

Teachers' Perspectives on Planning for
Conceptual Understanding in English Language Arts

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Abstract

This study explored the conceptual ideas of secondary English language arts (ELA) teachers when they planned backwards. ELA curricula in Western Canada had largely been framed as a set of literate processes and strategies, but some literacy research and ELA curricula have included a growing emphasis on conceptual understanding. This study examined the inclusion of concepts or “big ideas” among teachers who explicitly used backwards planning.

The researcher interviewed eleven secondary (i.e., grades 7 -12) ELA teachers to explore the conceptual understanding embedded in their learning designs and to find out whether their experiences with backward planning were helpful. The participants were purposefully sampled from a variety of settings – from public and private schools, from integrated to stand-alone courses, from three Canadian provinces and one American state. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), the interview transcripts and related artifacts from these varied settings were analyzed, coded, and themed. The analysis and interpretation of the transcripts and extant documents revealed the nature of goals, assessment practices, instructional strategies, and resources.

One theme that emerged from analysis was that the concepts ELA teachers conceived for their unit plans varied in their source. Some ideas were derived from themes in texts, some concepts explored the artistry and craft within texts of various genre, and a third category of ideas went beyond texts to think critically and reflexively. The teachers’ interviews and planning documents also reflected the ways that they positioned texts in their courses: as a central object of study, as a marquee or headliner for a key idea, or simply as catalysts for students’ own lines of inquiry.

In addition to the nature of learning designs, the study also examined the experience of planning backwards with conceptual understanding in mind. Participants contended backward planning brought a sense of clarity, purposefulness, connectedness, and relevance to teaching and learning. Participants used innovative pedagogy, embedded formative assessment, developed authentic summative evaluation and offered student choice. Also, participants shared ideas about planning collaboratively, identifying necessary conditions for successful collaborative planning (flexibility, time, expertise, leadership, and norms and protocols for collaboration). The dissertation concludes with ideas for further research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A better way to organize curriculum might be around a theme, a big idea, or an essential question. (Ivey & Fisher, 2006, p. 5)

Looking back on my experiences as an English teacher, I can think of moments where students in my English language arts (ELA) courses were challenged to understand ideas deeply. In Manitoba, a province in Western Canada, students have been asked on their final grade 12 ELA Provincial Standards Test to write an original text with their own choice of form (e.g., article, essay, prose fiction, script). Subsequently, students are asked to write a reflection that explains how the text they wrote would suit an audience, purpose, and context. To succeed, students must understand the concept that the form, content, and style of effective writing will vary depending on the characteristics of the intended audience, the purpose, and the context in which the audience will experience the text. This reflective question has proven the most difficult item on the test nearly every year. In my view, it is one question that requires a depth of understanding of rhetorical concepts that takes years for students to develop.

There were other teaching experiences where I noticed students experienced a greater degree of challenge when learning ‘big ideas’ in ELA. For example, suburban students in my grade 11 English class found it challenging to empathize with the complex experiences of indigenous people within the Canadian justice system, a unit that included such topics as unfounded stereotyping, institutional racism, and restorative justice. In part, the problem was a lack of prior knowledge and experience

with the ideas, but also the ethical dilemmas of crime and justice were subtle and sophisticated. Other challenging ideas for students arose in media literacy, such as McLuhan's (1964) concept that "the medium is the message," that movies, by the very nature of the medium, condense the span of time into selected, rarefied moments, and that this format communicates an altered view of reality. I appreciated those moments when students could take McLuhan's idea from the golden age of television and film and apply it to the rapidly changing age of digital media. Whether it was explaining a rhetorical situation, understanding human experiences, or realizing the impact of media on culture, these moments of complexity (and confusion) were opportunities for me to reflect on whether my courses were designed to help students develop deep understanding that they could apply later in life.

In the upcoming chapter, I will provide a clear background to situate the research problem that motivates this study. This background section will include the nature of a process-based ELA curricula, the problems that emerge when process is overemphasized, and the possible reasons why these curricula have become conceptually vague. The background will also highlight the increased responsibility of classroom teachers for curriculum design and a review of signs of change in the field. Following the background section in this introductory chapter, I will then elaborate on the specific purposes this exploratory study will serve in relation to the research literature and outline the specific research questions addressed in the study. Finally, I will briefly introduce the methods of inquiry and define key terms.

Background: Conceptual Understanding in the Context of ELA

In this background section, I will reflect on the nature of conceptual understanding in the school subject English language arts (ELA) within the curricular context of

western Canada. I will begin the background section with a brief review that will demonstrate that ELA curriculum has emphasized processes and strategies and then trace how this trend came about. I will then examine the increased responsibility that classroom teachers have for curriculum design, including their interaction through professional collaboration in institutions and wider learning communities.

An ELA Curriculum Emphasizing Processes and Strategies

This study is positioned within the curricular context of ELA in Western Canada. These provincial curricula have been shaped by an emphasis on learning outcomes related to the development of literate processes and strategies. In the 1990s and 2000s, the push for accountability in education led to the widespread adoption of outcome-based models of curriculum. At least thirty American states and many Canadian provinces adopted a model of outcome-based education (McNeil, 1996, p. 60). Rooted in the scientific approach to curriculum, outcome-based education linked predetermined outcomes to accountability in the form of large-scale tests at both the provincial /state, national, and international levels.

The Western and Northern Curriculum Protocol (WNCP) was an agreement to collaborate on curriculum development between four Western provinces in Canada (Western and Northern Curriculum Protocol, 2011). Originally established in the 1990s, the agreement established common goals in core subjects to ensure consistency for post-secondary preparation and to ensure education materials reflected a western Canadian identity. The WNCP ELA curriculum framework was expressed as a set of general and specific learning outcomes that described literate processes, such as comprehending and responding to text, critical thinking and inquiry, and composing with clarity and artistry (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998). The WNCP

ELA curriculum framework clearly defined the aims of the course and left the design of learning to local decision-making. The ELA framework consisted of five general outcomes and a total of fifty-six specific outcomes for each grade. Each province in western Canada adopted their own curricula from the WNCP curricular framework. To ensure that local jurisdictions met these outcomes, the provinces designed criterion-referenced performance tests at key grades.

I have worked in secondary education in the Canadian province of Manitoba since 1997. Manitoba took the lead role in the development of the WNCP ELA curriculum framework, which emphasized the cognitive and social processes students needed to be literate. However, while the curriculum described what students should be able to do, the document communicated little about what students should know and understand conceptually. For example, in the grade 10 ELA framework of outcomes, part of a description of the general learning outcome 1 read:

Exploratory language provides opportunities for students to develop intellectually and socially. Students make observations, ask questions, hypothesize, make predictions, and form opinions through talk, discussion, and active listening. Students also clarify their thinking through writing. When students see their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and experiences in writing, they can reconsider, revise, and elaborate on them in thoughtful ways. Reading and viewing enable students to gather and verify information, identify areas for further inquiry or research, and develop support for opinions. Ideas and their interrelationships may be explored through representations such as diagrams, concept webs, charts, and other visual media. (*Manitoba Education and Training, 1998, p. 13*)

Much of the description was about what students could do as a result of engaging with the curriculum – “make observations”, “clarify their thinking”, “gather and verify information” – all cognitive, intellectual processes that contributed to literacy. I would

argue that these are indeed an accurate and important portrait of the processes and strategies used by literate people. These processes and strategies were not the part-to-whole kind of thinking from a skills-based curriculum. The processes were set in a meaning-making context, with exploratory talk, comprehension and response, inquiry, the writing process, and collaboration.

While the processes and strategies were explicit, the writers of the framework gave little guidance regarding which ideas students were exploring and clarifying, or which “ideas and their interrelationships” students were investigating. Perhaps the documents rested on the unstated assumption that the ideas and themes stemmed from the textual material students were reading, but it is also important to understand the curriculum did not mandate book choices. Resource selection was the purview of the teacher. The framework document did contain a definition of knowledge was defined as “facts, concepts, principles, and generalizations” (Manitoba Education and Training, 1998, p. 9). However, the document gave little direction about such knowledge. There were no examples of concepts, no suggested principles, no generalizations. Before examining the aims of the ELA curriculum further, it may be helpful to briefly clarify differences between knowledge types in educational aims.

Knowledge types – a primer. While knowledge types will be examined more thoroughly in the review of literature in chapter two, a distinction here is important for establishing the background. A good place to start is to draw the essential distinction between knowing and doing. Ryle (1945) made the philosophical distinction between *knowing that* something is the case and *knowing how* to do things. Understanding is insufficient if one cannot apply that knowledge in a pragmatic way. For example, someone can know maxims for polite behaviour, but behave rudely. The reverse can also

hold – one may be able to perform a task, but in not understanding it, may have difficulty adapting it elsewhere later. Marzano and his colleagues (Marzano, et al., 1988, pp. 13-14; Marzano, 1992) made a similar distinction between declarative (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how) in delineating dimensions of thinking, similarly asserting that both declarative and procedural knowledge are equally important for learning.

Bloom's *Taxonomy of Learning Objectives* was a well-known framework that defined the increasing complexity of learning outcomes in the cognitive domain (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). The well-known taxonomy has undergone an update by Bloom's colleagues. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) contended that what was missing from the original taxonomy was an understanding of the different knowledge *types* that could vary according to complexity (see *Figure 1* on page 8): factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive. Factual knowledge consisted of concrete knowing of terminology, details, and elements, while conceptual knowledge involved categories, principles, and theories. Procedural knowledge involved skills and

techniques and when to use them, and metacognitive knowledge implied thinking strategies and self-knowledge. Applied to the official ELA curriculum in use for the last

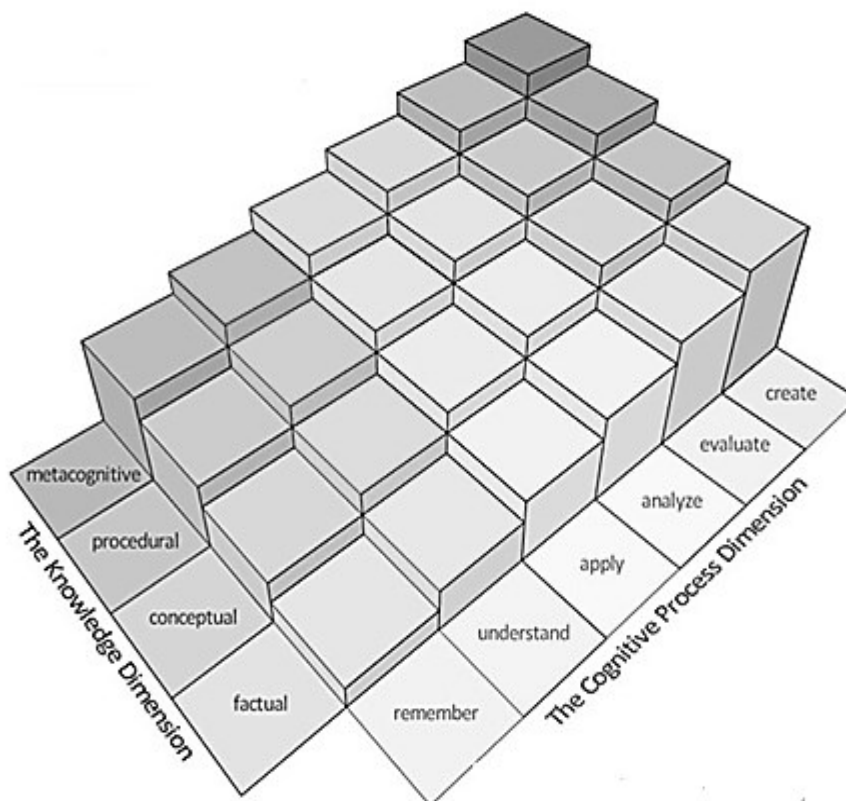


Figure 1. Four knowledge types in Anderson and Krathwohl (2001); Model created by Heer, Iowa State University (2015). [Licensed](#) under NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0.

twenty years, the aims have greatly emphasized procedural and metacognitive knowledge types and have largely been mute about factual and conceptual knowledge. Each of these four knowledge types could vary in complexity from remembering to creating something new. Remembering a statement of conceptual understanding is less complex than applying a principle to a new context. Among these four types of knowledge, ELA curricula emphasize procedural and metacognitive outcomes.

Contrasts in emphasis on knowledge types between subjects. Secondary teachers who have specialized in different subject areas place different emphasis on each

of the knowledge types according to the traditions of the discipline. For example, social studies teachers tend to emphasize factual knowledge, such as terminology, names, places, and dates of events, or broader conceptual understandings such as ‘the balance of power’. It is less common for social studies teachers to emphasize the processes of reading comprehension. To illustrate the contrast in knowledge types, in one study of American curriculum standards, Geography included 230 standards that related to declarative knowledge, with only eight for procedural and contextual knowledge; on the other hand, English language arts standards included 86 declarative, and 254 procedural and contextual standards (McREL International, 2017). . Science teachers tend to emphasize recall of scientific facts and terminology, such as the parts of the heart or the elements in the water cycle, but also have developed unifying concepts that integrate all science disciplines, such as diversity, systems and interactions, change and constancy, and energy. An example of one unifying concept from Manitoba curricula stated that “Energy, whether transmitted or transformed, is the driving force of both movement and change” (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000, p. 2.13). While factual and conceptual understanding are emphasized in science classrooms, the processes of scientific inquiry and design have not received as much emphasis. One clear attempt to rebalance the emphasis on curricular aims in science is evident in the work of Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten, and Stroupe (2012) who have proposed a set of dialogic instructional practices for science pedagogy. For example, one core practice elicits students’ prior knowledge and understanding of scientific phenomena. Such a content area literacy approach balances the focus on knowledge and concepts evenly with strategies and processes.

In contrast to science and social studies classrooms, ELA teachers have emphasized procedural and metacognitive knowledge types. While it is true that some classroom teachers maintain a focus on knowing certain conventions or quizzing plot events from a whole-class novel, in general, ELA classrooms in Western Canada have focused on the stages of the writing process, the reading comprehension process, and managing research and inquiry. In my experience, if you ask ELA teachers about the ‘big ideas’ in their discipline, they generally refer to processes rather than concepts, such as writing a memoir, giving a presentation, or finding joy in experiencing and responding to literature.

In instances where the disciplines intersect these differences in emphasis become notable. In my own attempts to integrate ELA and Social Studies curriculum, I found that sometimes what I considered important ideas in ELA (such as identity, ethics, or aspects of writer’s craft) faded into the background as the ideas and details from content-heavy Social Studies became dominant. With curriculum integration, ELA became a literacy framework for talking through ideas from the social sciences, reading became instrumental, and an aesthetic understanding derived from a study of literary arts was muted. This study’s exploration may contribute to some reflection on the important concepts in ELA and how teachers can balance conceptual ideas from different disciplines.

Problems with an overemphasis on one knowledge type over another. If both *knowing how* and *knowing that* are important, research that investigates what happens when ELA teachers shift their focus to put process and concept in balance is warranted. The overall purpose is to construct a theory about conceptual understanding in locally-planned and developed ELA curriculum that might have practical application

for planning units of instruction. Several problems exist in the current overemphasis on process. One issue might lay in student engagement - learners want to know, “What is the point?” and “Why does this matter?” Helping learners define conceptual understanding brings purpose and relevance to the discussion. A second issue when understanding is underemphasized is teachers may not consolidate or build on students’ prior knowledge in a way that promotes student capacity to apply that understanding in a new context. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1992) pointed out that even basic comprehension depends upon substantial general world knowledge (p.522). Teachers may assume students’ have greater prior understanding than they do, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Luke et al (2011) proposed in *The Trouble with English* that stand-alone, “in-the-head” strategy instruction creates an equity issue for culturally-diverse, indigenous, and low socio-economic students. The strategy approach assumes that the gap between the capacities of developing readers and expert readers can be filled by employing various metacognitive practices for inferring meaning, determining purpose, and solving vocabulary problems. In fact, these gaps may result from the knowledge differences between the culture of the student and that of the school culture (Gee, 1996). An alternative approach might start with an assumption of strength and competence, beginning with a recognition of the funds of knowledge a student brings to the classroom, and then bridging the gap to academic, disciplinary knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Building on existing schema by exploring perspectives and practicing cognitive strategies can ensure all students are valued and included. This study’s exploration with teachers who bring conceptual aims into balance with processes at the forefront of instruction may offer directions and implications for practice.

Why Concepts Are Vague in ELA

Many influences have contributed to ELA curricula becoming increasingly more process-oriented, including the integrated nature of the subject, a language and literacy research agenda, increasing cultural diversity, the influence of extreme forms of constructivism, and a broadening of the definition of text.

An amalgamation of courses. The wide range of content options in ELA can be traced back in part to mergers among what were in the past separate subjects. ELA is an amalgamation of the study of literature and the study of composition, which had been separate courses. The subject grew later to include business and technical English, journalism, drama, speech arts, and reading for pleasure (Squire, 2003). Until the 1970s in Manitoba, content was more explicit. For example, the 1978 grade 12 academic English curriculum in Manitoba provided specific lesson plans for both Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. However, the pendulum in the field swung away from explicit content in ELA. According to Goodman (2011), the 1970s and 80s featured a dynamic period wherein ELA became more interdisciplinary, and where Canadian public-school educators in Winnipeg, Manitoba, popularized the term 'whole language' to capture the nature of classroom learning in which students were constructing holistic knowledge and meaning (p. 21).

Research trends. Connected with the shift in ELA curriculum to more holistic, process-oriented curriculum, it is important to note the influence of the language and literacy research agenda on curriculum. According to Squire (2003), the connection between curriculum and research can be traced back to a summit in the summer of 1987, held by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and other associations, which "asserted the importance of *process* in learning language and

responding to literature, and... the growing capacities of readers and writers” (p. 13).

The conference proceedings reveal an influence on ELA curriculum, where processes were emphasized and factual and conceptual knowledge became more muted.

Researchers in language and literacy expended considerable energy on process approaches to writing in the past thirty years (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hillocks, 1986; Graham & Perin, 2007). Various thinkers from Rosenblatt (1978) and Thomsen (1987) to Beach (1993) and Langer (2011) have emphasized response processes for reading literature. Shulman (1986) has called this nearly exclusive emphasis on process and lack of emphasis on content a *missing paradigm*, a blind spot in the programmes of educational researchers. He stated that

Policymakers read the research on teaching literature and find it replete with references to direct instruction, time on task, wait time, ordered turns, lower-order questions, and the like. They find little or no references to subject matter, so the resulting standards or mandates lack any reference to content dimensions of teaching. Similarly, even in the research community, the importance of content has been forgotten. Research programs that arose in response to the dominance of process-product work accepted its definition of the problem and continued to treat teaching generically, or at least as if the content of instruction were relatively unimportant. (Shulman, 1986, p. 6)

As researchers developed these lines of inquiry into the processes of proficient readers and writers, curriculum developers reflected this emphasis in official curriculum documents. Shulman’s comment about curricular standards or mandates lacking reference to content could certainly be applied to the nature of the WNCP ELA curriculum.

Diversity. In addition to these shifts in the profession and in research, another influence on conceptual vagueness in ELA curriculum may stem from increasing

diversity of ability and culture now present in each secondary grade. In some ways, conceptual understanding has become less certain and more tenuous because the needs of an increasingly diverse student body range significantly. For instance, the province of Manitoba raised the mandatory age of schooling from age sixteen to eighteen to better reflect the widely-held belief that all students should graduate with a high school diploma. The implication is that ELA courses later in high school serve a much wider range of ability needs than they did in the past. In addition, today's secondary ELA classrooms are increasingly reflective of a heterogeneous, multicultural, and linguistically complex society (Bean & Harper, 2011, pp. 60-61). If ELA curriculum passes on the ideas and values that represent the intellectual heritage of society, those ideas become more contested when that society is more diverse and multicultural.

