Dr David Perkins, a senior professor at the HGSE, and also co-director for three decades and now senior co-director of Project Zero, made the point that the Compass of Inquiry is a direct translation of the TfU Framework at the organizational learning level. The manner in which an organization carries its action plan from the start to the end mirrors the planning and execution of a TfU unit.

For example, if we were to consider the organizational goal to be a mission of change, the Generative Topic is the mission of change and that essentially is what our Dream is. It involves clearly articulating what is the Dream's big idea, what makes the dream worth pursuing, and what makes the dream rich, accessible and interesting. The Understanding Goals are what we have to understand about the way things are now working in the organization and the way they might work to make the intended change happen. That represents the Mysteries. What we actually do (our Performances) to effect the change are the Actions. As the plan for change is executed, whether we are making progress and whether we are getting there and discovering where the gaps are essentially the Ongoing Assessment, representing the Evidence.



**The Leading for Understanding Framework in Action (from Session 2 of WIDE World Leading for Understanding 1 online course)**

**Applying the LfU Framework**

In order for groups of people, be it teachers or the school management and leadership to become effective teams it is vital that they develop a shared language understanding of the underlying beliefs, values, and principles that will guide their work together. The LfU framework provides the platform for a shared understanding to be evolved over time as members learn about each other, spend time together, and engage in the TfU work of their group in a way that is familiar to the school. This familiarity is a result of 90% of the teachers in the school having already acquired a practical sense of the TfU framework in action by completing the TfU course as well as planning and implementing a TfU unit.

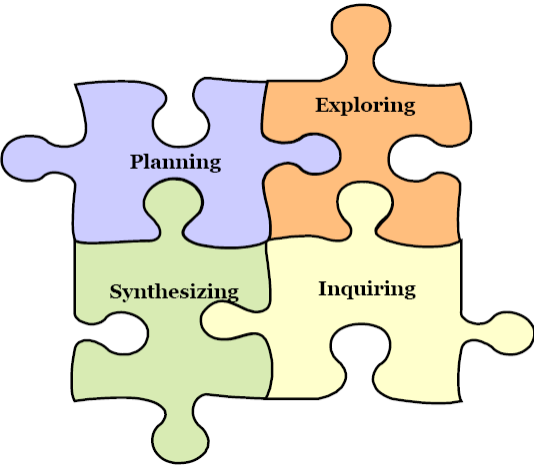
The LfU framework adds another rich layer to develop a shared and common understanding of the curriculum innovation work in the school. This provides a structure within which teams develop common goals, determine actions that will lead toward the attainment of their TfU goals, ensure that their actions are consistent with their beliefs, and judge whether their efforts in the curriculum innovation have been successful. In essence, having a shared understanding helps team members develop their collective vision of the direction in which they would like to be headed as they implement TfU in the school.

**An Action Project**

For a start, the LfU framework was put to use to help establish a professional and collegial sharing culture in the school when the school started to implement TfU. The TfU committee initiated an **action project** using the LfU framework. An action project is essentially a personal or group project that builds understanding through a process of inquiry

leading to practical improvements. Based on the key concepts of the TfU framework, the quartet of dreams (generative topics), mysteries (understanding goals), actions (understanding performances) and evidence (ongoing assessment) provides a pathway through which leaders can transform ideas into action.

Essentially, an actions project involves three fundamental ideas that are important for leading for understanding. Firstly, they ask leaders to engage in personally meaningful and focused inquiry centred on developing understanding in their setting. Secondly, they invite leaders to collaborate within a critical but supportive group throughout the inquiry process. Last but not least, they guide leaders through cycles of action and reflection. The action inquiry process outlines four stages that are in keeping with the general idea of action research:

	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Exploring</b>
	<p>The process of creating personally and professionally relevant dreams and mysteries, and developing sequences of actions and ways of gathering evidence to advance these dreams and understanding the mysteries</p>	<p>The carrying out initial actions, reflecting on those actions and gathering evidence that explores the mysteries and dream in a variety of ways</p>
	<b>Synthesising</b>	<b>Inquiring</b>
	<p>The pulling together of the actions, evidence and mysteries to develop understandings related to the mysteries and dream</p>	<p>The implementation of more focused and systematic actions and collection of evidence to match</p>

The following table below is an illustration of how the framework guided the committee’s inquiry work successfully.

