

Introduction

Three elements make up the Essentials Curriculum:

Threshold concepts

Threshold concepts are the 'big ideas' that shape students' thinking within each subject. The same threshold concepts will be explored in every year group and students will gradually increase their understanding of them. Previous editions of this curriculum referred to the Threshold Concepts as 'objectives'. We have stopped using this terminology because it implies that there is a target to be met. Instead of meeting objectives we now advocate exploring concepts. An important principle, therefore, is that exploring concepts will never be complete; students will continue to explore them for as long as they continue to study the subject. Each subject begins with an overview of the essential characteristics students should develop and these form the basis for the threshold concepts.

An example of one of the threshold concepts in history is "evidence tells us about the past". This, of course, cannot be taught in isolation: it would be abstract and meaningless to students. The concept must be explored within a breadth of different contexts so that it has tangibility and meaning.

Breadth of contexts

Breadth provides the contexts for exploring the threshold concepts. It has two roles:

- 1) **Knowledge***. Concepts need knowledge to make sense. Contexts give students subject specific knowledge with which to think about the concepts. For example, students will use the context of the Great Fire of London to explore the concept 'evidence tells us about the past'. They will be shown extracts of Samuel Pepys diary and will explore how an historical account gives us the knowledge of the cause and spread of the fire. The more knowledge students have, the better their understanding of the concepts becomes. Another benefit of knowledge is that it helps pupils reading comprehension. A student with a greater knowledge of the world will infer more from a text than one with little knowledge, no matter how good his or her decoding skills may be.

* by knowledge we mean procedures (skills) and meaningful facts. Knowledge does not mean simply remembering unconnected lists of facts.

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- 2) **Transference.** Whilst it is only possible to explore a concept within a context, this also causes a problem for students: their understanding is context bound. They find it very difficult to transfer the concept to another situation. By providing a breadth of contexts, students begin to transfer the concepts. They do this by comparing the new context knowledge to previously learned knowledge, the bridge being the concept. For example, if students explore the concept 'evidence tells us about the past' through the context of The Great Fire of London they learn that a vital piece of evidence is that Samuel Pepys kept a diary. They then later explore the same concept in the context of The Ancient Egyptians, in which they learn that the Rosetta Stone gives us evidence of the meaning of hieroglyphics.

Each subject has a suggested breadth of study which exceeds the requirements of the English National Curriculum. It is also recommended that schools consider additional breadth of study so that students develop cultural capital. (The essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said and helping to engender an appreciation of human and creative achievement.)

Milestones for progress

Because the threshold concepts are repeated in each year group it is important that students progress in their understanding of them. The Essentials Curriculum sets out this progression in the form of three 'Milestones'. Each Milestone contains a range of descriptors which give more detail to be discovered within the concept. Over a two year period students will become more and more familiar with these details by exploring them in a breadth of contexts. These descriptors are not exhaustive and should only be used as a guide for teachers. They should not be 'ticked off' as each one is covered: they should be repeated in as many different contexts as possible. For more details on progression within each Milestone, please see our supporting materials on planning for Greater Depth.