The study of literature has been a significant part of secondary ELA curriculum. Traditionally, literary selections have centered around a Western canon drawn from major British, American, and Canadian authors. However, since Canadian classrooms have become increasingly diverse, ideas, perspectives, and values in literature must reflect contemporary society. Property, civility, courage, progress, disease, wilderness – these words represent ideas that are constructions within a culture and their meanings vary significantly depending on the community. For instance, traditional views of property and ownership among indigenous Canadians may differ in substantive ways from Western views. With an increasingly diverse and multicultural student body, official ELA curricula that have been described only in terms of processes have left decisions about concepts in of ELA courses to classroom teachers.

How teachers understand constructivism. Not only have trends in the field and changes in society influenced an emphasis on processes in ELA curriculum, so too

has social-constructivist theory. A central premise in social constructivism is that ideas are socially and culturally constructed through active participation in a community of learners (Davis & Sumara, 2002, p. 411). A social constructivist view on learning emerged in part from the ideas of Russian academics Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986) who viewed learning as a social and cultural process. Where people engage in structured dialogue, they gain meaning by appropriating language from this social circle:

... the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances. This experience can be characterized to some degree as the process of assimilation – more or less creative – of others' words Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness" These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89)

According to this theory, ideas are revoiced words that we have gained from social interaction (including reading). Our ideas are cultured and are historically contingent; that is, meaning is inseparable from historical uses of utterances within a community of practice (Bakhtin, 1986).

Some of the conceptual vagueness may emanate from the way teachers understand and apply social constructivism. For example, this premise of learning does not mean that all social interaction in classrooms results in intended school learning. Teachers need to know how to apply social constructivist theory in a workable model that results in deep learning and transfer. Windschitl (2002) contended that constructivist approaches are “not easily accomplished, even among serious advocates” (p. 143) and “...difficult to put in practice” (p. 144). Constructivism is a theory, not a model, and the

real implication of a constructivist model represents a significant departure from traditional school pedagogy. Working in the field of science education, Windschitl asserted that teachers must develop a better understanding of constructivism, design complex instructional approaches, and then negotiate the conflicts that arise from changes in practice from within the classroom and within the school (p.132). Windschitl (2014) has more recently suggested that for constructivism to truly become a workable theory, teachers must uncover the *central ideas*, make these ideas relevant to students, and use various *discourse tools* to develop understanding of these concepts.

The vagueness of conceptual understanding highlights a more widespread misinterpretation of social constructivism in society that people are entitled to their own truth. Anderson (2017) claimed that we are living in a ‘post truth world’. Take, for example, the difficult public and political debate about global warming for an example of a discourse that largely lacks evidence. Despite widespread consensus in the scientific community that humans have contributed to global warming, many people, including a U.S. president, believe global warming is a hoax. It is a misinterpretation if the way social constructivist ELA curriculum has been interpreted leads teachers to believe that all students’ ideas, claims, interpretations, and reasoning are equally legitimate. A more moderate understanding of social constructivism recognizes that, while ideas are based on a consensus built within a community, they must also be supported by evidence and continued discourse. In this way, workable, classroom-tested approaches to constructing conceptual understanding in ELA classes can contribute to improvement in democratic discourse in a civil society.

Teachers’ understanding and use of official curricula based on constructivism cannot be taken for granted. This problem has been noted in other subject areas. Handal

and Herrington (2003), studying the implementation of a new mathematics curriculum in Australia, noted that the constructivist orientation of the prescribed curriculum clashed with teachers' mainly behaviourist views of learning mathematics.

Expanded range of texts and forms. One final influence on the vague expression of concepts in ELA curriculum may originate with the rapid pace of change posed by the digital age. According to Bass and Sibberson (2015) digital reading can be hypertextual and non-linear, can integrate text with multi-media, and can include built-in options for interaction and co-construction. Forms of communication have become ever more multimodal in workplaces, everyday citizenship, and personal representations of identity (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). The implications of the expanded forms of text for ELA are profound. Since the range and availability of forms and genres of texts have exploded, there is less certainty about which ideas, forms, and genres to include in ELA curriculum. For example, no longer is it valid to suggest that the teaching students the standard cover letter will be key to getting a job; students now might be better served by developing a digital portfolio and by effectively managing their social media presence. The effect is that ELA teachers can no longer confine instruction to a narrow range of forms.

To summarize, the net effect of a process focus in the language and literacy research agenda, increasing cultural diversity, weakly understood tenets of social constructivism, and the proliferation of text forms in society has been to emphasize process outcomes in ELA curriculum and to leave the conceptual territory to the decision-making of classroom teachers. The next section of this background will examine the increased this responsibility that ELA teachers in western Canada now hold to design learning experiences.

Teacher as Designer

While process-based curriculum has become dominant in ELA in western Canada, simultaneously the responsibility for curriculum design shifted. What I personally most valued about being an ELA teacher was the creativity and choice I had in creating learning experiences for my students. In no other subject do teachers enjoy as much freedom to plan units and choose resources as in ELA. I explored with students how the themes, topics, and texts fit with the students' values and preferences. My experiences of being a designer, a teacher curriculum maker, were at the heart of my professional practice. However, once curriculum was expressed as an open-ended set of year-end process goals, I also recognized the concomitant increase in the amount of responsibility for planning ELA courses.

ELA curriculum as a shared experience. One metaphor holds that curriculum stands as the 'ends', while teachers' instructional practices are considered the 'means' to achieve those ends (Popham & Baker, 1970; Zahorik, 1976). In this view, curriculum is a thing to be implemented as intended by the curriculum workers, and success is dependent on the teacher's ability to do so with fidelity. In contrast to that view, Clandinin and Connelly (1992), drawing from narrative inquiry research conducted with teachers, envisioned a more situated and interrelated view where curriculum and instruction are intertwined:

Teachers and students live out a curriculum; teachers do not transmit, implement, or teach a curriculum and objectives; nor are they and their students carried forward in their work and studies by a curriculum of textbooks and content, instructional methodologies, and intentions. An account of teachers' and students' lives over time is the curriculum, although intentionality, objectives, and curriculum materials do play a part in it. (p. 365)

Curriculum in this sense constitutes the situated, shared, lived experiences of teachers and students. In their review of studies which tracked the curriculum implementation experiences, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) concluded that “the more closely one looks at schools, the more doubt it casts on the efficacy of the means-end split between the teachers and curriculum” (p. 372). The gap between the official curriculum and the lived experiences of teachers and students puts the assumption of means / end in question. Aoki (1993), encouraging teachers to examine the practical wisdom they gained through living out curriculum experiences with students, offered the term “curriculum actualization” in contrast to “curriculum implementation.” The reality is that curriculum is much more flexible and negotiated as teachers’ co-construct learning experiences with their students. Another alternative view of official, externally-created curriculum documents is that of “curriculum potential” (Ben-Peretz, 1975), casting such documents as possibilities for teachers to draw from to create rich learning experiences. In order to examine ELA curriculum, investigation needs to focus on what teachers have designed and revised in light of shared experiences with students. While official curriculum might offer ‘potential’, individual teacher plans, revised over time, will be closer to curriculum as ‘actualized’.

Teacher planning. Over my career, I experienced a shift in the way I planned ELA instruction. When I started teaching ELA, I planned by first choosing a text, such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* for grade 11. After that I would access teacher guides for lesson plans and assessments, and, at the same time, consult the provincial curriculum framework to ensure the plan fit. After planning lessons, I would design assessments, which consisted of tests, a writing assignment, and something more creative.

When the province of Manitoba adopted an outcome-based curriculum, I gradually moved towards a different planning practice. Starting with the end in mind, I first identified intended learning, then, working backwards, defined acceptable evidence of such learning, and then chose resources and planned an appropriate instructional sequence. The first phase, identifying intended learning, consisted of both formulating statements of conceptual understanding and identifying broad transferable processes (skills and strategies) students would be able to use as literate adults. This approach to backward design was adapted from the well-known *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The most challenging part of planning backwards in ELA was to articulate the ‘enduring understanding’ I wanted students to know deeply and be able to transfer. Conceptual understanding included themes, generalizations, and principles that united ideas and showed the patterns or relationships between and among them. Concepts “lie at the heart of the discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, I found little help expressing ‘big ideas’ or ‘essential questions’, either in the curriculum framework or in professional books.

This shift towards backwards planning has been referenced explicitly in western Canadian curriculum revisions (e.g., Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 9-11; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015). Besides *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), other methodologies that promote a form of backwards planning include Universal Design for Learning (Katz, 2012), Teaching for Understanding (Newton, 2002), and Concept-based Curriculum (Erickson, 2007). To find out more about how conceptual understanding works in teacher constructed curriculum, I sought out people who had created units using backward planning. While focusing on conceptual understanding is not the exclusive domain of teachers who plan

backwards, those who plan with these methods would have had to formulate big ideas or statements of enduring understanding, and shifts in the field would make such research timely and relevant.

Shifting assessment and evaluation practices. In the 2000s, the outcome-based ELA curriculum emphasized summative assessment and standards to evaluate whether students had achieved the outcomes. Simultaneously, emphasis in research on the importance of formative assessment practices for student learning began to emerge. After twelve years in the classroom, I left the classroom to work for the education ministry on a provincial initiative to promote better and more frequent formative assessment practices, based on the ideas contained in *Rethinking Assessment with Purpose in Mind* (Western and Northern Curriculum Protocol, 2006). Formative assessment, or ‘assessment *for* learning,’ is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). This body of scholarship focused on ensuring students were more successful along the way (e.g., Black, Harrison, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Shepard, 2006).

One aspect of assessment *for* learning that may not be as well understood is how ELA teachers monitor and give feedback about student growth in conceptual understanding. An important aspect of a focus on concepts is the assumption that students begin any learning experience with existing schema – prior knowledge and experiences about how things work. Seeing curriculum as a co-constructed exploration that increases understanding might significantly change the assessment dynamic with students. ELA teachers might need processes for monitoring changes in perspective and incrementally deepening conceptual understanding. They need strategies for

documenting their assessment observations and conversations during learning, rather than relying on strictly paper and pencil work samples at the end of learning.

Not only might teachers need different tools and strategies to monitor progress and growth in conceptual understanding, students also need opportunities to self-assess. In the 2000s, ELA teachers like me, who were learning about backward planning, were simultaneously participating in professional learning communities around the assessment reform work of authors such as Stiggins (2005), Davies (2011), and Black et al (2003). The goal was to create more opportunities for student-involved assessment and become better at generating effective feedback, and revision. However, in addition to providing opportunities for students to reflect on growth in thinking processes, investigation is also needed into metacognitive strategies for reflecting on growth in understanding.

Changes afoot in the present

The trends are clear for teachers to take a more prominent role in curriculum design, to shift toward backward planning, and to emphasize assessment *for* learning. Further changes are reflected in provincial and state curriculum renewal and a proliferation of professional trade books that focus on conceptual understanding in ELA.

ELA curricula renewal. There are signs that official ELA curricula in western Canada are beginning to move past an outcome-based framework that underemphasizes conceptual understanding. New ELA curriculum documents have appeared in western Canadian provinces. Saskatchewan Education undertook curriculum renewal especially to integrate indigenous perspectives across curriculum; the new curriculum specifically relies on backward planning (2010, pp. 9-11). Alberta's *Inspiring Education* (Alberta

Learning, 2011) focuses on cross-curricular competencies and student-centred, personalized learning. Influencing the reform in Alberta were ideas disseminated by Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation (Milton, 2015).

In Manitoba, teachers will design courses from new curricula in the next few years, and the draft conceptual framework has directed teachers to design learning experiences around literate practices that represent valued ways of knowing and thinking (Manitoba Education and Training, 2016). The new Manitoba ELA framework delineates four practices, defining them as “the valued ways of knowing, thinking, and doing of the discipline.” One practice is “sense making” and an example of an element of this practice includes “Access, use, build and revise schema.” Since schema can be defined as an organizing concept (Piaget, 1959 / 1926), Manitoba ELA teachers may benefit from support for the kinds of schemata they wish to develop and extend. Given these shifts in curriculum, it would be useful and relevant to find out more from ELA teachers about how conceptual understanding fits in teacher planning in secondary settings.

In the province of British Columbia the government has introduced an ELA curriculum that balances intended learning on concepts, processes, and habits of mind (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2017). B.C. curriculum directs teachers to design learning beyond the level of fact and sub-skill and help students understand deeply and become more proficient at higher order processes. The draft ELA curricula include a set of “big ideas,” examples of which include:

- Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world. (Grade 8)
- Texts are socially, geographically, culturally, and historically constructed. (Grade 10)

- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens. (Grade 12) (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2017)

The ideas are written to represent the concepts, principles, and theories the curriculum writers believe students should understand deeply, ones that endure over time and transfer to new contexts, and can combine with other concepts in interdisciplinary study. The inclusion of big ideas in the expression of official ELA curriculum represents a significant shift from outcome-based education, which tended to atomize learning into a multitude of specific outcomes.

Shift in professional trade books. As further evidence of a shift in the field of ELA toward planning that includes conceptual understanding, a spate of professional publications has included a focus on conceptual understanding in ELA. Lanning (2013) has written a book called *Designing Concept-based Curriculum for English Language Arts*. British Columbia authors Brownlie and Schnellert (2009) have similarly produced *It's All About Thinking: Collaborating to Support All Learners in English, Social Studies and Humanities*. Smagorinsky (2008) has released a book called *Teaching English by Design: How to Create and Carry Out Instructional Units*. Other books that feature planning that references big ideas include *Universal Design for Learning* (Katz J. , 2012), *Teaching for Understanding* (Newton, 2002), and *Concept-based Curriculum* (Erickson, 2007). The emergence of both official curricula and professional resources focused on developing conceptual understanding signal a shift in the professional practice of ELA teachers that deserves wider exploration by researchers.

One illustration of such professional trade books material might represent what is meant by a statement of conceptual understanding. Erickson (2007), in her book

Concept-based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom, explained that teachers must go beyond a list of topics (such as “courage and survival”) to explain the relationships among these topics. Erickson advocated that teachers formulate statements of enduring understanding using a three-step process:

- 1) *What?* Formulate one or more complete sentences that link key topics.
- 2) *How or why?* State the relationships between the topics by asking “How is / are...?” or “Why is / are...?” and revising for strong verb choice.
- 3) *So what?* Revise the statement so that it communicates why it is important and enduring by asking “So what?”.

To formulate a complete statement of conceptual understanding, teachers use active verbs to connect the terms they believe are important, revealing the relationships between these terms. By asking “So what?” teachers are prompted to refine their conceptual statements so that they are more relevant to students and expressed in student-friendly language.

Using Erickson’s model, Glass (2013) gave examples of conceptual statements for ELA that use a version of the process (see *Table 1*). In the first sentence in *Table 1* on page 25, key terms include unjust, righteous, courage, and survival: “To counter unjust leaders and support righteousness, individuals might courageously help others to survive.” The complete statement connects these ideas with the verb forms counter, support, and help. These transitive verbs show the relationships between the concept words in the context of a unit that explored the actions of individuals like Oskar Schindler. The second statement links the terms argument, position, evidence, and counterclaims using the verb forms present, articulate, evaluate and address.

Table 1. Examples of essential understandings (Glass, 2013, p.64)

CONCEPTUAL PHRASE +	ANSWER: How? What about it? So what? Why is this important?
To counter unjust leaders and support righteousness,	individuals might courageously help others to survive.
To present an argument that effectively convinces others,	writers must articulate a clear position, evaluate and use evidence to support it, and address counterclaims.

The examples are simply meant to illustrate the kinds of concepts teachers might devise, and a strategy that teachers might use to come up with such ideas.

In this background section, I have outlined the curriculum context in Western Canada where ELA curricula have emphasized processes and underemphasized concepts. Several factors have influenced this emphasis, including a process research agenda, increased diversity, constructivist curricula, and multi-modal digital texts. Concomitant with this trend, teachers have increased responsibility for designing learning experiences. Signs have emerged that the field is shifting to ELA curricula that balances conceptual and procedural understanding, and these shifts have implications for instruction and assessment that warrant this study.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

Against this curriculum context of an evolution in ELA curriculum, the purpose for this research is to explore learning designs where ELA teachers have explicitly considered conceptual understanding. This research will have practical relevance for English teachers and those who lead and support them. The reflections may inform theory dealing with epistemological questions about the nature of conceptual understanding within the discipline of ELA. It may also be useful in efforts to integrate ELA with other subject areas, such as social studies, career studies, or digital literacy.

The specific research questions addressed by the study included the following:

1. How did conceptual understanding fit into teacher-created planning for ELA in a variety of contexts?
2. What were the perspectives of ELA teachers regarding a backward planning process?
3. What do these experiences suggest about the relationship between conceptual understanding and teaching ELA?

With these lines of inquiry, I will explore several dimensions of the role of conceptual understanding in ELA planning. I will consider the nature of subject knowledge in ELA, what ELA teachers might need to know about curriculum, and planning as the practical work of teaching.

Substantive knowledge. In order to reflect on how conceptual understanding fits into teaching planning, this first line of inquiry explored what teachers believed were important ideas in the discipline. After an era of conceptual vagueness in ELA curricula, and where teachers have taken on increasing responsibility as curriculum designers, this question is an important one. Schwab (1978) argued that learning a discipline requires teachers to organize content by substantive structures, the variety of ways in which the concepts and principles are organized within a subject discipline. The range of substantive knowledge a secondary ELA teacher might consider could differ substantially between one teaching context and another, given the needs of different students and local contexts. What is important is that ideas are important enough to transfer to future contexts. The idea of “transfer” is that curriculum should focus upon the connection between what is learned in school and its applicability to life beyond school (Oliva, 2005, p. 442). The general idea is that learning that helps students

generalize *principles* promotes transfer (p. 443). Phillipot and Graves (2009) posed questions to help teachers focus thinking of understanding in English language arts:

Will students gain knowledge from this unit that extends beyond a particular text? Will their understanding be applicable to other contexts? And will their understanding of central ideas be retained over time? (p. 53)

These questions consider the importance of conceptual growth in ELA, asking teachers to consider their students' needs and interests, the transferability of understanding, and the endurance of ideas. The purpose of this research is to explore the conceptual understanding as it is explicitly outlined by ELA teachers, and reflect on what has been valued.

Although these ideas will be reviewed in greater depth in chapter two, an example of such substantive structures in ELA curriculum can be found in the categories outlined by Peters and Wixson (2003): literary understanding and genre, craft, and conventions. One category of these aims included literature and understanding as a focus, encompassing key concepts, beliefs and perspectives communicated by the works studied. Grossman (2001) noted that there was a "lack of clarity in existing research... defining clearly what it means by learning and achievement in literature," and she went on to ask, "What do we mean by literary understanding?" (p. 427). If the big ideas are conveyed by the books chosen for the course, resource selection becomes an important factor in conceptual complexity. Certain works may be more thematically challenging and complex than others. The selection also indicates whose perspectives are included and whose are silenced.

Another category for ELA content focused upon genre, craft, and the conventions of language (Peters & Wixson, 2003). This conceptual area included the study of

narrative and informational text features, author's craft in written and spoken prose, and oral and written conventions. Substantive structures reflect a theory held by a teacher / designer. For instance, a teacher may design a course based on a review of significant literary movements in Western and non-western literature (for example, Victorian-era novels or Beat poets). Concepts might be related to the defining characteristics of genres and form (e.g., poetry: free verse, ballad, sonnet), or how literary elements contribute to meaning and effect (e.g., characterization, arrangement, figurative language). Further, a theory of reader response may lead a designer to develop opportunities for critical reading (Appleman, 2009). Students may be invited to undertake a resistant reading from an alternative perspective than that assumed by the author, such as a feminist critique or a Marxist reinterpretation.