<b>Leading for Understanding Action Project Guide</b>	
<b>Project Name: Breaking the Walls of Isolation by Building a Culture of Professional and Collegial Sharing</b>	
<b>Project Author(s): Tfu Committee</b>	
<b>Dreams (Generative Topic)</b>	
What is the dream's big idea?; Why is this dream worth pursuing? Why is it important to you?; What makes the dream rich, central, accessible and interesting?; To what degree is the focus of your dream under your "control"?	
<b>Criteria/Question</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>
<b>What do we really want to achieve? What visions, goals, aspirations, or objectives do we strive to realize?</b>	<p>We are interested in a project to help eliminate or reduced the isolated nature of teachers' work - one of the greatest obstacles to teacher leadership and professional development. The isolation factor appears to be a side effect of the autonomy of the work in teaching. Even though there are random acts of teaching and leadership excellence, we see few opportunities to problem solve collaboratively and very often there is very little dissemination of knowledge about what is most effective. We believe that there are some leverage points within the school that we can tap on to break the isolation nature of a teacher's work. This will ultimately contribute in some fashion to the knowledge, skill, judgment and commitment that teachers will bring to their work.</p> <p>To achieve this, we must actively look at ways to promote collaboration between teachers in the school. We believe that when teachers collaborate among themselves and with administrators, they can generate the critical force to break down the walls of professional isolation.</p>
<b>Mysteries (Understanding Goals)</b>	
What do we want to get out of exploring this dream?; What concepts, processes, skills and attitudes do you most want to focus on?; How do these goals or questions connect to understanding?; To what degree have you phrased questions that focuses inquiry around actions?	
<b>Criteria/Question</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>
<b>What are our questions, worries, enigmas, or aspects of a situation that we want to understand to achieve the dreams?</b>	<p>What do we believe about the importance of professional and collegial sharing?</p> <p>How do our teachers feel about professional and collegial sharing in their classrooms?</p> <p>What do teachers believe to be an effective sharing session in their classrooms?</p> <p>How ready are the teachers to open their classrooms to others?</p> <p>How can we assist teachers to make them feel safe about sharing? Can we provide a non-threatening environment to support the sharing culture?</p> <p>Do we have an observation protocol so that all teachers can share and give feedback in a common language (i.e. find some common ground)?</p>

	How do we make time available for collaborative work between teachers? Can we get teachers to form effective teams?
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Actions (Understanding Performances)</b></p> <p>How can you ensure that the actions, tasks and learning activities are anchored to, and framed by, all other parts of the action plan? That is, how can you ensure that the actions are aligned with the mysteries and evidence parts of the project?; To what degree are the actions intentional and informed?; To what degree are the actions creative and flexible?; How do the actions that the participants will engage in develop the understandings as defined by the mysteries?; How do the actions that the participants will engage in address the challenges that threaten to impede the development of understanding?; How do the actions that the participants will engage in provide evidence or a measure of developing understanding?; How do the actions that the participants will engage in encourage them to think beyond what they already know?</p>	
<b>Criteria/Question</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>
<p><b>What might we do to achieve the dreams and understand the mysteries? What cycles of actions, plans, processes or activities should we engage in?</b></p>	<p>Administer a survey to ascertain the teachers' level of comfort to allow others to observe their lessons? Assure teachers that the sharing is non-evaluative.</p> <p>Share with all teachers the intent and rationale of this project. Have an open dialogue to understand the teachers' concerns.</p> <p>P or VP to meet with Heads of Department to get support at the middle management level? Perhaps P or VP will visit the classes of the Heads of Department first. This will be a symbolic act of leadership by example.</p> <p>Establish an observation protocol and share with all teachers how to use it.</p> <p>Collect feedback from teachers to ascertain the extent of success.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Evidence (Ongoing Assessment)</b></p> <p>What tasks could participants do to demonstrate that they have developed an understanding of the dream and mysteries?; How might the mysteries help me generate assessment criteria? What levels of competency can I identify?; How might I weave in assessment: self, peer, and others, to provide regular feedback and guide next steps in advancing the action project?; How might I determine when formal and informal assessments will be most beneficial or revealing?</p>	
<b>Criteria/Questions</b>	<b>Thoughts</b>
<p><b>What do we look at to evaluate progress? What feedback, data, or observations gauge our advancement toward attaining our dreams and resolving our mysteries?</b></p>	<p>Rich feedback from teachers to improve lesson units.</p> <p>Evidence of increased collaboration and sharing sessions and more open dialogue between teachers about their teaching practice.</p> <p>Evidence of increased peer classroom observations.</p>

### A Common Language for Learning and Inquiry

In *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (1991), Seymour Sarason wrote that there was little likelihood that the current efforts at educational reform would have any lasting effect until there was a recognition that the kinds of conditions that we seek for students must also become a reality for the adults who work in schools. Sarason's comments about educational reform were echoing what Peter Senge described in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) when he wrote that the businesses that will be most successful in the future will be those who can become learning organizations i.e. places in which everyone is a learner.

Other than providing a more systematic way in which understanding can be developed in the classroom for students, Martha Stone Wiske (1998) put forward that the TfU framework also “provides a structure and language to organize inquiry”. Through conscious use of the elements which promote understanding, the framework guides teachers to think about what and how to teach certain topics. In the same way, LfU framework can be a powerful tool to support learning and inquiry for teachers in the school. The elements of the LfU framework have been designed to promote the kind of communication to examine challenges in an in-depth manner in contrast to the traditional superficial search for solutions as well as help everyone grow in understanding, and when the time comes to make a decision, everyone will have a much greater understanding about what they are making a decision about. School leaders can, therefore, employ the framework to guide all members of the school community, whether in cadres, departments, or as individuals to move the school toward the goals and vision throughout the school.

## **Conclusion**

The school recognizes that lessons that have included all the features of the TfU framework will lead to enhanced engagement and learning for the students in the classroom. In a similar manner, all the elements in the LfU framework can provide the school with a shared language to engage teachers in their learning and inquiry as they implement the TfU framework as a school-wide curriculum innovation. Over time, the shared language will attain critical importance as it becomes more than simply a means for communication. It will become a field for action, and a way of constructing truth for its constituents. Ultimately, it will become the basis for meaningful learning and inquiry for the school.

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