Since ELA is a subject whose traditions have been amalgamated from several courses, the study of literature is not the only place to derive ideas. Concepts might also be derived from writing and rhetoric, communication studies, the dramatic or speech arts, or information communication technology. What might unite these ideas is an examination of how literary and pragmatic texts are used in culture. These various designs reflect a theory, whether the teacher is conscious of the theory or not, about the role of individuals in society, the function of literature and literacy, about freedom and power (Brass, 2010).

Where teachers are determining themes and big ideas, they may look beyond the themes and craft of typical works studied and examine to trends in wider society for conceptual ideas that are relevant and engaging for students. For instance, Hargreaves (2003) observed that we live in a knowledge economy that offers a central paradox: on one hand, our schools must foster growth and prosperity, while on the other must

simultaneously develop the “compassion, community, and cosmopolitan identity” (p. 1) that will lessen the strain on social order that results from such economic growth. This conceptual frame explores the tension between economic progress and the values needed for a just society. Another example of a broad concept for critical thinking might be found in with our relationship with the land. Canadian educator Judson (2015) believed in cultivating ecological understanding, founded on the premise that human survival depends on re-imagining its relationship with nature. Conceptually, ecological understanding implies an awareness of our interconnectedness with the natural world. ELA curriculum in Canada might these address concepts of environmental sustainability and human rights in a rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, Canadians have been called upon to redress the harm done to indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, hereafter TRCC). Many of the calls to action in the TRCC report involve education strategies. ELA teachers might think in conceptual terms about indigenous world views such as the “principle of reciprocity between humans and all other things” or that “true learning occurs through participating in and honoring relationships in both the human and natural communities” (Cajete, 2005, p. 70). Whether it’s Hargreaves’ balance of creativity and responsibility, Judson’s imagination and environment, or Cajete’s reciprocity and relationship, ELA teachers have a wide range of relevant “big ideas” for students to explore that are beyond canonical texts. This exploratory research I am conducting explores which conceptual frames some ELA teachers have found relevant and have built into their courses.

Syntactic knowledge. However, having substantive knowledge of a subject area does not necessarily mean a teacher can communicate about that content for others to

learn it. In addition to substantive knowledge, Schwab (1978) also suggested that knowledge in a discipline also consists of syntactic structures, the way that people establish what is valid, true or worthy. An important purpose in this study is to explore not only what conceptual aims were considered, but how teachers planned learning experiences to bring about that understanding. The second line of inquiry in this study collected perspectives of teachers regarding their planning experiences. Regarding syntactic knowledge, Shulman (1986) explained that

A syntax is like grammar, a set of rules for determining what is legitimate to say in a disciplinary domain and what 'breaks' the rules. Teachers must not only be capable of defining for students the accepted truths in a domain, they must also be able to explain why a particular proposition is deemed warranted, why it is worth knowing, and how it relates to other propositions, both within the discipline and without, both in theory and in practice (*p. 9*).

Syntactic knowledge for literary study might include how themes develop and how to interpret them, or how to comprehend and respond to literary text, including summarizing passages, drawing inferences, citing textual evidence, and connecting experiences. Grossman, Wilson, and Shulman (1989) defined pedagogical content knowledge as the integration of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (e.g., the most useful forms of representation of the ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations) – the ways of representing and formulating the subject in a way to make it comprehensible to others. According to Shulman (1986), pedagogical content knowledge involves an understanding of what makes the learning of specific concepts easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning (*p. 9*). Weaver (Weaver, 1996; Weaver & Bush, 2008) offered an example of

pedagogical content knowledge about the teaching of grammar, in which she explained how grammar is best taught in the context of writing instruction with a minimal amount of terminology. Weaver's approach combines substantive knowledge of English grammar (e.g., forming complete sentences) with syntactic knowledge (e.g., teaching students how to look for signs of sentence fragments in their own writing). One of the benefits of conducting constructivist grounded theory research is the opportunity to reflect on and theorize about pedagogical content knowledge in ELA, exploring how teachers represent and develop understanding of concepts.

Teacher Curriculum Design Knowledge

Whereas the first important purpose for researching conceptual understanding in ELA is to reflect on what conceptual ideas teachers plan and how they develop, the other questions for this study aimed to gain insight into teacher's understanding of instructional design using a backward planning process. Since ELA teachers have significant latitude for the selection of aims, the design of instruction and assessment, and the selection of resources, it would be illuminating to explore ways they used a backward planning process to map out learning experiences. Research in Harvard's *Teaching for Understanding* project demonstrated that conceptual understanding does not develop from direct teaching, nor does it develop from experiential learning. Rather, it involved goal-directed, responsive, contextualized interaction that enabled students to recognize their current understanding / theory and test that theory against new experiences to draw insights and conclusions (Ritchart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). Since the official ELA curriculum in Western Canada is built from ideas derived from social constructivism, research needs to explore ways that teachers can understand and practically employ the theory. The implication of this interactive view of learning is that

teachers plan learning experiences that engage students, that encourage authentic conversations about texts and ideas (Applebee, 1996; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). The study is intended to lend insight into the way that teachers have designed instruction for students to gain understanding by being a part of a community of learners.

Collaborating to build coherence and continuity. Part of what I wonder in posing the research questions is whether and how English teachers achieve coherence and continuity in curriculum experiences, how they map ideas out over a longer period to allow deeper understanding to develop (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Since developing conceptual understanding takes time, students benefit when teachers develop a deliberate sequence of progressively more complex treatments of ideas over several years. Heritage (2008) suggested that in order for teachers to see the connectedness over time, core ideas need to be expressed as a “big picture, multi-year progressions that outline the essential building blocks, and then drill down from the building blocks into more detailed descriptions” (p. 9). In my experiences as an English teacher and department head, the processes of planning were made more complex when teachers attempted to coordinate curriculum and resources. Slattery (2006) described this interaction as a “community of interpreters working together in mutually corrective and mutually collaborative efforts” (p. 141). ELA curriculum is often developed locally, in department meetings, professional learning sessions, and other collaborative settings. If each teacher in the same department develop units and courses that were too dissimilar, the lack of coherence would make for a disjointed learning experience over the course of high school. As Beane (1995) noted:

A “coherent” curriculum is one that holds together, that makes sense as a whole; and its parts, whatever they are, are unified and connected by that sense of the whole. The idea of coherence begins with a view of the curriculum as a broadly conceived concept-- as the curriculum-- that is about “something”. ...There is a sense of a larger compelling purpose, and actions are tied to that purpose. (p. 3)

To develop coherent learning experiences, teachers establish purpose so that students see connectedness between learning tasks and activities, perhaps through ongoing reflection and discussion.

In addition to coherence, ELA teachers can collaborate to promote continuity. According to a review by Burroughs and Smagorinsky (2009), the planned curriculum tends to overemphasize scope and neglect sequence (p. 176 – 177). In schools where I worked, ELA courses in one room featured creative writing and independent book choices, while next door all students read a shared text and wrote a literary essay. While this lack of continuity could be problematic, it is also true that if courses became too similar between grades, they become repetitious and do not promote growth in understanding. Historically, a shared sense of an ELA program in a school was established by using a list of the titles of literary works, or, in the least, prescribed literary genres. However, every one of the titles of literary works might thematically end up repetitious (for example, a whole course only about social justice). Teachers have also coordinated forms of writing, especially various forms of the essay, between courses. Mapping the curriculum according to titles or forms gave way in the 1990s to mandating important literacy processes such as comprehension, communication, collaboration, and thinking processes. Instead of title, genres, forms, or processes, as Ivey and Fisher express it, “A better way to organize curriculum might be around a theme, a big idea, or an essential question” (2006, p. 5). While this study examines ELA teacher planning at

the unit level and not at the course or multi-year level, the teachers' plans and experiences will still provide insight into how a sense of continuity and coherence is imagined in the planning of ELA learning experiences.

Planning as an Element of the Work Life of Teachers

In addition to aspects of subject knowledge and curriculum design knowledge, this study's third question aimed to examine implications of conceptual understanding and backward planning as an important component of the work of teaching. Beyond theoretical considerations, when teachers plan they simultaneously experience the joy of the creative process and the demands of everyday work. The shifting role of curriculum may represent an increase in workload that teachers may find challenging. Chapter 5 presents an exploration of the experience of planning, including settings and methods. Several practical aspects of planning come to mind: teachers use of strategies, templates and tools to plan; the time and space needed for planning; and how teachers access support and expertise in collegial networks. This study examined and reported on such practical considerations.

Planning expectations have also changed in recent years. The mission of secondary schools has changed: it is now an expectation that all students should graduate from high school with high levels of literacy, inclusive of young adults with special needs (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) have argued that unless teachers plan at the conceptual level it becomes difficult to be flexible and differentiate instruction and assessment to suit a wide range of students. By operating at the level of principles, generalizations, or concepts, learning can be scaled to suit the complexity and challenge level needed by different students in a classroom. This study featured

teachers with diverse classrooms and a range of needs, and it is instructive to consider the ways their planning flexed to meet the diverse needs their students presented.

At the same time, the expectation for high level planning positions the teacher as a knowledge worker, part of a creative class, a professional who is relied upon to develop custom, personalized learning experiences to an ever-widening array of students. The creativity of curriculum planning was the subject of a qualitative inquiry based on dialectic interviews of twenty-five teachers from California, selected for their creativity in bringing secondary curriculum to life (Gose, 2005). Five themes emerged from the teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding ways they planned curriculum creatively:

1. knowing and teaching subject matter and achieving the course goals;
2. generating fun, engagement, joy of learning;
3. being relevant and challenging for students' interests, backgrounds, readiness;
4. being organized for the flow of energy: variety, increasing responsibility and challenge, student participation, variety in resource selection, and diversity in learning formats;
5. expressing a teacher's educational philosophy (e.g. personal development, teaching for democracy, critical thinking) (p. 58-61)

These themes recognize that there is artistry and creativity in curriculum planning. The creativity of designing began for these teachers with proficiency in the subject matter, but then turned to responsiveness, engagement, relevance and flow. Some of the joys of the creative work of planning emerged in the experiences reported by teachers, and is included in the analysis in chapter five.

Not only will the present inquiry have relevance for ELA teacher professional knowledge, curriculum knowledge, and craft knowledge, it also has implications for teacher professional learning. Where teachers are increasingly relied upon to design high quality learning, ongoing, job-embedded, professional learning is essential (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). In chapter five, the study will illuminate instances of book study, mentoring, faculty education workshops, inquiry networks and online digital collaborative spaces that contributed to planning ELA curriculum. Chapter five will also feature instances of collaborative curriculum-making in English departments, districts, and regional networks.

I have outlined the background and reviewed the purpose for studying the role of conceptual understanding in the planning experiences of ELA teachers in secondary grades. In the next section, I will introduce the research approach I have taken to explore teachers' experiences.

Research Method

Since my research goal was to explore teachers' perspectives and plans to develop a better understanding of how conceptual understanding works in the subject of English language arts, I shaped my approach to inquiry through the lens of constructivist grounded theory. According to Charmaz (2006), "Simply stated, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (p. 2). Essentially, through inquiry, I aimed to develop a workable theory of teacher planning for the development of conceptual understanding. I provided a fuller review of the development of grounded theory methods for this study in chapter two. To become more theoretically attuned, I also reviewed theory and research, presented in chapter 2,

on epistemology in ELA, ELA curriculum, teacher planning, social constructivist pedagogy and assessment, and the role of collaboration and professional learning.

Data collection. After gaining ethics approval, the research began by inviting educators who had experience planning backwards in ELA to participate as volunteers in semi-structured interviews. Through a purposeful sampling strategy, I sought a diversity of contexts in Canadian and American sites, both public and private school settings, and a range of grades from 7 – 12. Some of the sites taught ELA as a course, while others integrated ELA with other subjects. Eleven teachers agreed to participate and interviews with them were recorded and carefully transcribed. The contextual details about each participant are discussed in chapter 3. During each interview, I asked participants if they had extant texts of their planning to share. I collected and coded unit plans, web pages, checklists and rubrics, and other such documents that were shared by participants.

Data analysis and interpretation. Guided by a framework of constructivist grounded theory (CGT), I explored participant ideas, perspectives, and experiences in interview transcripts and extant texts. While traditional grounded theory poses the researcher as an unbiased, blank slate, I recognize that theories and ideas are constructed from participation in social communities. As a CGT researcher, I understood that my prior knowledge affects how well I attend to and interpret the views of my participants, so I took steps to more purposefully consider ideas and perspectives from participants, such as close coding (Charmaz, 2008). I entered the exploration with an openness to examining others' ideas and perspectives, reflecting on and recognizing my own biases and preconceived ideas, and attempting to listen, reflect, and reconsider my position. The idea was not lost on me that I was using a method of inquiry to shape

and change my own understanding of curriculum planning; at the same time, the subject of my study was about how others brought about understanding with their students.

To analyze and interpret the transcripts, I read the transcripts closely and engaged in open coding. Coding involves attaching labels to short segments of data to capture what that data is about, and to find patterns among the codes. I condensed the number of codes by combining categories that fit together and gave the category a title. Once categories began to emerge, I engaged in axial coding, sorting through each category and determining relationships between the information about the plans and experiences (Cresswell, 2013, p. 286). As I read and analysed further transcripts, I adjusted the codes with the new information, writing reflective memos about cases and categories (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). I described the context in which participants used backward planning, the nature of the learning they designed, and their perspectives and experiences with using backward planning. Further data gathered through artifacts (such as unit plans, charts, assignment descriptions, success criteria, and web pages) enhanced and confirmed the interpretation of meanings from the interviews. My description and interpretation of the data is laid out in chapters four and five.

This exploratory research may be relevant for a range of stakeholders. Exploring practitioner experiences may yield insights for ELA teachers and those who support them (e.g., teacher leaders, teacher educators, support teachers, consultants). Knowing more about planning might also inform collaborative curriculum development projects and professional learning designs. The findings of this study should not only be relevant to secondary ELA teachers and teacher-leaders, but also to university-based teacher educators, curriculum workers, and curriculum scholars.

Definitions

Several terms are used throughout this thesis that require definitions grounded in the existing literature. Some terms connect to the topics of conceptual understanding and teacher planning. Other key definitions relate to technical vocabulary integral to constructivist grounded theory methods. Since grounded theory has developed several related but distinct versions, these definitions specifically related to constructivist versions (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Axial coding – interpreting the relationships within the categories developed through open coding as they relate to the central phenomenon (Cresswell, 2013, p. 286)

Backward Planning – planning educational experiences for students by first identifying intended learning outcomes (enduring understanding and transferable skills), then, working back from these goals, defining acceptable evidence of such learning, and, finally, planning an appropriate instructional sequence. Such planning often involves collaboration between teachers. Other related terms include backward design, backward mapping, task analysis, and Understanding by Design (UBD) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Cooper, 2010; Katz J. , 2012; Schnellert, Dato, Ediger, & Panas, 2009)

Conceptual understanding – generalizations and principles that unite ideas by showing the patterns or relationships between / among them (Erickson, 2007). Also called enduring understanding, essential understanding, big ideas, declarative knowledge, and core concepts (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Ritchart, Church, & Morrison, 2011; Marzano, et al., 1988; Marzano, 1992; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Constant comparative – a strategy of interpretation in grounded theory research wherein the researcher identifies codes in early data, and then compares subsequent data to develop and saturate the category (Cresswell, 2013, p. 287)

Constructivist grounded theory – a form of interpretivist, qualitative research in which the researcher generates a schema of a phenomenon; the constructivist form of grounded theory is more flexible and less structured than traditional approaches to grounded theory (Cresswell, 2013, pp. 287-288; Charmaz, 2006)

Learning outcomes – the knowledge, concepts, processes and strategies, and attitudes and habits of mind that students gain from a learning experience (Suskie, 2004)

Metacognitive understanding – knowledge and understanding of one's own thinking about processes and understanding (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Open coding – the first step in the data analysis in grounded theory in which interview transcripts are segmented and sorted into the major themes of the study (Cresswell, 2013, p. 289)

Procedural understanding – knowledge of the steps in a process such as problem solving, including strategies (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Social constructivism – a theory that humans learn by participating in social and cultural experiences, and develop understanding especially by appropriating and internalizing the dialogue shared within the group (Vygotsky, 1978; Palinscar, 1998)

Understanding by Design (UBD) – a planning framework developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) that puts conceptual understanding and transferable skills at the forefront of curriculum planning. See also: backward planning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the opening chapter, I outlined how curriculum in English language arts (ELA) courses in secondary schools have focused mainly on procedural understanding. Since, increasingly, teachers are being positioned as the designers of learning experiences, research exploring conceptual understanding has to be positioned with the realm of classroom teacher planning. For learning to transfer, ELA teachers help their students organize learning by the key concepts of the discipline (substantive structures) and know how best to help students gain that understanding (syntactic structures) in a coherent and connected learning plan.

Whether conducting a literature review makes a researcher biased with preconceived categories has been a debate within the traditions of grounded theory research; however, in constructivist forms of grounded theory, engagement with the available research literature is thought to help a researcher become more theoretically sensitive and therefore more attuned to insights and innovations (Bryant, 2009, p. 63). In this chapter, I review relevant research about conceptual understanding in secondary English language arts. The review of literature will contextualize the study in relation to the three research questions:

1. How did conceptual understanding fit into teacher-created planning for ELA in a variety of contexts?
2. What were the perspectives of ELA teachers regarding a backward planning process?
3. What do these experiences suggest about the relationship between conceptual understanding and teaching ELA?

The review will begin by contextualizing the focus on teachers' relationship to curriculum. I will consider what is known from theory and research about how teachers design learning to bring about understanding, including some of the factors that shape teacher planning. Next, I review the nature of the plans teachers create, with a specific focus on backward planning, including the way teachers formulate higher order goals for conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive understanding. Following that section, I will examine the ways teachers design formative and summative assessment to gather evidence of students' growth in understanding and proficiency. Finally, I will review how teachers design instruction that promotes understanding, attending especially to selecting texts and designing opportunities for productive classroom dialogue.

Teachers' Relationship to Curriculum

To contextualize the nature of the research questions, it is first necessary to explain the reasoning for a focus on teacher-created planning for ELA. The idea established in the introductory chapter maintained that ELA teachers in western Canada have taken on an increased responsibility as curriculum makers. This premise will be examined in more detail to begin this chapter by thinking about levels of curriculum planning and the implications for the role of the teacher.

Curriculum planning occurs at different levels: institutional, programmatic, and classroom (Doyle, 1992). The *institutional* level constitutes the official statement of curriculum by government in a state or province, and curriculum at this level outlines the beliefs, purposes, and standards expected by society (Doyle, 1992, p. 70). For example, a belief expressed in the WNCP curriculum was that it would help produce highly literate, contributing citizens that could respond to changes in society and technology that were apparent in an increasingly global society (Western Canadian

Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998, p. vii). In the 1990s and 2000s the government positioned the role of curriculum as that of raising standards, holding schools to account for the mandated outcomes.

Subsequently, the *programmatic* level of curriculum (Doyle, 1992) takes the form of formal curriculum documents, such as Manitoba’s ELA Framework of Outcomes (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000). This programmatic document set out year-end learning outcomes for each grade level and included processes like comprehending and responding, managing ideas and information, and communicating with clarity and artistry. Other official documents included approved resources, a support document for curriculum implementation, and provincial standards tests at key grades. Since this programmatic level of ELA curriculum was so open-ended, it gave ELA teachers increased responsibility for developing curriculum at the classroom level. I will explore three metaphors of the relationship teachers have with curriculum: teachers as curriculum implementers, as curriculum adapters, and as curriculum designers.

Teachers as Curriculum Implementers. A traditional view of the relationship expected of teachers regarding curriculum maintained that the curriculum acts as the ‘ends’ while instruction, the ‘means’ (Popham & Baker, 1970, p. 82). The curriculum was set by the province or state and, if student outcomes were lower than expected, the teacher could bear the blame for not implementing curriculum with fidelity.

Table 2. Metaphors of ELA teachers' relationship to curriculum.

Advanced Organizer: <i>Metaphors of ELA Teachers' Relationship to Curriculum</i>	
Implementer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The curriculum represents the ‘ends’ and teachers, the ‘means’ • A curriculum gives direction; a teacher’s job is to carry out the curriculum with fidelity

Adapter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum documents and other available resources offer ‘potential’ for developing learning experiences • A teachers’ role is to collate and adapt such material into learning experiences in a local context
Designer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum is a lived experience shared between teachers and students, and reflected in the richness of ongoing classroom dialogue • Teachers are integral to the design and subsequent enactment of curriculum

Curriculum implementation fidelity is a phrase that means a judgement about the closeness between what teachers put into effect and the intended mandates of the curriculum by the curriculum writers. In my experience, the degree of training teachers received for a new curriculum is often limited and simply posting new documents online does not help. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1992), it may not be surprising that teachers under public scrutiny either actively resist provincial or school board curriculum reform attempts or that they stick to conservative, tried-and-true approaches (p. 368). In another take on this metaphor, the curriculum experts write the music and the musicians (teachers) simply play it.

The ‘teacher as implementer’ metaphor is even more difficult to apply when the curriculum is expressed as a set of year-end process outcomes and gives little direction of what to teach or when to teach it, as has been the case for ELA teachers in western Canada. In the past educators have explored changing the *conceptual* base of English studies According to Myers (2003, p. 460), curriculum efforts to develop new conceptual content were apparent in English curriculum experiments during the formalist period of the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Hammond (1998) described how some secondary English teachers focused on ideas from Northrop Frye’s literary

archetypes, Chomsky's transformational grammar, and central ideas from Brooks' and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. One important insight to emerge from the 'conceptualizing' experiments was that they only had effect in schools who were involved in the change: "The top-down curriculum reform worked in those schools that were directly involved in bottom-up work on the ideas and practices embodied in the curriculum" (Hammond, 1998, p. 216). Hammond's observations suggested the teachers who took part developed an understanding of the important concepts by teaching them. These narratives reveal that teachers need to be more than 'implementers' of pre-determined curricula; a better metaphor is needed to capture an effective relationship.

Teachers as Curriculum Adapters. ELA teachers have latitude in designing learning, but that does not necessarily mean that teachers create learning experiences from scratch. According to Ben-Peretz (1990), teachers do rely on published materials and accompanying teacher guides as a key source for curriculum at a classroom level, and they make choices from available options of pacing, teaching strategies, and optional components developed in the material (1990, pp. 5-7). Teachers choose and adapt published materials to provide curricular experiences that are appropriate for their students. In this light, teachers' relationship with curriculum may be more along the lines of *choice maker, adapter, or differentiator* (pp. 29-32). As a teacher myself, I certainly found such materials and adapted them, especially in the first number of years of my teaching career. For example, I found the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Shakespeare Set Free* series of tremendous benefit for helping me engage students with a performance approach that included improvisation, language study, and script performance. Since Ben-Peretz (1990) worked closely in her research with science teachers, especially in Biology, it may be true that ELA teachers are less likely to see

textbooks and teacher guides as curriculum mandates. Still, there is value in recognizing teachers' tendencies to use and adapt commercially and digitally available curricular materials, and in analyzing the potential and the problems that these adaptations offer to students as realized in classroom experiences.

Teachers as Curriculum Designers. A more accurate metaphor, at least in the case of ELA, of teacher's relationship to curriculum is that of 'designer.' Since curriculum mandates have been broad, year-long processes that were almost mute about conceptual ideas, texts, or knowledge. At the classroom level of curriculum, many ELA teachers make original plans – guided by broader curriculum frameworks– that are realized in context to response to students' needs. This situation has given ELA teachers the responsibility to design what to teach and when to teach, so long as those learning experiences helped students achieve the learning outcomes. Because the processes are so open-ended and content is vague, the metaphor that teachers have had much to 'implement' or 'adapt' in terms of ELA curriculum certainly does not seem accurate. A more realistic view of Canadian secondary ELA teachers' relationship to curriculum is that of *designer*.

Canadian scholars Clandinin and Connelly (1992) conducted narrative research into teacher practices that examined teachers' lived experiences in a school-based curriculum-making initiative called the Humanities Curriculum Project (Stenhouse, 1980). To raise engagement and achievement in middle years humanities courses for low-achieving students, teachers became designers of new courses that aimed to be more engaging and dialogic. The revised curriculum was to feature rich discussion, increased relevance, and a wider array of resources. Analysis of teacher interviews revealed that some teachers had overall positive experiences of participating in

curriculum-making. Through learning experiences that facilitated discussion, teachers found that they understood their students' lives better, that strong student engagement in discussion reduced behaviour problems, and that the demanding role as facilitator required putting faith in students (p. 383-384). These experiences indicated to Clandinin and Connelly (1992) that the curriculum that mattered most was the shared, lived experience in the classroom. They asserted that an accurate portrayal of the relationship between teachers and curriculum could be *teacher as curriculum maker*, that "the teacher is an integral part of the curriculum constructed and enacted in classrooms" (p. 363). While the relationship teachers have with curriculum includes planning and designing, it also includes living out the experiences with students.

The present inquiry is one attempt to find out more about how ELA teachers design and plan curricular experiences and live them out in classrooms. Given the reality that teachers are largely responsible for curriculum design, Grossman (2001) advocated a broadening of professional learning models for teachers to learn how to develop ELA learning experiences, parallel with those models that had emerged for writing instruction, such as the National Writing Project (p. 428). This call is not a new one. As far back as the early 1970s, Hillocks (1974) had called for pre-service ELA teachers to receive more training in curriculum design due to increasing choice and elective courses; he suggested that a lack of innovation, unclear curricular goals, and poor sequencing were key challenges, but asserted that adding a logical process for curriculum-building to pre-service education could be immensely helpful.

Factors that Shape Curriculum ELA Teachers’ Designs

If ELA teachers are curriculum designers, it is worth considering factors that influence teachers’ curriculum decision-making: their beliefs, their experience, external assessments, and efforts to coordinate curriculum.

Table 3. Factors that shape ELA teacher designs.

Beliefs (Eisner)	Career Stage	External Assessment	Coordinated Curriculum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop cognitive processes • To appreciate great ideas • To find personal relevance • To address social justice • To find personal relevance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novice teachers spend considerable time planning • Novice teachers often latch on to packaged material for survival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External exams can sometimes shape and narrow design choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some ELA departments or teams attempt to coordinate curriculum vertically (between grades) and horizontally (between subjects)

Teacher beliefs about the purpose of ELA curriculum. One important influence on ELA teacher curriculum design are the beliefs and philosophical assumptions they may hold regarding the purpose of school and the role of the subject ELA. According to Fang (1996), the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices is a complex one, especially because teaching practices are not always consistent with the beliefs teachers express. Eisner provides a frame to reflect on ELA teachers’ beliefs

about the purpose of school and the subject. Each of Eisner's (1985) five basic orientations to curriculum would impact the selection of aims, the use of resources, and the learning design.

Eisner's first curriculum orientation emphasized the development of cognitive processes (Eisner, 1985, pp. 62-66). Teachers who design learning experiences with this orientation emphasize learning processes such as inquiry and problem solving, based on the assumption that these processes will transfer to future situations the student will encounter. This orientation is congruent with recent ELA curricula in Western Canada (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998), which had largely been framed as a set of individual processes, outlining strategies for comprehension and response, inquiry, composition, and collaboration. For example, against the backdrop of research in process writing which was based on the self-reported cognitive processes of effective writers (e.g., Flower & Hayes, 1980), teachers might develop lesson plans to learn strategies for each of the stages of the writing process. Learning designs for process writing are beginning to incorporate more emphasis on developing writing skills within a community of practice (e.g., Boscolo & Ascorti, 2004). ELA teachers oriented strongly toward processes may design with an understanding of these skills as twenty-first century learning, such as the P21 Framework (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2017), which encompasses the "Four C's" – creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking.

In contrast, Eisner's second orientation to curriculum, academic rationalism (pp. 66- 69), is based on a belief that intellectual growth and broadened interest result from comprehending the great ideas in established disciplines. In effect, through discussion, analysis, comparison, and evaluation of work from the great minds of the past, students

can grow their own interests and aptitudes. Teachers oriented this way believe that ideas are timeless and universal, and accessible through study of the classics. Former president of the National Council of Teachers of English, Carol Jago, made this argument in her books *With Rigor for All* (2011) and *Classics in the Classroom* (2004). Jago asserted that classics are enduring stories that “tell the truth about human experience across both time and culture” (2011, p. 6). English teachers who select canonical works of literature are often taking this academic rationalist approach.

Besides the process-focused and the classics-focused orientations, a third orientation that may influence learning designs is the lens of personal relevance (Eisner, 1985, pp. 69-74). Proponents of this curricular viewpoint in ELA believe that texts and writing assignments should have meaning for each individual, that understanding develops because of choice and commitment rather than by deliberate exposure to stretch minds. This curriculum lens for ELA is especially popular as adolescents begin to make choices in relation to an emerging social identity and personal values. Recent professional books advocating choice in middle and high school include *Book Love* (Kittle, 2012), *Readicide* (Gallagher, 2009), and *Every Child a Super Reader* (Allyn & Morrell, 2016). These authors argue that schools ruin any motivation students have for reading, that most students simply pretend to read complex texts, and they cannot tackle greater complexity in reading responses unless they have read a greater volume of books that have personal relevance to their lives. When teachers design ELA curriculum with this purpose in mind, they provide access to a range of relevant texts, establish high expectations for reading and writing, model literate practices and attitudes, and develop intellectual engagement as much as achievement of skills.

Eisner's (1985) fourth orientation portrays curriculum as a means to help students contend with societal demands or to develop critical consciousness that will eventually address needed social justice concerns (pp. 74-79). Noddings' (2013) concept of ecological cosmopolitanism blends an emphasis on concern for the environment with a focus upon social justice. Dover (2016) recently conducted a qualitative study of twenty-four secondary ELA teachers who designed learning experiences with a focus upon social justice. The learning plans included a wide range of social justice topics such as racism, sexism, and classism, with literary, historical and contemporary sources. The teachers could address the process standards in the curriculum, and by using a justice-oriented approach, were able to address critical thinking skills. Manitoba Education and Training's stated mission for education is that it prepares them for "lifelong learning and citizenship in a democratic, socially just and sustainable society" (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). Another example of ELA emphasis oriented toward addressing societal inequalities is reflected in Christensen's books *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (2000) and *Teaching for Joy and Justice* (2009).

Finally, some ELA teachers may view curriculum simply to gain the skills that are necessary to sustain oneself economically (Eisner, 1985, pp. 79-83). Learning plans that develop literacy skills for the world of work might be one example. A reflection of this curriculum orientation often emerges in a testing and accountability movement that attempts to uphold standards, to use of best practice teaching methods, and to set programmed, sequenced, highly prescriptive curriculum. The rhetoric undergirding this thinking often portrays education and literacy as important for economic productivity and competitiveness. For instance, in the United States, the expressed purpose of the Common Core State Standards is to set a standard that ensures students are prepared to

meet the increasing demands of post-secondary schooling and workplaces after high school (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The focus in this perspective is on education for earnings and career advancement at the individual level, and economic competitiveness and productivity at the national level.

In sum, ELA teachers' learning plans may vary depending on their beliefs about the purpose of the course. They may view their role as developing literacy processes, considering time-tested ideas, exploring personal meaning, addressing social justice, or developing job-ready skills. These curriculum orientations may overlap and combine, or teachers may be unaware or uncritical of their orientations. Whether teachers adapt unit plans from commercial resources or design learning experiences from the ground up, it is important that they take a critical stance to the orientation taken. For example, Zhao (2012) advocated for teachers and schools to design learning for creativity and entrepreneurship to respond to rapidly changing global trends. On the other hand, Noddings (2013) encourages educators to think critically about the overall aims of educational experiences, envisioning a more progressive, holistic emphasis on personalized, problem-based learning that generates appreciation for ecological cosmopolitanism (a focus on caring for the earth and social justice) (p. 83). As they reflect teacher' beliefs and contributions to the education of future generations, designing learning experiences represents the core of teachers professional work: "curriculum development in all its diverse aspects – including program design, lesson planning, and student evaluating – touches on the heart and soul of education artistry" (Henderson, 2015, p. 6). Understanding how teachers' beliefs about the purposes of ELA curriculum vary gives insight into their design decisions.

Novice teachers and the burden of curriculum planning. If teachers' beliefs are an important factor shaping the design of ELA curriculum, so, too, is career stage. Teachers at the earliest stage of their careers can find the demands of curriculum planning challenging. In a longitudinal study of 135 teachers in their first five years, researchers in Alberta, Canada, tracked experiences through interviews and focus groups (Alberta Teachers Association, 2013). Of the initial group of these novice teachers, eighty-nine remained in the study for the full five years. An exploration of the experiences in the data revealed that new teachers spent considerable time locating resources, planning lessons, and working with colleagues (p. 9). Since novice teachers frequently changed teaching assignments in their first five years, they often had to plan new courses and new learning experiences from scratch each year (p. 34). Among other conclusions, the study authors indicated that novice teachers need support, resources, and help with planning in ways typical classroom teachers do not.

In their study of novice ELA teachers in the Pacific northwest of the United States, Grossman and Thompson (2004) found that besides classroom management, novice teachers spend considerable time on curriculum and planning. A later report from the same longitudinal study of new teachers (Grossman & Thompson, 2008) revealed the anxiety and frustration some beginning teachers felt toward interpreting a vague English curriculum and their subsequent use of packaged resources (p. 2014). Data was gathered from interviews (both individual and group), observations, and artifacts from both the classrooms and districts of three secondary teachers. The study noted that

All of the teachers in our study spent an enormous amount of time searching out curriculum materials for their classes. When they found materials that solved the pressing problem of what to teach, they quickly latched on to them...the more comprehensive the material, with respect to addressing both what to teach and

how to teach it, the more they solved the problems these beginning teachers faced (p. 2020).

Examples of packaged material that secondary ELA teachers used in the study included Daniels' (2002) book on literature circles, a full unit on writing the five-paragraph essay, and the Pacesetter English course materials (a full course in communication studies). The researchers noted that differences in the academic backgrounds of the participants had an influence on the degree to which the teachers could redesign curriculum experiences from their original packaged form (p. 2024). The curriculum materials became an important influence on how teachers thought about the subject, and in subsequent years they adapted the packaged material to better suit their students (p. 2025). The implication of the study would suggest that teachers benefit from curriculum design experiences that include a critical review of how to make use of existing resources. As Ben-Peretz (1975) suggested, teachers need an evaluation framework to judge the extent to which packaged resources have *curriculum potential* from which teachers and students might augment their learning experiences. Additionally, leaders in schools and districts must consider the best ways to support teachers developing yearly and unit plans, especially in the first five years or when teachers take on new courses or grade levels.

The influence of external assessment. Besides teacher beliefs and experience levels, another contextual factor that may shape curriculum planning is the presence or absence of external assessment systems. Depending on a teacher's context, external accountability requirements can significantly impact planning (Glatthorn & Shouse, 2003, p. 522). Smith (1991) found that testing programs tended to limit the breadth and richness of the curriculum and the teacher's mode of instruction. ELA teachers in

western Canadian provinces are relatively unencumbered by high stakes tests, college admissions tests, or federal education bureaucracies, as is the case in the U.S. or some other Western nations (Craig, 2009, p. 1035). However, external testing varies by province and program. For example, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs are common in academic-focused high schools as dual-credit opportunities.

Grossman and Thomson (2004) revealed in their longitudinal study of novice teachers that how districts and schools respond to external assessment demands can vary. The study included three secondary ELA teachers in two demographically-similar districts in Washington state where a state-wide writing assessment had been introduced. The teachers' ELA classes were observed for four years, three times during each school year, along with individual and focus group interviews. The researchers took observational field notes and collected artifacts of curriculum materials. Results revealed that the local district's policies had a significant mediating effect on the emphasis teachers placed on external assessment. One district's leaders put considerable emphasis on helping teachers integrate strategies into the curriculum for student success on the state assessment, while the neighbouring district virtually ignored the assessment. Undoubtedly, external assessment can influence teacher design choices, but it depends on how much the teachers and leaders in the organization think those results matter.

Curriculum collaboration and professional learning. A fourth factor that emerged in the review of research that may shape ELA teacher designs is how much pressure and support is available to coordinate learning designs between courses. Research on collaborative planning revealed that it could have substantial effects on

teacher learning if it is job-embedded (Wineburg & Grossman, 1998) and tailored directly to ELA teachers' classroom practices or content (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). A review of research on effective professional learning for raising literacy achievement by Kennedy and Shiel (2010) confirmed that professional learning should be contextualized; that is, it needs to be "on site" and "customized" (p. 376). Where school leaders enable time for collaborative ELA curriculum design during the school year, it could result in positive results for teacher learning.

One exploratory study of the collaboration of ELA teachers to plan focused on ways to integrate literacy strategies into curricula (Lawrence & Jefferson, 2015) as a means of improving student achievement. The study followed teachers in one American middle school who were designing unit and lesson plans using a Readers' and Writers' Workshop approach to improve literacy instruction. Teachers met weekly for 40-minute blocks facilitated by a literacy coach. The coach also provided in-class modelling, observation and feedback. Co-planning included a focus on both strategy instruction and conceptual mini-lessons. Elements of the workshop instructional model that were identified as important for student achievement included mini-lessons, collaboration, differentiation, choice, and emphasis on strategy use. According to the study results, the collaboration on these common approaches led to significant gains in reading achievement on a four-level scale. Teachers cited the common planning time and in-class coaching as important factors in improvement. The significant elements of this coordinated planning effort were using a common approach, embedding professional learning into the school day, and infusing the elements of effective pedagogy. The study adds evidence to the idea that collaborative curriculum planning has potential for professional learning under the right conditions.

The possibility of collaborative curriculum being effective professional learning was also evident in a Canadian study of professional learning communities. Earl and Katz (2007) evaluated networks of British teachers who were collaborating to develop a dependable, local curriculum with a dialogic design. The study included 137 networks and involved 1500 schools. The study revealed in part that curriculum planning was not only a solitary teacher endeavor, but a productive and purposeful form of collaborative professional learning and school improvement. Factors that contributed to successful professional collaborations included effective leadership, trust, communication, collaboration, inquiry, accountability, and support (Earl & Katz, 2007). Based on their work on school improvement in Chicago Public Schools, Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001) also maintained that such collaboration can make an important contribution to school improvement. The study used surveys and observational rating scales to determine whether increased instructional program coherence would have an effect on school achievement data. These authors found that when teachers work together within a school or district to bring coherence to local development of curriculum, the teachers gain professional knowledge and student achievement rises.

A key factor in the success of collaborative curriculum design is the degree to which it engages teachers in authentic dialogue. MacKeracher (2004), a Canadian adult learning expert, stated that professional learning approaches depended on effective communication skills, “including active and empathetic listening, responding to the other’s ideas and feelings, sharing one’s own ideas and feelings, and providing feedback” (p. 220). In contrast, ineffective learning is typified when “[dialogue is] reduced to two monologues in which neither participant listens to the other” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 220). To facilitate dialogic learning within collaborative curriculum design,

MacKeracher's would suggest placing the locus of control for planning equitably with each teacher in interactions where teachers co-construct shared models of effective practice (p. 223). These interactions included acknowledging existing schema; analyzing real cases; sharing anecdotes of challenges; reading, problem-exploration, strategy identification; strategy trials, action research, gathering data, and reflection (pp. 223-224). Collaborations between ELA teachers could positively shape learning designs if they included these powerful dialogic elements. For instance, collaborative backward planning invites participants to share what they already know and design something that fits their context; they problem-solve and inquire into a real case through conversation, trial the learning experience with students, and engage in reflection and revision.

One research study that included many of these dimensions was a collaborative reform effort conducted in New Zealand. The mixed methods study in two large secondary schools (Whitehead, 2010) judged the conditions under which a collaborative literacy initiative could sustain gains after external funding had been withdrawn. The study drew qualitative data from observations, artifacts, and interviews; quantitative data was comprised of proportions of students meeting expectations. Both schools maintained a dual focus on constructivist literacy learning, focusing on metacognitive thinking, comprehension strategies, and text structures. Led by principals, facilitative department heads, and literacy coaches, the professional development experiences invited debate and discussion within an inquiry cycle that included regular structured meeting time, professional resources, and administrative support. One key to creating a successful community of practice was the leadership's focus on data about instructional effectiveness. The study substantiated that such collaborative professionalism resulted

in achievement gains, with moderate to strong effect sizes ($ES=.32-.52$) in terms of proportions of students meeting expectations for literacy learning.

This focus on leadership, collaboration, and powerful professional inquiry echoed in other curriculum research. Spillane and Jennings (1997) studied attempts at aligning ELA curriculum, instruction, resources, and assessments. These researchers found that policy changes were insufficient for guiding reform in improving ELA instruction. The researchers studied nine elementary classrooms implementing reform in reading instruction in Michigan. The authors concluded two most important features for high quality curriculum implementation in ELA were the richness of student tasks and quality of classroom discourse. With richer tasks and better dialogue, students would engage more fully in reading and responding to literature. The study demonstrated, however, that when teachers negotiated curriculum with colleagues, such interactions represented significant opportunities for professional learning and school improvement. The available research suggests that coordinating ELA curriculum across the subject or several grades would have an impact on the shape of learning designs, but that expectation has the potential to be a positive experience with the right facilitation.

Design across disciplines. Teacher designs become even more complex when combining aims from two or more subject areas. One Dutch study analyzed the needs of six teachers engaged in interdisciplinary curriculum design, along with the facilitators who supported them (Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2014). Like Canadian ELA curricular frameworks, the Netherlands had defined learning outcomes (“attainment targets”, p. 34), but teachers could design and enact curricular experiences with their students and could choose to teach in an interdisciplinary manner. The researchers wondered what teacher design teams needed most to develop curriculum

effectively and compared semi-structured interview data from both teachers and facilitators. One aspect of curriculum design expertise that needed attention was increasing external consistency, defined as having a coherent understanding of the expected outcomes of a course design and a shared vision of how to achieve these outcomes (p. 38). The teachers found it difficult to establish a consensus about the design process, and they lacked “a shared understanding of the main concepts they wanted to include in a lesson series” (p. 49). The Dutch researchers concluded that facilitated discussions that established a shared understanding of concepts, the reasoning for why that concept is important, and strategies and tools to bring about that conceptual understanding (such as templates, curricular frameworks, and evaluation guidelines) helped both teachers and facilitators establish better plans (p. 53-54). The study highlights the possibility for a focus on conceptual understanding to have a clarifying effect for the contributions of each discipline to integrated curriculum.

Such professional collaboration across disciplines is not without its challenges. One study of twenty-two English and social studies teachers meeting regularly in a teacher professional community to develop interdisciplinary curricular units revealed that tensions can arise when participants have a different sense of purpose (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2000). Conflict emerged where ELA teachers focused on pedagogy and social studies teachers were more concerned about content expertise. The tensions likely arose due to the different emphasis within each discipline on curricular aims and territorial tensions.

To conclude, my review of the available theory and research highlighted several important factors that influence the shape of learning designs. First, teachers sense of the purpose of ELA curriculum, whether derived from cognitive processes, great works,

personal relevance, social justice, or employability skills, guides their design. The level of teaching experience also matters a great deal for design, as novice teachers have not developed the repertoire of learning experiences from which mid-career and experienced teachers can draw. A third influence is the presence of external assessment requirements, balanced with the relative importance placed upon them in particular schools. A fourth influence in teachers' learning designs depends on whether others in a particular context expect the curriculum to be coordinated between grades or across subjects within the grade. Finally, concepts planned for ELA can be affected profoundly by attempts to design in an interdisciplinary way, such as combining ELA and Social Sciences.

Research on ELA Teacher Planning

Any review of planning that attempts to typify the planning of secondary English teachers will likely fall prey to overgeneralization. Teachers vary widely in the amount of planning that they do and vary substantively in their planning styles (Glatthorn & Shouse, 2003). Some teachers plan with broad strokes, while others are much more detail-oriented; some may start planning with content in mind, while others begin with an idea, and others start with tasks or activities.

In addition, it is important to narrow the time interval to focus upon teacher planning. Teacher planning occurs at a variety of time intervals – yearly, terms, unit, weekly, and daily – but teachers generally place *unit planning* at the highest level of importance (Clark & Yinger, 1979; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Ornstein, 1997). Secondary ELA teachers specifically emphasize unit planning (e.g., McCutcheon & Milner, 2002). Unit planning can be described as cyclical and incremental – teachers begin with a general idea and then move the plan through successive iterations where the plan

becomes more elaborated (Clark & Yinger, 1979). Because of the importance teachers place on unit-planning, this study will focus on that time interval of planning.

Table 4. Research on ELA teacher planning.

Nature of Teacher Planning	Early Research	Shift in the Field
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers vary in the amount and formality of planning • Teachers plan at different intervals, but unit planning is most significant in secondary contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers tend to foreground activities and resources in planning • Non-linear nature of planning: less formal and contingent upon what happens in class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning practices shifting from lesson level to longer-term • Emphasis on connectedness • Beginning with longer term goals in mind

Early research on teacher planning: activities and resources. Research on planning was initially influenced by four elements of instructional design popularized by Ralph Tyler’s book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1949):

1. Defining appropriate learning objectives
2. Introducing useful learning experiences
3. Organizing learning experiences
4. Evaluating the process and revising

These four elements [which curriculum theorist Pinar (2013) has discovered were co-developed by Taba and can be traced back much further in curriculum history] set out a rational, deductive series of steps. Early research on teacher planning sought to determine whether teachers actually used the linear planning processes outlined in Tylerian planning frameworks. Researchers discovered planning by teachers in authentic contexts was significantly more complex (Eisner, 1967; Zahorik, 1975; Taylor

P. H., 1970). For example, Taylor (1970) conducted a qualitative study of 261 British teachers in which he held focus groups, conducted document analyses, and administered surveys about teacher planning. Taylor discovered that teachers foregrounded activities and resources, aspects most directly related to teaching, in their planning rather than putting learning objectives first. The focus on activities and resources rather than learning objectives has resonance for the planning processes of ELA teachers today, where book choices and associated activities can dominate planning.

Another important study revealed the complexity of teacher planning in practice. Yinger (1980) conducted an extensive ethnographic case study of a teacher's planning over the course of a school year to develop a model of the mental processes of planning. The researcher observed forty full days, observing and taking notes as the teacher thought aloud about her activities. The study revealed that planning occurred at several different time intervals, and that activity planning and instructional routines dominated the teacher's thinking. Yinger also postulated that planning was a problem-solving process, and that it did not unfold in a neatly rational or linear fashion, but was more contingent on the previous teaching episode, which altered future planning and instruction. Hall and Smith (2006) regard teaching planning as a cognitive process that encompasses thinking before instruction as well as reflection and adjustment during and after instruction. This definition is a broader, more reflective, and more realistic reflection of how experienced teachers plan.

Yinger's early study also established that the curriculum as planned and the curriculum as experienced did not constitute a neatly linear relationship. However, according to a review by Glatthorn and Shouse (2003, p. 523), research on teacher

effectiveness reveals that while teachers' plans are not always implemented as originally designed, more effective teaching and higher student achievement are nonetheless correlated strongly with good planning.

Shifts in teacher planning: backwards design. McCutcheon and Milner (2002) conducted a case study of planning in high school English that offered a subject-specific case of the way that an ELA teacher planned. These researchers followed this veteran male teacher as he planned a course of study for British literature in a high school in a small Midwestern American town. The researchers conducted multiple interviews of the teacher and students and examined artifacts of planning. By contrasting the contemporary case to a review of planning research the researchers had conducted twenty years previous, they could illuminate key changes in this English teacher's planning. Data analysis revealed several key differences. First, the focus of planning differed. In the teacher's past practice, his emphasis had been on developing skill and behavioural objectives at the lesson level, but now this teacher developed long-term procedural and conceptual goals at the course level (p. 84 – 85). A second important difference was the teacher's focus on the thematic links between literature selections, revealing the importance of knowledge of the concepts and themes within and between texts, and how texts conceived in one time and context were read and understood in another time and place, a concept called *textuality* (Pirie, 1997, pp. 20-21). Contrasting his current with his own past practice, one that had focused more on lesson level objectives, the teacher in the case study described his approach as “*backward building*, which refers to envisioning where we want students to end up and then making the plans backwards from there” (McCutcheon & Milner, 2002, pp. 91-92). In contrast to the way planning was described in the earlier research where the focus of

planning was on resources and activities, this evidence pointed to a shift, foregrounding goals and rich tasks at the unit level, and continuing to plan contingently at the lesson level. The study concluded that this teacher’s ELA planning had shifted to longer-term, backward design, in part because of shifts in the field about how students learn and the nature of knowledge. The in-depth exploration of this case study may suggest the nature of the shift in how English teachers are now designing: longer, more connected learning progressions with the goal of deepening students’ conceptual understanding at the forefront of planning.

Research on Planning Backward

While no generalizations can be drawn from a single case study, this shift in the field regarding planning secondary ELA is tangible. Well-known English teacher and writer Jim Burke noted in a recent commentary that ELA teachers “are all thinking about planning in ways that are new to us” (2015, p. 250).

Table 5. Research about planning backward.

Features of Planning Backward	Learning to Plan Backward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A trend in secondary and post-secondary settings • Congruent with inclusionary practices • Common in designs that aim at higher levels of cognitive complexity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-service teachers found it complex but important • Backward planning methods raise the quality of planning overall • Collaborative backward planning can be a form of professional learning

There has been an increase in the professional tradebooks available on forms of backwards planning, such as understanding by design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014), concept-based instruction (Erickson, 2007), and standards-based assessment (Woodley &

Ferguson, 2003). While backward planning is a generic term, various writers and scholars have their own terminology. The most well-known term, *Understanding by Design (UBD)*, was developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). They used the term *backward design* and their work focuses mainly on K-12 education. Fink's (2013) phrase *design for significant learning experiences* has been made popular among post-secondary instructors and professors.

Backward planning for thinking. Harvard Project Zero scholars Ritchart, Church and Morrison (2011) use the expression *Teaching for Understanding (TFU)* for their design project. This design for conceptual learning starts with generative conceptual goals, focuses on thinking routines which develop understanding through dialogue, and gives students opportunities to apply their thinking with feedback. A related term, *concept-based curriculum* (Erickson, 2007; Lanning, 2013), has also emerged. With its origin in the curriculum work of Taba, Erickson's work focuses on instruction that develops conceptual understanding. Finally, several scholars have been working on learning progressions (Heritage, 2008), specifically focusing upon the formative assessment scaffold in learning designs. These terms are related but not synonymous.

Other researchers have examined whether the higher order goals targeted in backwards planning improve learning. One team of researchers hypothesized that instruction and achievement would improve if teachers had planned with a better understanding of the nature of learning goals (Raths, 2002). They used the updated version of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Learning Objectives* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) in relation to planning with higher levels of cognitive complexity. The study collected written vignettes from teachers enrolled in graduate classes that described planning

instruction and assessment. Analyses of the vignettes revealed that teachers often confused activities with goals, and planned and conducted assessments that were misaligned with the stated objectives (Raths, 2002, p. 234). For instance, one ELA teacher set out conceptual understanding as a target for her unit on *Macbeth*, and while many of the learning activities emphasized these concepts, she gave her students a test on the play emphasizing factual knowledge. The study suggested that backward planning could tighten the alignment between stated goals, activities, and assessments, could focus instruction on higher levels of cognitive complexity (analyze, evaluate, and create), and could help incorporate metacognitive thinking (Raths, 2002, pp. 234-235). These attributes – alignment, higher order goals, and self-assessment – are common features of designing for conceptual understanding.

Backward planning to facilitate inclusion. Several curricularists have noted the usefulness of backwards planning to facilitate the inclusion of diverse ability levels (e.g., Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). This perspective suggests all students benefit from a curriculum that deepens understanding. Struggling learners in particular benefit from the clarity of goals and ideas inherent in backwards designed units, and benefit from purposeful, ongoing assessment and feedback. Canadian scholar Katz (2012), among others, has incorporated understanding by design and essential understandings as an important part of instructional design for inclusion, one element in a larger framework of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL).

Learning to plan backward. Some research from the university education of ELA teachers reveals that shifting to such a longer view of planning has both possibilities and complexities, whether they are preservice or practicing teachers.

Backward planning in preservice teacher education. Graff (2011) taught preservice English teachers to use backward planning for units of study, and then conducted follow-up qualitative research after these teachers had practiced in the profession for several years. Through focus groups (21 teachers) and electronic surveys (17 teachers), participants revealed what aspects of backward planning they found valuable:

what they took from learning the backward design framework into their teaching [was] the knowledge of a process for lesson and unit planning, an emphasis on the importance of understanding both what students would learn and why, and a conceptual framework for evaluating both their own teaching and the curricular materials they encountered in the schools. (Graff, 2011, p. 163)

Teachers found the process practical, purposeful, and it helped them judge whether their teaching was successful. However, while ELA teachers in the study found backward planning valuable, they also struggled. The nature of their experience was reflected in the words of one participant who said it was “an effective and agonizing way to learn” (Graff, 2011, p. 164). While the planning method ultimately worked, the processes were complex and required teachers to engage in the intellectual struggle. That an English teacher described the lived experience of backward planning in part as ‘agonizing,’ suggested that the process may be multifaceted, ambiguous, and frustrating at times, and that teachers could use supportive coaching. However, participants in the study also determined that backward planning was effective. Graff concluded that “an emphasis on beginning with desired outcomes inherent in the backward design approach is helpful to new teachers in providing a process both for designing instruction and for evaluating curricula—one’s own and others” (Graff, 2011, p. 163). While it may have been hard intellectual work, clarifying goals at the forefront of the planning process had a focusing

effect on designing appropriate instruction and assessment for the early career ELA participants in this qualitative study.

While Graff's qualitative study relies on self-report of experiences with backward planning, some quantitative research confirms that it improves the overall quality of pre-service teacher planning. Kelting-Gibson (2005) assessed the quality of planning of 153 preservice teachers, comparing a control group to others who learned backward design methods. Independent raters used Danielson's (1996) *Framework for Teaching* categories to assess the quality of planning. The study found that participants who used backward design methods (n=74) created better plans overall. The plans were rated higher in terms of connecting content knowledge, setting clear instructional goals, selecting suitable resources, linking learning activities, materials, and small group instruction coherently, and designing better assessment. However, even though the backward planning teachers outperformed other planners in assessment, their overall average ratings on a four-point scale for assessment were still low (2.15/4), indicating that there remained a great deal of room for improvement for assessment practice (p. 34). The evidence from both Graff (2011) and Kelting-Gibson (2005) lend some evidence to the potential of backward planning to improve the effectiveness of pre-service teachers' ELA unit planning.

Backward planning as professional learning for practicing teachers.

Another study in the research literature provided evidence that backward planning can be effective with experienced staff (Taylor, Kwek, & Foo, 2010). The study sought to examine the use of the pedagogy that undergirds the *Understanding by Design* curriculum framework developed by Wiggins and McTighe (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and examined whether the framework would prove useful for teacher professional

learning. In this qualitative research study in a private girls' high school in Singapore, teachers used the framework to collaboratively redevelop a high school program for able students. A research brief on the project noted that "The humanities teachers were able to weave numerous connections between subject matter, students' prior knowledge and common-sense experiences. This helped to build a strong conceptual knowledge base from which to engage with the subject matter critically and creatively" (Taylor, Kwek, & Foo, 2010, pp. 4-5). Connecting ideas in dialogue helped students engage in learning.

Guided by this review, the present research focused upon ELA teachers' curriculum design at the unit level. The search for participants for this study focused on teachers who planned backwards at the unit level, because they were likely to have explicitly considered higher level understanding and the proficient use of processes. Some of the plans in this study were constructed collaboratively. The pattern of backward planning generally followed a three-stage pattern: formulating higher order goals, designing assessment, and planning learning experiences. In the remainder of this chapter, I will review the thinking and relevant research associated with each of these phases with consideration of secondary English language arts.

A Close-up Examination of Planning for Conceptual Understanding in ELA

One goal of this study was to explore the conceptual territory of ELA. Teachers who have used backwards planning are likely to have explicitly considered conceptual goals. Rather than beginning with literature selections, lessons, and activities, teachers focus on identifying desired results, defining the collection of evidence and success criteria, and developing a learning progression. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) defined the process of backward planning: "One starts with the end – the desired results (goals or standards) – and then derives the curriculum from the evidence of learning

(performances) called for by the standard and the teaching needed to equip students to perform” (p. 2). An important focus of this planning process is that it shifts the emphasis away from an accumulation of facts and sub-skills at the lesson level to focus on enduring understanding at the level of unit planning. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), the first consideration of planning for teachers is to determine important knowledge (facts, concepts, principles) and skills (processes, strategies, methods). The criteria for what constitutes important English language arts concepts and skills includes

- 1) transferable to life beyond school
- 2) lie at the “heart of the discipline”
- 3) complex, sometimes counterintuitive, and require ‘uncoverage’
- 4) relevant and engaging for students (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007)

The concepts and processes that have these characteristics are deemed “enduring understanding.” Statements of enduring understanding synthesize what students should understand as a result of acquiring and applying the important knowledge, ideas, processes and skills that are central to ELA as a discipline, understanding that has lasting value beyond the classroom (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Table 6 A close examination of planning with conceptual understanding in mind.

Identifying Desired Learning	Designing Summative and Formative Assessment	Designing Learning Experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating conceptual goals: narrative and paradigmatic • Developing goals for procedural understanding • Metacognitive goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating rich tasks • Developing success criteria • Planning formative assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing texts • Designing dialogic interaction • Layering in metacognitive awareness

Identifying Desired Learning

Backward planning begins by first identifying intended learning outcomes, including enduring understanding, transferable skills, and metacognitive knowledge. Several researchers have noted the importance of understanding the nature of learning goals on the part of the teacher. For example, Hattie’s (2008) book *Visible Learning*, which summarized research meta-analyses, concluded that an important part of teacher expertise is understanding “...how teachers see the surface and deeper understandings of the subjects that they teach, as well as their beliefs about how to teach and understand when students are learning and have learned the subject” (p. 25). Hattie’s view of the teacher’s expertise posited that how teachers conceptualize their subject determines their approach to instruction and assessment. Some research has established that these conceptualizations of subject matter emerge strongly in discourse when teachers plan collaboratively (Gregoire Gill & Hoffman, 2009). Grossman (2016) developed the Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observations (PLATO), a framework reflecting criteria for effective ELA instruction. Among the criteria for the highest level of ELA teaching proficiency in PLATO included the description, "the teacher provides

clear and nuanced explanations and helps students distinguish between different but related ideas, and the instruction focuses on conceptual understanding of ELA content" (Grossman, 2016). Grossman’s framework suggested a teacher’s understanding of the structure of goals propels clarity and connectedness of ideas. In the past few decades, the orientation of official ELA curriculum has emphasized literacy and thinking *processes*. Since ELA curriculum has mainly focused on these processes rather than on ideas, teachers may find the conceptual territory less than clear. Putting conceptual understanding alongside processes at the forefront of ELA planning may help teachers develop instruction and assessment that has clarity, connectedness, and responsiveness (Ivey & Fisher, 2006).

To examine setting goals that represent the deeper understandings of the discipline, it makes sense to first review the nature of knowledge. Bloom’s *Taxonomy of*

Figure 2. Major types and subtypes of knowledge (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Heer, 2015).

Factual	Conceptual	Procedural	Metacognitive
Knowledge of terminology	Knowledge of classifications and categories	Knowledge of subject-specific skills and algorithms	Strategic knowledge
Knowledge of specific details and elements	Knowledge of principles and generalizations	Knowledge of subject-specific techniques and methods	Knowledge about cognitive tasks, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge
	Knowledge of theories, models, and structures	Knowledge of criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures	Self-knowledge

Objectives in the Cognitive Domain (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) was revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). One significant change from the original was that knowledge was categorized into four *types*: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive (see *Figure 2* on page 75 **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). These types of knowledge will serve as an organizer for reviewing types of learning goals in teacher planning.

Factual and conceptual knowledge. The first type, *factual knowledge*, includes elements such as vocabulary, facts, terms, and details. ELA teachers plan factual knowledge when they select particular elements of fiction or figures of speech, for example. This factual knowledge type contrasts with *conceptual knowledge*, which involves interrelationships among elements within a larger structure that allows them to function together. Carson (2004) defined *conceptual knowledge* as finding patterns within and across domains of knowledge(s):

Concepts generally take the form of an assembly of knowledge built up out of many parts to form a coherent pattern. A concept has an intelligible structure; it is not a mere collocation of associated parts. Knowledge of all the parts does not constitute knowledge of how these parts acquire coherence together, which is why we are regarding conceptual knowledge as a specific category, a specific type of knowledge (Carson, 2004, p. 70).

Conceptual knowing includes classifications and categories, principles and generalizations, and themes, models, and structures. When ELA teachers plan around concepts, they are articulating the patterns, principles, and generalizations about the ways that different kinds of knowledge cohere (Carson, 2004). Conceptual knowledge is important for connecting ideas together, because seeing the purpose or pattern make it

more likely that students can retain understanding over time and can apply it to new contexts.

Evidence suggests making concepts explicit in teacher planning improves student learning. McKeown, Beck, and Blake (2009) conducted a quasiexperimental study with middle years students comparing student performance in reading using a strategy-based approach (emphasizing procedural knowledge) with performance using an approach more focused on ideas (emphasizing conceptual knowledge). In the treatment group, open-ended questions around important ideas provided the impetus to discuss texts. The results of the study found that the concept-focused approach yielded higher results on standardized measures of narrative recall and expository learning. Further, the content approach generated more talk around texts and students made relevant connections with other disciplines. This study provides substantial evidence for an emphasis on conceptual goals. The approach can be effective when teachers are explicit about the important concepts of the subject, assess students' current understanding in relation to these ideas, and build learning experiences that help them grow their understanding (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

Narrative knowing. In ELA, teachers are far more likely to be comfortable with *theme* rather than *concept*. This word 'theme' raises the question about whether ideas derived from story are different in kind from those derived from expository, non-fiction text. According to Carson (2004), narrative knowing involves making sense of experience, as well as the process of inductively interpreting story with a representational / metaphoric meaning (pp. 72-73). The inductive process of exploring narrative meaning can promote integration and coherence just as deductive reasoning from explanations can. Bruner (1986) also contrasted these types of big ideas, calling

them *paradigmatic* and *narrative*. Paradigmatic knowledge concerned deductive, rational problem-solving, while narrative knowing was “concerned with the verisimilitude, the likeness of truth, the creation of characters and events that represent emotional and social truths” (qtd. in Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 13). ELA teachers focus upon narrative knowledge when they discuss and interpret the important ideas explored in literary texts, and when they help students meaningfully narrate their own experiences. Real-world literacy practices include the development and engagement of aesthetic sensibilities and creativity. Langer (2011) explained:

I have treated literature as a way of thinking, rather than as a type of text—one aspect of intelligent and literate thought that brings with it particular reasoning and problem-solving strategies. From this perspective, literary thinking has the potential to be useful in all life’s contexts, across the life span. Through literature, students learn to explore possibilities and consider options; they gain connectedness and seek vision. (p. 2)

In this view, literature instruction leads to literate thinking. Planning with a focus on narrative knowing or aesthetic experience can engender the capacity for creative, imaginative problem solving. A focus on reading, writing, and experiencing literature can develop narrative knowing through posing questions, defining problems, rereading, and inquiry (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 15). The dimensions of knowledge gained through literature include

- vicariously experiencing different cultures
- developing empathy
- imagining possible selves
- exploring identity

- taking various perspectives

(Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006, pp. 11-15)

These dimensions, such as empathizing and perspective-taking, resemble some of the “facets of understanding” that Wiggins and McTighe (2005) developed as ways to reveal students’ understanding in rich tasks. At the forefront of planning, ELA teachers can formulate goals for conceptual understanding – big ideas, themes, concepts or essential questions. However, ELA teachers must appreciate the subtle distinction between understanding derived from reading and creating expository texts with that derived from narrative texts. The next section will review how teachers might express such conceptual goals in planning.

Formulating conceptual goals in unit planning. Because statements of conceptual understanding are relatively new in secondary ELA, some teachers may find it useful to develop a strategy for determining what ideas are most important. As many curricula are framed in terms of processes and strategies, concepts are often vague. When I entered the profession, our English department focused squarely on teaching ideas about elements of fiction, features of various genre, and crafting of an interpretive literary essay. Over time, our focus shifted to important themes in texts, such as social justice or the environment, or to an expanded definition of text and thinking critically about how texts were constructed.

An illustration of a statement of enduring understanding may help illuminate how teachers illustrate conceptual goals. Canadian teachers and researchers in British Columbia designed and trialled sample unit plans for ELA that expressed conceptual understanding. One example of a statement of conceptual understanding was “The language we use reveals our beliefs and values; such language can create and sustain

hope or can separate us from others” (Schnellert, Butler, & Higginson, 2008, p. 42). This statement more specifically articulates the expectations the teacher has in mind when naming a thematic unit with a single word such as *Values*. The complete statement constitutes conceptual understanding because it reveals the relationships among language, values, and impact on others.

Articulating conceptual goals with statements or essential questions.

Developing statements of conceptual understanding is an approach recommended by ELA curriculum theorists Peters and Wixson (2003). They suggested that ELA teachers identify the big ideas and corresponding beliefs and values that unite a group of texts that students will study and express them in the form of an essential question (p. 576). An essential question is one that engages students in the key issues of a subject, the core ideas that have been historically important (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 106-107). Peters and Wixson (2003) asserted that when teachers talk about ELA ideas, they are often thinking of “the ideas, problems, and issues that engage students” (p. 578) from literature, film, and other texts. These thematic statements or questions represent the lives and values of all students, confront developmentally-relevant issues that recur and persist across time, and build more complex understanding of such issues across a span of time.

However, in addition to ideas from texts, ideas and essential questions can also be developed about genre, form, and language (Peters & Wixson, 2003, pp. 579-580). For example, students can study mode in literary texts, such as the mythic, romantic, epic, tragic, comic, realistic, and ironic modes (Frye, 1957). They can engage with ideas about form and genre, such as the study of novels, plays, poetry, and non-fiction. Big ideas might center on classic motifs, images, and archetypes across plot and character, such as

the hero's quest, coming of age, or the mighty's fall from grace. The study of pragmatic texts might include examining the structure of non-fiction text, such as problem-solution, inverted pyramid, chronological, and cause and effect, or exploring new patterns of organization evident in modern electronic communication. For instance, a threaded e-mail is organized in reverse chronological order, comments on social media are often organized by popularity, and hyperlinked text is navigated in a home page, nodes, and pages. The point is that a core concept might be articulated about how both literary and information texts include structures and elements to achieve their purpose. These concepts about how texts work may be positioned at the heart of a unit of study or be twinned with major themes.

Teachers may also choose not to constrain the ideas to the themes or elements contained in a text or a set of texts. Such is the case when teachers take on pedagogies that involve inquiry, critical literacy, or interdisciplinary designs. Applebee, Burroughs, and Stevens (2000) suggested that what adolescents would appreciate in secondary ELA is “a sense of important issues being debated [issues with] a distinct social/political cast, raising questions about the roles of race, gender, and ethnicity within the fabric of American life and culture” (p. 425). Some ELA teachers emphasize how literacy learning is a vital component of achieving social justice (e.g., Christensen, 2000). Dover (2013) described how ELA teachers in her qualitative study could legitimize teaching for social justice as more than just a typical thematic unit by carefully mapping out the theoretical underpinnings of their work:

Principles of democratic education were evident in teachers' emphasis on civic responsibility; they used critical pedagogy to promote sociopolitical consciousness, drew upon multicultural traditions to ensure a diverse and

reflexive curriculum, adopted a culturally responsive stance, and applied the theoretical lenses advocated by social justice educators. (p. 9)

The constructs that Dover described provided firm ground for ELA students to develop concepts and skills alongside ethical and cultural competence.

Several scholars have wondered if the conceptual scope of ELA could use a complete makeover so that English class is more relevant. They suggested that as learning communities are becoming more culturally and economically diverse, ELA curriculum might not only focus on concepts from or about literature, but reframe itself to cross disciplinary boundaries (Luke, 2004; Brauer & Clark, 2008; Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Luke (2004) contended that the future of English requires us to “...reassemble the field from a host of disciplinary knowledges and epistemological stances [including] linguistics, English and other literatures, but also, broadly conceived, cultural studies, sociology, semiotics, multiliteracies, and other work in media and communications studies” (p. 86). Morgan (1995) stated the case for cultural studies as a way of re-visioning English, because the focus suggests “culture as the sphere of the inscription and enactment of social differences across a motley range of signifying practices” (p.28). Rather than looking backward to common ideas of literary criticism of the 1940s and 50s, these scholars advocated a shift of the conceptual base of English language arts in keeping with developments in the way people interact with literary and media texts in modern cultures. In effect, the focus of ELA would center on a social and cultural view of the role of language and texts in society.

In summary, according to the review, conceptual understanding in ELA can be derived from ideas and experiences conveyed in the text, from ideas about how language and texts work, or from ideas in the world beyond language and texts.

Procedural and metacognitive aims. Besides factual and conceptual knowledge, Bloom’s revised taxonomy outlines *procedural knowledge* and *metacognitive* knowledge. Such “how-to” knowing includes methods of inquiry, techniques and methods, and criteria for when to use a procedure. Carson (2004) termed this same set of skills as *cognitive process skills*: formalized thinking strategies suited to specific contexts and purposes (p. 71). For example, students use several processes related to creativity and imaginative problem solving: posing questions, defining problems, rereading, and inquiry (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006). With information texts, students might learn the skills for documenting sources, recording main ideas and details, and summarizing and connecting. Carson (2004) asserted that these strategies were “uniquely procedural, dynamic, and potentially transferable across different content areas or knowledge domains” (p. 71). Years of research on the cognitive strategies of proficient readers and writers (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1980) have led to curricular designs for reading strategies, writing processes, and inquiry methods.

An illustration of backward planning focusing on the development of procedural skills was evident when some U.S. researchers examined how teachers build a learning progression to help students with the skills of argumentation (Song, Deane, Graf, & van Rijn, 2013). The unit included descriptions of developmental stages in thinking through making an appeal, taking a position, citing reasons and evidence, and framing a case (p. 6). Students learned to apply their understanding of language flexibly in rhetorical situations, especially formal, written contexts that required the use of standard, edited forms of English. Procedural understanding in ELA for both reading and writing can

focus on accessing and building on prior knowledge, and then identifying and developing richer ideas and perspectives.

Strategies for accessing and connecting prior knowledge. An essential part of a model of literate thinking shows how readers and writers activate prior knowledge. Straw (1990) asserted that readers generate hypotheses and locate relevant schema in a manner very like the discovery process in writing (p. 82). Learners locate and activate *schema* (prior knowledge of content) from long-term memory, evaluate their relevance and appropriateness, and select appropriate ideas (Kucer, 1985, pp. 321-322). In other words, learners use clues from the text to explore in their minds what they already know about a topic. Through such connections, readers and writers build a text-world, a mental construction of the meaning of text. In addition to accessing prior knowledge of the topic, readers and writers also activate their schema of the genre, the language, the audience / author, and the purpose. For instance, they consider the typical structure of ideas in a text based upon their experience with the genre.

Identifying and developing understanding. As readers and writers proceed, they use a variety of strategies for generating and confirming (or rejecting) propositions about the relationships between ideas. They test them against existing schema and piece together clues to make intelligent guesses (inferences). These processes are dynamic in that they alternate between generating and confirming main ideas and details, thereby integrating them (Kucer, 1985). As Tierney and Pearson (1983) expressed the idea, to attain coherence, effective readers and writers add details and fill in gaps, seeking to develop a sense of the whole text and the relationship among its parts (pp. 7-8). Through these active processes, both readers and writers develop a mental draft of holistic understanding (Tierney & Pearson, 1983, p. 258).

These brief descriptions of the active reader and writer are idealized versions about what should happen. As Tierney and Shanahan note, “Reading and writing behaviours are varied, complex, and change with development” (1991, p. 254). These strategies and processes are not as well developed in some learners as they are in others, and they may be more developed for reading than writing or vice versa. While inside the process, effective readers and writers employ more elaborate strategies for these cognitive processes. For example, Straw (1990, p. 83) highlighted the importance of self-questioning and hypothesis generating about the ideas and structures of the text. Readers / writers carry out this kind of internal dialogue, to inference (question, predict, hypothesize, guess), connect, structure and restructure ideas. In the remainder of this section, I will trace key processes in the development of understanding, including connecting to prior knowledge, determining importance, posing questions and summarizing.

Activating existing schemata. Several implications emerge from understanding literate thinking as the active construction of meaning. First, teachers provide models of how readers and writers connect to prior knowledge about the form and pattern of the text and access prerequisite knowledge about the concepts and common misconceptions in text content (Squire, 1983). Teachers assist learners to develop more effective activating strategies by explaining and modelling such processes, giving guided practice and feedback, and offering opportunities for independent practice. Direct instruction in a range of text structures, especially unfamiliar patterns, will help learners form a mental picture of the relationships between ideas to expect in a text. To illustrate such instruction, consider a Canadian study by Kirkpatrick and Klein (2009). The study suggested that two factors that improve the quality of students’

written syntheses of what they have read include knowledge of text structure and skill in planning (p. 310). Their study of eighty-three grade 7 and 8 students confirmed that helping students with these factors was important for understanding the text and writing a summary. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) in the gain scores of students in the instructional groups revealed substantially better holistic writing scores of students' compare-contrast compositions (+1.21 S.D.). The study also revealed both low ability and high ability writers (as determined by their pre-test scores) benefitted from instruction in text structure and planning skills (p. 317).

Determining importance. A second important set of literate thinking processes relates to determining importance. Secondary ELA students use their prior knowledge of the content, the text, and the purpose to determine whether information is relevant to their emerging understanding of the text model. Reflection strategies for determining importance and relevance during reading and writing can enhance literate thinking. Langer suggested that "...every envisionment is filled with questions and hunches, along with more fully developed ideas, even after thought and development take place" (2011, p. 69). As students read texts, teachers can model strategies for thinking through what details are significant for the emerging text model, connect with the overall purpose, or have personal relevance. Having explored prior knowledge, students become more aware of what new perspectives, ideas, and experiences contribute to new understanding.

Posing questions. Reviews of research have concluded that instruction in question generation improves reading comprehension in middle years (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002, p. 181; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996) and a questioning stance promotes middle level engagement in reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p.

404). Tierney and Pearson (1983) suggested both readers and writers pose procedural questions (how and when will I read/write?), substantive questions (how will the topic be addressed?), and intentional questions (what will this text try to accomplish?) (pp. 3-5). To plan, the learner relies on procedural knowledge about how to access, use, and generate information during reading and writing (Shanahan, 2006). However, awareness of such procedures is not symmetrical between reading and writing (p. 176). For instance, a writer might know to brainstorm ideas about the text he is writing, but not use this same generative thinking strategy to access prior knowledge when reading.

Summarizing. Posing questions to explore the content, strategies for summarizing a text in writing are powerful ways to promote learning (Squire, 1983, p. 24). Teaching students to summarize a text enhances their schema for the genre features and text organization (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, p. 258). Summarizing can therefore aid in text comprehension. According to Tierney and Shanahan, to develop summaries, readers keep various levels of meaning in mind simultaneously. Knowledge is stored in memory in relational ways, somewhat like the way a town can be located in reference to local, provincial, and national levels and also can have a proximate relationship to other places. In a similar way, teachers help students keep a focus on both the whole and its parts in a dynamic, iterative process, focusing in and stepping back from whole text meanings. Unfortunately, lower achievers often get programs that are broken into out-of-context fragments – only focusing on spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and so on – producing a lack of coherence and consistency (Allington, 1991). Research employing multiple case study methods required teen-aged learners to summarize a single text and to synthesize ideas from two texts (Mateos, Martin, Villalón, & Luna, 2008). The researchers used a think aloud protocol, observed reading and writing activities, and

examined their finished work. Results showed that many students lacked the cognitive strategies to complete the tasks proficiently, while a few students were able to use strategies in a flexible and recursive way (pp. 695-696). The researchers concluded that there is an urgent need for more work on summarizing and synthesizing strategies in the classroom.

The implication for ELA teachers designing units is that learning the mental strategies for thinking routines need to be modelled, practiced, and coached. Activating knowledge of text structure, questioning the relevance and importance of content, and summarizing illustrate active thinking strategies for activating and developing understanding. The next section will examine how teachers can integrate aims that help readers plan, monitor, and revise their thinking when comprehending and composing.

Metacognitive knowledge. When ELA teachers design a plan to help students gain deeper understanding and more proficient strategies and skills, they build in a set of aims to expand the flexible use of metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), metacognitive knowledge is unique: metacognition includes knowledge of cognition and one's own use of cognition (knowing 'why'), including strategies, contextual / conditional knowledge, and self-knowledge. Evidence from cognitive research indicates that systematic instruction can help students develop the capacity to reflect on their own growth and self-regulate understanding and skills: "like other forms of learning, metacognition develops gradually and is as dependent on knowledge as experience. It is difficult to engage in self-regulation and reflection in areas that one does not understand" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 97). Thus, the relationship is reciprocal: understanding ideas and processes is

essential for metacognition, but engaging in metacognition broadens and deepens understanding.

Goals for metacognition can be thought of in terms of planning, monitoring, and revising meaning (Perkins, 1992) and can be layered in to the learning progression to help students become more independent and self-regulated. Metacognitive *planning* can include setting a purpose, judging how much time is available, and clarifying the purpose. *Monitoring* goals include judging whether emerging understanding makes sense, whether the purpose is being met, and whether the plan is working. Metacognitive monitoring goals also take place over a longer period in which time students become more aware of to what degree their understanding is expanding and deepening, and whether they are becoming more proficient in their longer-term literacy goals. Finally, metacognitive goals can include *revising* understanding and adjusting the use of strategies.

Summary: formulating higher order goals. In sum, as teachers design units to develop deep understanding, they articulate the aims for study. These aims involve a range of types of knowledge, from factual and conceptual to procedural and metacognitive. These types of knowledge comprise what students know, understand and can do, and can vary in terms of depth and complexity. ELA teachers articulate the conceptual understanding gained from exploring perspectives in texts and explore ideas about how texts work. ELA teachers layer in processes that develop understanding, helping students to access and build schema. Teachers model ways that students can plan, monitor, and revise understanding through metacognitive practices.

Designing Formative and Summative Assessment

Once teachers are clear about the aims of instruction, they design ways to gather evidence of students' growth, progress, and achievement. Teachers plan the means of formatively and summatively assessing whether and to what degree students have gained knowledge and understanding and have become more proficient in skills and processes. If teachers' plans have been clear about both knowledge types and level of cognitive processing, they can align instruction, curriculum, and assessment more effectively (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005).

Teachers can make stronger conclusions about student progress and growth when they base their judgements on varied sources of evidence. According to Frey and Hiebert (2003), summative evidence can derive from observations (e.g., anecdotal note-taking, logs, and checklists), conversations (questioning, conferring, and surveying), and from performance samples (artifacts of reading, thinking, writing and interacting, collected in a portfolio). This varied evidence strategy is called *triangulating*—cross-validating by using data from varied viewpoints at different times using multiple methods (Davies, 2011, p. 47). Effective planners design summative assessment tasks characterized as 1) diverse, 2) aligned with learning goals, and 3) emphasizing performance-based-assessment (Shepard, 2006).

Creating rich tasks. Teachers design rich tasks, or culminating transfer tasks, as an opportunity to consolidate understanding and reflect on processes by the end of the learning progression (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Targeting a depth of understanding requires performance assessment tasks and criterion-referenced assessment. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) suggested different but related facets of understanding planners can use to gather evidence of student understanding in a culminating task:

- 1) *Can explain* – an explanation develops a knowledgeable and developed theory of how and why things are connected or related and makes sense of phenomena (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 85-88). In ELA, for example, a performance task might ask a student to explain the results of their inquiry.
- 2) *Can interpret* – exploring the meaning, importance or message of an experience, especially those human experiences captured in narrative; through this process, students gain greater understanding of how experiences can shift based on perspective (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 88-92). Interpretation is common in ELA in such tasks as reading responses or character analyses.
- 3) *Can apply* – wherein students use knowledge and understanding effectively in a new circumstance; requires an understanding of the context, constraints, audiences, and purposes to determine how an idea might apply or how to solve a novel problem (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 92-94). Students might apply their understanding of rhetoric to develop a communication strategy for a student election.
- 4) *Have perspective* – use a detached and critical stance to explore an issue or experience from multiple points of view; examine the evidence supporting various positions to test strengths and limitations; examine implicit assumptions from majority and minority vantage points; and confront alternative theories and diverse points of view (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 95-97). An ELA task might have students conduct a case study, engage in resistant reading, experience and reflect on Indigenous or other cultural views in literature.

- 5) *Can empathize* – using a subjective, open-minded stance to imagine another’s emotional and lived experiences, including mainstream or counter-cultural perspectives (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 97-100). A performance task in ELA targeting empathy might engage students in reading multi-cultural literature, comparing and contrasting the characters’ lives with those of the students.
- 6) *Have self-knowledge* – use a reflective stance to understand one’s views strengths, preferences, and habits, as well as to be aware of one’s limits, biases, and faults (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 100-103). Through reflexive performance tasks, ELA students might explore aspects of their own identity or self-assess their own growth and achievement.

These subject-matter dimensions of developing understanding (explanation, interpretation, application), deepened by personal and social understanding (perspective-taking, empathizing, and reflection) help teachers design rich tasks and learning experiences. According to Henderson (2015), while Wiggins and McTighe’s work repackages a structuralist orientation to curriculum, these facets could be recast as a set of possibilities in teaching for holistic understanding (p. 12). Holistic understanding was defined as the educational aim of designing education experiences that foster freedom and flourishing (p. 41). Eisner (1994) emphasized that authentic assessment should be sufficiently nimble to document the actual outcomes of experiences, given the unpredictability of learning, rather than only those outcomes that a curriculum or teacher may have predetermined.

In planning for the development of deep understanding, ELA teachers design summative assessment processes that make thinking transparent. Two assessment

strategies that are congruent with teaching for deepening understanding include “gathering of data in naturally occurring contexts,” and “the use of an interpretive process focused upon seeing the patterns that exist in the data” (Murphy, 1998, p. 163). Primarily, such assessment practice implies engaging in dialogue with students and developing strategies for documenting learning in relation to success criteria. Johnston and Costello (2010) described literacy assessment as a “social practice that involves noticing, representing, and responding to children’s literate behaviours” (p. 158). Getting to know about students as literate people requires teachers to notice details, document them, and engage in responsive feedback. In this view, summative assessment is about synthesizing a professional judgement from multiple, varied sources of data (i.e., observations, conversations, and work samples) (Davies, 2011). This view of literacy assessment as a social practice contends that thinking and collaboration skills are combined and applied within a rich and authentic situation. Assessment tasks, therefore, must be designed with sufficient richness and complexity.

Applied literacy assessment tasks in ELA gauge students’ ability to read and write with an expanded range of texts in authentic contexts. Student projects incorporate drawings, maps, texts, charts, booklets, and diagrams (Ormerod & Ivanic, 2000, p. 93). In addition, because of advances in information and communication technologies, students are making meaning in ways that are increasingly multimodal, including oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and spatial patterns of meaning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2011). Applied assessment practices observe students’ literate thinking as they comprehend and compose texts in these modern, social, digital environments.

Developing success criteria. As performance assessment tasks are developed, teachers must concurrently develop success criteria for determining how well students

have understood a concept. If the task asks students to explain, teachers need criteria for judging the quality and development of the explanation so they can give feedback that moves learning forward. Collis and Biggs' (1982) *Structured Organization of Learning Outcomes* (SOLO) taxonomy describes student understanding according to its relative sophistication (see *Figure 3*. on page 94). These levels range from simple identification of parts (unistructural, multistructural), to seeing relationships between and among parts (relational), to seeing the wider context (extended abstract). The implication of this work is that it is possible to model, coach, assess and evaluate higher degrees of quality of understanding. At a basic level of understanding, students can only identify a part (unistructural) or list several parts (multistructural), but they do not communicate the relationship between or among the parts. At the relational level, thinking reveals the connections between elements, such as similarities

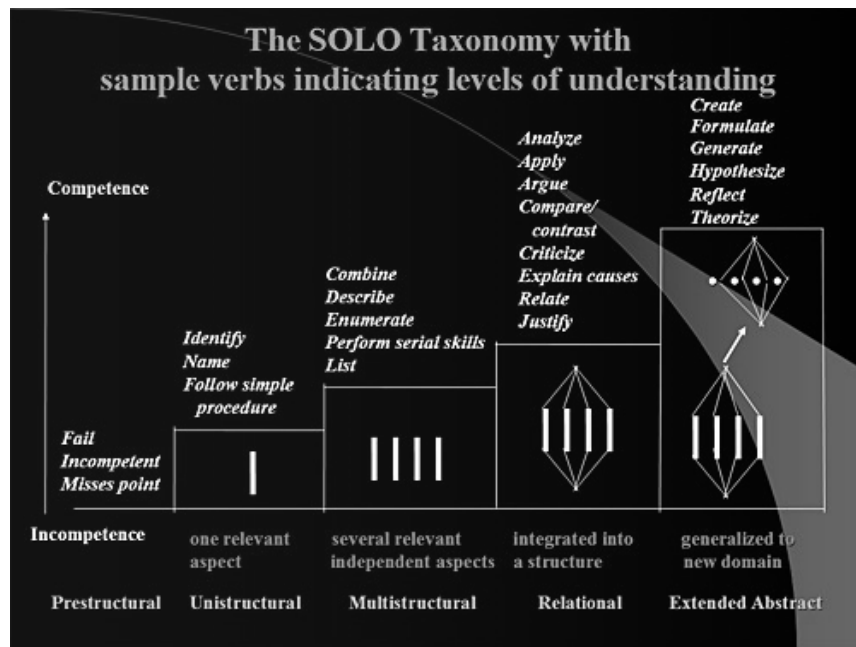


Figure 3. SOLO Taxonomy (Biggs, 2016). Used with permission.

and differences, causes, applications, or other relationships. At the final level of understanding, extended abstract, students can communicate an understanding of the structure in context. With this level of understanding, a person can apply understanding to a new context, find an effective solution, make inferences or predictions, develop a new perspective or theory, or go beyond the immediate subject to connect to a broader context. Biggs' SOLO taxonomy has been adapted by Harvard's Project Zero (Ritchart, Church, & Morrison, 2011) as a framework for helping teachers give feedback to students about emerging understanding.

Planning formative assessment strategies. Once summative assessment tasks are designed, ELA teachers can then plan formative assessment strategies to check in on student progress and keep them on track for success. High quality formative assessment (also known as assessment *for* learning) can support student literacy achievement, helping students to grow daily (Bennett, 2011; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2008). Formative assessment recognizes the developmental nature of literacy learning, that it is “ongoing and non-hierarchical” and “recursive and requires continuing development and practice” (Franzak, 2006). Because of its responsive nature, planning for the formative assessment practice is also ongoing and conditional.

Some evidence from Canadian classrooms revealed the conditions that help teachers increase the quality and frequency of formative assessment practice. In a mixed methods study, Schnellert, Butler, and Higginson (2008) analyzed data from six Canadian secondary teachers involved in a project to raise literacy achievement through improved formative assessment. These teachers treated their classroom as a school-wide case study, and they used assessment to inform their ongoing problem-solving. Teachers in the study made changes to their practice because of several operative conditions: co-

constructing assessments, setting and monitoring goals, collaborating with others, and participating in accountability practices. Quantitative achievement data revealed that formative assessment practices resulted in gains in student achievement.

Initial assessment. While much of formative assessment practice is ongoing, responsive, and relational, it is also possible when planning that teachers build in deliberate checkpoints to purposely monitor progress (Heritage, 2008). For example, teachers can plan diagnostic or pre-assessment to explore students' prior knowledge, interests, and readiness to learn (Tomlinson, 2014). Canadian researchers working in the tradition of learning sciences (cognitive psychology) have explored differences between novice teachers and expert teachers in terms of pedagogical reasoning (Mercier, Giroud, Brodeur, & Laplante, 2010). Goals and schema were key to pedagogical planning. Schema are "organized and ordered actions to achieve a given goal" (p. 32), much like an action plan, but more generalized. Schema for expert teachers included considerable attention to diagnostic assessment. However, teachers varied significantly in how much importance they place on diagnostic assessment:

By showing differences in pedagogical reasoning related to expertise levels, the results of the study suggest that more emphasis should be placed in preservice training on the diagnostic of the difficulties of students especially if diagnosis is seen as the basis of differentiation in teaching. (Mercier, Giroud, Brodeur, & Laplante, 2010, p. 77)

ELA teachers might explore what students already know and understand about what they are going to learn, may assess reading or writing proficiency to prioritize strategy lessons, and choose appropriate texts.

Monitoring learning. Not only are planned formative assessment practices important at the beginning of instruction, they are also key for ongoing monitoring of

learning. The five most central formative assessment practices, according to Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, and Black (2004) are

- Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success
- Engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks
- Providing feedback that moves learners forward
- Activating students as the owners of their own learning
- Activating students as instructional resources for one another (p. 54).

Formative assessment practice involves being responsive in the classroom spontaneously in relation to student need, but teachers can plan intentional opportunities and strategies for checking on progress and generating feedback.

Student self-assessment. In addition to clear criteria, checking, and feedback, ELA teachers must also engage students in metacognitive thinking about the texts they are reading and composing, as well as their progress in using literate thinking strategies and practices. Earl and Katz (2006) defined this student involvement with the term “assessment *as learning*”, which they defined as “...a process of developing and supporting metacognition for students.... When students are active, engaged, and critical assessors, they make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and use it for new learning” (p. 2). As students take on the role of assessor, they need ELA teachers to model the language for monitoring their literacy learning. These models are then practiced and become common in the everyday discourse patterns in the classroom. Stiggins (2009) asserted:

What students think about and do with the results is at least as important as what the adults think about and do with those results. Students interpret data,

too, and ask themselves ‘Can I learn this or not? Is the learning worth the energy it will take to get it? Is trying worth the risk that I might fail?’ (p. 12)

In this way, assessment as learning is a process of self-regulation.

Effective descriptive feedback. According to Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) meta-analysis of the research on feedback, “Feedback that attends to self-regulation is powerful to the degree that it leads to further engagement with or investing further effort into the task, to enhanced self-efficacy, and to attributions that the feedback is deserved and earned” (p. 102). Hickey, McWilliams, and Honeyford (2011) described a model of assessment for English language arts that included situated, participatory literacy practices with new media texts. The model included reflective practices that engaged students with discourse prompts about events, activities, artifacts, standards, and achievement (p. 254). Given the high effect size (E.S. =1.54) associated with student-involved assessment in Hattie’s (2008) meta-analysis, and given their compatibility with new forms of interactive literacy, participatory assessment practices are worth exploring further.

Designing Learning Experiences

In backward planning, ELA teachers map out conceptual and procedural knowledge that constitutes enduring understanding, they design summative assessments and success criteria that would enable them to see evidence of understanding, and plan strategies for formative assessment to ensure they keep students on track for success. To develop deep conceptual knowledge and proficient procedural knowledge, the final phase of backward planning focuses on choosing texts and designing instruction.

Choosing texts. ELA teachers spend considerable effort thinking about which texts students will read. Content choices in English are traditionally connected to major works of study and not integrated over time (Applebee, 1993). Because of this tacit assumption that certain literary texts will be included in a course of study, many ELA teachers who plan backwards may already have a key text in mind.

Shared reading selections in English courses can become stagnated and impervious to change. For example, a 1996 study of texts used in grade 10 Alberta English courses (Mackey, Vermeer, Storie, & DeBlois, 2012), which was repeated in 2006, showed that the text selections in ELA remained remarkably constant. In a decade of otherwise explosive change in text production and use in the age of the Internet, texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet* stayed popular:

In the decade from 1996-2006 traditional print genres such as poetry, plays, and short stories still form the core of the curriculum, with film serving as the main non-print medium. Computers and the Internet are used in the classroom, but in a traditional role of tools to support learning rather than as texts in their own right. (Mackey, Vermeer, Storie, & DeBlois, 2012, p. 45)

The canonical choices remain from year to year as stock and trade for English courses, even where teachers have choice.

One goal for curriculum is to provide students with increasing challenge in terms of text complexity. ELA teachers are increasingly allowing for students choice, giving students access to a range of literary works:

[Literature] explores a rich collection of ideas, issues, and problems that are central to the human condition; it provides the source of much of the best knowledge that humanity possesses; and it allows individuals to engage in ongoing dialogue or experience intellectual encounters with varying cultural beliefs. (Peters & Wixson, 2003, p. 581)

Students should read a wide range of texts over time, including novels, plays, poetry, and non-fiction prose. As they gain more and more reading experience, they develop more advanced understanding of story structure. They read narratives dominated by character change and introspection, and sweeping epics featuring a rapidly changing plot. With this experience, they gradually have more prior knowledge to draw from to bring to the next reading.

Text sets and classroom libraries. Rather than selecting texts from the canon, teachers may select texts or text sets that suit the enduring understanding and transfer skills they are targeting, even offering students choice of their own texts from a set of possible selections. This choice model is one currently being promoted widely by such practitioners as Kittle (2012), Miller (2010), and Allyn and Morrell (2016). The option comes down to whether teachers rely on shared text (the whole class reading the same novel, for example), or whether students are reading different texts (as they do in inquiry learning, book clubs, or literature circles).

Conceptual lenses. One way teachers can reflect on the variety of conceptual territories that students are exploring is to consider different conceptual lenses. One province in Canada attempts to achieve variety in the viewpoints represented in text selections when teachers are planning out the year by invoking a framework of rotating rich contexts or lenses. Saskatchewan Education's (2006) ELA curriculum identifies five broad contexts to rotate each year:

- 1) Personal and philosophic (psychological, inward focus)
- 2) Social, cultural and historical (sociological, outward focus on relationships with others)
- 3) Imaginative and literary (imaginary worlds and possibilities)

- 4) Communicative (rhetoric; the role of communication)
- 5) Environmental and technological (nature, technology and society)

(p. 278)

These contexts provide a broad conceptual frame that not only encourages variety in the range of texts within the course, but also provides coherence as the contexts are revisited over several grades. By contrast, a course by genre studies (plays, novels, poetry, short fiction) might have texts that focus only upon psychological introspection. The problem with not varying these lenses is that over the time that a student spends in secondary school, a topic might always be put in the same context. For example, if aboriginal perspectives each year are only considered through a distant historical lens, students may only get a limited conceptual understanding of indigeneity. Varying the conceptual lenses on indigeneity – from psychological, cultural, technological lenses can provide important ‘throughlines’ that, when considered in different contexts (or ‘lenses’), can develop student understanding more deeply and richly over time.

New and emerging forms of text. When teachers are choosing texts, they also need to represent how meaning-making has become increasingly arrayed across more than one mode of representation. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2015), in order to keep literacy pedagogy relevant for students, teachers need to bring new, digital media into the classroom, and teachers must come to recognize the importance of “*synesthesia* [emphasis added], or learning that emerges from mode switching” (p. 3). While literacy pedagogy focused on written language has dominated text choices, educators now need to consider how students become adept at moving recursively between written, visual, auditory, gestural, tactile and spatial forms of text to make meaning.

Designing dialogic interaction. In this final phase of planning, ELA teachers design a set of lessons that progress from direct instruction and modelling to guided practice and independent work. The features of instruction for social constructivist curriculum that stand out the most include 1) dialogue and thinking routines, 2) connectedness, and 3) challenge. A modern example of instructional practice that aims at students achieving conceptual understanding was developed in Queensland, Australia (Queensland Dept. of Education and Training, 2009). The productive pedagogies framework contained four important principles:

- 1) A higher degree of intellectual challenge, including a focus on understanding concepts through substantive discussion,
- 2) More relevance and connectedness to students' lives, tapping prior knowledge and making explicit connections to knowledge in other domains and problems in the world,
- 3) An environment that is conducive to learning, including social support, explicit success criteria, engagement, and self-regulation, and
- 4) A recognition of difference, including differences in culture and ability, and aiming at group identity and concepts of citizenship.

These principles – intellectual quality, relevance, a supportive environment, and a recognition of difference – typify the kind of pedagogical vision at which a concept-based curriculum aims. These principles imply key instructional design considerations – dialogue, connectedness and challenge. Along these lines, Chaiklin (2002) argued that teaching should be conducted such that students “... investigate the problems that enable them to develop a theoretical relation to subject-specific matter” (2002, p. 178). The approach involved teachers mapping out the big ideas and related concepts that are

central to a discipline, posing them as questions for students to investigate. Chaiklin (2002) argued, then, for a form of active, collaborative problem-based learning accompanied by frequent reflection and self-evaluation.

Dialogue and thinking routines. From a social and cultural perspective on ELA instructional practice, understanding is considered a product of participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Conceptual understanding develops from interactions within a social group that, together, develop culturally- and historically-created concepts that are appropriated and revoiced by individuals. Literacy develops through active participation in purposeful, collaborative activity (Wells & Claxton, 2002, p. 6). Clark (1990) aptly described learning in science: “... people become scientists by learning how to participate in the discourse through which scientific knowledge is continually constructed” (p. 5). Learning to become a scientist is a gradual process of socialization where the language shared in that community becomes internalized as a way of thinking. As Clarke (1990) explained “... in the process of communication itself we transform our interpretations of experience into the structures of knowledge we use to define for ourselves our reality” (p. 1). This *social* view of constructivism leads to a pedagogy that emphasizes opportunities for dialogue. By participating in the learning community, students appropriate and internalize language that shapes identity, power, and agency (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). A belief in this social constructivist frame shifts the instructional approach for ELA teachers to emphasize interaction and collaboration. Concurrent with dialogic pedagogy, ELA teachers also need to develop congruent assessment practices (Hickey, McWilliams, & Honeyford, 2011) that rely on documenting thinking from ongoing classroom dialogue.

Learning and development depend entirely on participation in human dialogue. If ELA teachers accept a situated model of literacy development that emphasizes that understanding develops through interactive, social experiences (Gee, 2004), what they need for planning instruction is a practical focus on how to use discourse tools (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Ritchart, Church and Morrison (2011) promote the regular use of dialogic thinking routines, structures that engage students in initiating, exploring, discussing, documenting, and managing their thinking (p. 45-49). For example, the “Generate-Sort-Connect-Elaborate” routine helps students explore and organize their thinking with a concept map (pp. 125-131). Embedding such thinking routines in the dialogic fabric of the classroom allows students to appropriate and internalizing these strategies.

ELA teacher planning that develops understanding maps out opportunities for authentic discussion and dialogue. Among all the cultural tools that are available for students, the central tool for learning is speech, and it is essential to examine the way that speech genres in the classroom relate to learning. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) studied classroom discussion in fifty-eight grade eight ELA classrooms. Substantive engagement in discussion, which was a relatively rare occurrence, made a significant difference to achievement on a later independent literary assessment. Substantive engagement was generated when teachers used authentic, open-ended questions, acknowledged and probed student response and concerns, and redirected student response to further questions. Later research confirmed the centrality of dialogue for learning: student achievement rose in classrooms with active participation in extended discussion (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). Students’ active participation was spurred when teachers or students asked authentic, open-ended

questions, and students' interpretations and contributions were valued. Unfortunately, these episodes of truly dialogic exchange were again rare, especially in lower track classrooms.

Research by Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) on classroom dialogue patterns revealed a teacher-led, whole class discussion model dominated. Marshall coded videotaped classroom discussions from sixteen English classrooms. Teachers dominated turn-taking, content contributions, and controlled the pace and direction of discussion. The pattern when discussing literature tended to unfold in three parts; 1) the teacher asks a question, 2) students offer short words or phrases in response, and 3) the teacher evaluates the answer and elaborates further. This initiate-respond-evaluate pattern was pervasive. In a connected study in the book, Smagorinsky investigated the patterns in small group discussion. He noted that the quality of discussion in small group tended to reflect the pattern that was modelled in whole class discussion, so teacher modelling of effective discussion practices is key (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995).

In classrooms built on dialogic models, teachers create opportunities to hear the voices of students, and for their students to be heard by a broader audience. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) asserted, "Comprehension of difficult text can be significantly enhanced by replacing traditional I-R-E [Initiation-Response-Evaluation] patterns of instruction with discussion-based activities" (p. 693). These authors assert that discussion that leads to understanding features open questions, student control of interpretive authority, more student than teacher talk, and teacher responses that are based on students' responses. Teachers can generate faith that students are being heard by planning activities / lessons where the audiences are more

likely to listen, understand, and respond. Teachers can plan classroom activities that bring out three forms of dialogue outlined by Renshaw (2004): instructional, consensus building, and inquiry.

Connectedness. With ongoing classroom dialogue, ELA teachers need to develop a clear sense of the connectedness between ideas. Researchers studying the way understanding develops suggest that teachers planning should emphasize connectedness:

Learning [is viewed as] a trajectory of development that connects knowledge, concepts, and skills within a domain. With clear connections between what comes before and what comes after a particular point in the progression teachers can calibrate their teaching to any missing precursor understanding or skills revealed by the assessment, and determine what the next steps are to move the student forward from that point. (Heritage, 2008, p. 3)

Researchers in cognitive psychology assert that instruction is more effective and more permanent when it *links* learning in different contexts over time (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). When students apply learning in different contexts and refine their thinking, they can generalize ideas. Harvard researcher Perkins (2009) claimed that for learning to transfer, students need opportunities to *practice* transferring. By engaging students in practice during which teachers coach students to make connections, students practice linking their own knowledge of content and process to the new context (pp. 111 – 115). This way they develop “rich extensible action repertoires” (Perkins, 2009, p. 117) or rich schema for applying and transferring skills.

Challenge. Not only are rich dialogue and connectedness essential for planning learning progressions, so, too, is posing an appropriate level of challenge. As some students reach high school, their literacy levels plateau while others continue to make

gains, creating a significant gap between the highest achievers and the lowest achievers by grade nine. Hattie (2008), reviewing the statistical evidence about the effectiveness of teachers, concluded

...the greatest single factor facing the further enhancement of students is the need for teachers to have a common conception of progress. When a student moves from one teacher to another, there is no guarantee that he or she will experience increasingly challenging tasks, have a teacher with similar (hopefully high) expectations of how to progress up the curricula, or work with a teacher who will grow the student from where he or she is, as opposed to where the teacher believes he or she should be at the start of the year. (p. 128)

Hattie's viewpoint called for teachers to coordinate curriculum vertically and to engage in frequent assessment to ensure students are experiencing a moderate degree of challenge. One American report recently suggested that the clearest predictor that students will succeed in university coursework was performance in response to complex texts; the report concluded that, in addition to a focus on higher order thinking, schools should pay more attention to higher text complexity (ACT, 2006). Researchers working on Common Core State Standards initiative in the U.S. reported that texts in both post-secondary schools and in workplaces have increased in length and complexity, and students must read these more complex texts independently (i.e., without the assistance they often get in secondary school) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, pp. 2, Appendix A). According to the study, teachers are posing a lower challenge level in terms of text complexity in many middle and high school ELA classrooms. This circumstance creates a gap when students transition to workplaces or post-secondary studies where they are expected to read and write a higher volume of texts of greater complexity, and do so independently.

Students will enter a learning experience with a range of prior knowledge and understanding and with different levels of proficiency with expected skills (Tomlinson, 2014). Luke, Dooley, and Woods (2011) proposed that a stand-alone, “in-the-head” strategy instruction approach to ELA instruction actually creates an equity issue for culturally diverse, indigenous, and low socio-economic status students, because the strategy approach assumes that the gap between the capacities of developing readers and expert readers can be filled by employing various metacognitive practices for inferring meaning, determining purpose, and solving vocabulary problems. Much evidence suggests that prior knowledge is as important as the efficiency of strategies for making meaning (Buehl, 2013).

Developmental readiness. ELA teachers who are designing a learning sequence might also consider developmental theories of cognition. Piaget’s (1970) developmental framework posited that when children are between ages 7 and 12 they operate in a *concrete operational* stage of thinking where logical thinking emerges and children can begin to explore concepts. After age 12, many students move to a *formal operational* stage where they can think in abstract terms. However, Shayer (2003) estimated that fewer than 50% of students in grades 10 and 11 (aged 16-17) are formal operational thinkers.

Egan (1997), in his work *The Educated Imagination*, developed a Vygotskian perspective, which would explain this discrepancy in literacy development. Egan suggested that development is not a matter of physical maturity, but of experience, and that cognitive tools are acquired through socio-cultural interaction. Without significant experience in a literate culture of practice, these tools do not develop – they are not simply a matter of brain maturation. For example, *romantic* understanding reflects a

fascination among youth for exploring the extremes and limits of reality, associating with heroic qualities, and deepening narrative understanding. With sufficient literacy experiences (typically when students become teenagers), students can shift from more concrete to more abstract thinking, or *philosophic* understanding. They can make more theoretical connections, see rules and relationships, and see themes and generalizations. As these capacities deepen, students develop *ironic* understanding. They know language can be used in subtle ways and consider multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives (Egan, 1997). A major implication of Egan's theory is that ELA teachers match instructional design with the stage of a student's cognitive tool development if they have want students to deepen their understanding, and create the dialogic conditions to help students gain additional cognitive tools.

Of course, planning for the development of cognitive tools is made more demanding when teachers are faced with a diverse range of student language ability and maturity. Sociocultural theory holds that we learn literate thinking by appropriating language in social and semiotic interaction, but this premise only holds true if the learning poses an appropriate degree of challenge. It would waste a young learner's time to set about learning something he or she already knew or could do. Likewise, it cannot be so complex that, even with the support of a teacher, a student could not learn.

In order to help students connect to their prior knowledge, teachers use strategies to assess the student's range of interests and abilities (Wells & Claxton, 2002, p. 6). Vygotsky (1978) refers to this optimal state as a zone of proximal development, a social setting that presents students with opportunities to learn what is beyond their independent capacities, but within reach given enough support. It must pose a moderate degree of challenge. Enciso and Ryan (2011) pointed out that: "the potential to learn is

optimal where a problem makes use of and extends the language, knowledge, motivation, and relationships already available to the learner” (p. 133). The teacher and other students in the class engage in social interaction, and the dialogue acts as a temporary scaffold that supports students until they can read and write texts more independently. In other words, the zone of proximal development is mainly a social exchange. Literacy develops when socially mediated in contexts that provide development that is challenging but within reach. Language is the primary vehicle for learning, the central mediating resource, the “tool of tools” (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Enciso and Ryan, 2011, p. 136). As we appropriate language through participating in various social contexts over time, language becomes a sociocognitive tool that provides inner control in the present and also enables us to imagine future selves (Encisco & Ryan, 2011, p. 133). By becoming literate, we learn the ways of thinking of our culture through time, and that language in turns shapes our identity, power and agency (Gee, 1996).

Layering metacognitive awareness into instructional designs. When planning learning experiences to develop deeper understanding, teachers can intentionally consider ways to help students develop metacognitive awareness. As defined earlier, metacognitive learning goals can be directed toward planning, monitoring or revising meaning.

Planning. One important form of being metacognitively aware is a set of strategies for planning, whether students are comprehending or composing. Reading and writing are inherently goal-directed, purposeful processes, and these goals and intentions have a great impact on determining meaning (Straw, 1990, p. 81; Kucer, 1985, p. 327; Ruddell & Unrau, 2013, pp. 1032-1033). Teachers can model strategies for

metacognitive planning, such as setting a purpose, judging how much time is available, and clarifying the purpose. When students engage in rich, authentic tasks, students can reflect on their own purposes for reading and writing, such as connecting with personal or academic goals, satisfying curiosity, or collaborating with others (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 15). Teachers can purposefully build opportunities into their instructional designs to promote active planning, and model the strategies that students use to make meaning.

Monitoring. Teachers who seek to develop conceptual understanding plan opportunities for readers and writers to monitor the coherence of their emerging understanding of the text. For example, students use one set of strategies to monitor meaning while engaged in an initial reading or drafting of the text. Readers judge whether they are maintaining the gist of the text, have the details straight, and know the meaning of words and phrases. Effective readers and writers can recognize when meaning has been lost, while ineffective readers continue to read the words even though they do not comprehend the ideas. Teachers can make use of heuristics for self-questioning during and after reading and writing processes to cue students to monitor emerging meaning (Straw, 1990, pp. 82-83).

In addition to monitoring emerging understanding, teachers can also plan to help students monitor their understanding of purpose or audience. Readers and writers monitor whether they understand the intent or purpose of a text when reading or whether they have adequately considered the audience when writing. Studies have shown that when readers develop a sense of authorial intent they comprehend better, especially when reading more complex texts; similarly, students who develop an ongoing concern for audience as they write, through collaboration, feedback, and

training, think more critically about their writing and develop better texts (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, pp. 260-261). Readers and writers monitor meaning in an internal dialogue with an absent other (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62). In this internal dialogue, readers and writers rely on shared metaknowledge about written language, such as knowing the functions and purposes of reading and writing and knowing how readers and writers interact (Shanahan, 2006, p. 75).

While monitoring meaning involves maintaining the gist and considering the author / audience, a third set of monitoring strategies involves an awareness of whether the plan is working. According to Tierney and Pearson (1983), such embedded and ongoing monitoring informs reader / writer decisions about whether s/he is doing a good enough job, whether s/he is being efficient enough, or whether s/he is done (p. 17). Teachers set out goals for metacognitive thinking that monitor what tasks need to be completed and how much time is available. In a thinking classroom, teachers draw attention to the dynamic shifts students need to make as they flexibly adjust their priorities and pacing to suit changing circumstances.

Finally, instructional designs can intentionally include a set of monitoring strategies that work over a longer period. Teachers can aim to help their students become more aware of whether their understanding is expanding and deepening, and whether they are becoming more proficient in their longer-term literacy goals. Modelling how to keep track of progress over time engenders a learning goal orientation wherein individuals pursue personal mastery; such a perspective contrasts sharply with a performance or ego orientation, which seeks to look good regardless of learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 407). In terms of growing understanding, learners

monitor changes in their understanding, perspectives, and beliefs also over the longer term as a result of interacting with texts and others.

Revising. In addition to the metacognitive strategies planning and monitoring, teachers include goals for helping students revise their understanding and use of strategies. Such revision strategies enable readers and writers to add ideas and details to first drafts, delete ones that do not fit, change details to improve meaning, or leave ideas as they are. Revising is a flexible, dynamic, and evolving process. While many older writers may have an image of revising separate paper copies of drafts of academic papers, modern writers revise their texts on the fly, continuously engaging relevant strategies with various frequency (Hansen & Kissel, 2011, pp. 272-273). These revision processes are not linear or cyclical or even recursive – they are drawn upon as they are needed in the holistic process of meaning making (Graham & Perin, 2007).

In an ELA classroom focused on deepening understanding, not only do teachers set goals for revising meaning during initial read-throughs or first drafts, they also engage revision strategies to reread and redraft. Teachers can model a willingness for revising initial interpretations by expanding the meanings they constructed from previous read-through. Similarly, writing instruction should devote more time for rereading, re-examining, and reshaping the text for meaning, emphasis, form, balance, and rhythm (Tierney & Pearson, 1983, p. 15). Revising can also be viewed in the longer term when thought of as a process of reorganizing and redeveloping existing understanding (schema) after considering new ideas (Ruddell & Unrau, 2013, p. 1028). It is important for teachers to create a context for secondary ELA where knowledge is open to revision and growth.

Implications of metacognition for designing learning experiences.

Including goals for planning, monitoring and revising is essential for the academic growth of ELA learners. One of the strongest implications of the research on metacognition is that teachers need to prompt learners to monitor and revise their understanding and interpretation of text more frequently. Reading and writing instruction in secondary schools might expand the attention paid to monitoring and revising for meaning (Kucer, 1985, p. 331). Teachers might consider creating an environment where meaning and response are characterized as growing envisionments (Langer, 2009), becoming clearer and better developed with thinking, collaboration, and ongoing revision: “In envisionment-building classrooms, it is assumed that ideas change and grow over time as one reads, writes, hears, and thinks. Therefore, teachers try to help students engage in ‘meaning in motion,’ questioning ideas, leaving them open to new refinements and connections as they are in the act of gaining fuller understandings” (p. 59). Tierney and Pearson (1983) suggested that while it is common to think of writers revising, we seldom think of readers revising, and that educators could improve comprehension instruction vastly by devoting more time and direction for deliberation: re-examining initial interpretations, thinking of meaning as ‘draft’, rereading, re-reacting, and questioning (p. 15). Teachers need to provide time for thoughtful reflection and provide an environment that encourages ever-growing ‘envisionments’. They need to encourage readers to read whole texts with little interference, and then design opportunities to revise meanings, linger with text much more than we do, encourage rereading, multiple readings, and close reading of passages.

However, while planning, monitoring, and revising are commonly *associated* with the writing process, in my experience many ELA teachers seldom ask for more than a

first draft of written responses. Unfortunately, timed tests and writing prompts reinforce the idea that only a first draft of writing is necessary or desirable. Teachers can demonstrate revision processes and deliberately cue revision through heuristics and conversations, modelling the metacognitive, self-aware thinking skills through purposeful think alouds. That way ‘thinking about thinking’ becomes a part of the culture and dialogue of the classroom, and students can appropriate these skills.

As further implication of the metacognitive agenda for designing ELA instruction, teachers shift their assessment practices to signal greater value for metacognitive strategies. To describe progress and growth in metacognition, teachers engage students in conversations about strategies, observe them during class, and read their reflections in logs, journals, and other work. Based upon these sources of evidence (conversations, observations, and classroom samples), teachers suggest ways that learners can enhance their metacognition and self-regulation. Teachers ask students what they are thinking and describe ways that they can make their thinking and self-assessment more sophisticated.

Not only is there a function for students to monitor their comprehending and composing during a single literacy act, they must also set goals, monitor progress, and make ongoing efforts to improve in literacy learning over time. Thomsen suggested that “...once readers become reflexively interested in their own reading processes they can be helped to progress to higher levels of reading” (1987, p. 180). Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) described the range and content of ongoing metacognitive conversations developed in the Reading Apprenticeship program, shown to develop better adolescent readers:

New knowledge, strategies, and dispositions to reading develop in an ongoing conversation in which teacher and students think about and discuss their personal relationships to reading, larger issues of literacy and power, the social environment and resources of the classroom, their cognitive activity, the structure and language of particular types of text, and the kinds of knowledge required to make sense of reading materials. (2001, p. 92)

Unfortunately, this ongoing metacognitive conversation is relatively rare, as one recent study found. The researchers trained teachers to use workshop approaches to writing; what was missing in part was a systematic and integrated focus on self-regulation through goal-setting, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation (Troia, 2007, p. 144). Self-regulation is a critical ingredient for a successful middle years literacy program, especially for struggling learners.

When ELA teachers take on the role of curriculum maker, they begin planning units by articulating conceptual and procedural knowledge. Conceptual ideas in ELA may be communicated by the themes of texts students read in class, may be ideas about how texts work, or may be ideas derived from their knowledge of the world. Procedural knowledge is planned in terms of strategies for comprehension and response, inquiry and research, and composing and creating. Once aims are mapped out, teachers design culminating assessments and performance criteria that enable them to see evidence of understanding. They also consider designing formative checkpoints in the learning progression leading to the final task. Finally, in the final stage of planning, ELA teachers select resources and design instruction that is rich in dialogue and thinking, connectedness, and an appropriate degree of challenge.

Summary

This review has focused on ideas related to the ELA teacher as a curriculum maker. Modern curricula for secondary ELA positions the teacher as curriculum-maker, as expressions of official curriculum are mostly a framework from which to design learning experiences. Several factors influence the shape of teachers' designs, such as their beliefs, their experience and background, the influence of external assessment, and efforts to coordinate curriculum within a district or school. Knowing a teacher's orientation to the purpose of curriculum explains how they position ideas and texts. Teachers can benefit from coordinating their planning efforts within a school. Research on ELA teachers' planning reveals a shift from planning forward with activities and resources to planning backward with higher level aims at the unit level, aligned instruction and assessment, and concept and process in balance. Teachers' instructional designs should achieve connectedness, continuity, coherence, challenge, and relevance to achieve understanding.

When ELA teachers use the backward design processes such as those of Wiggins and McTighe (2005), the planning sequence develops roughly in this order: 1) identify desired learning, 2) designing summative and formative assessment, and 3) design learning experiences. ELA teachers benefit from an epistemology that balances what students know and understand (factual and conceptual knowledge) with what they can do (procedural and metacognitive knowledge). Once these higher order goals are in place, teachers determine the evidence they would accept that students had made progress in developing depth of understanding and transferable skill. They design culminating assessments and success criteria: authentic or performance tasks that generate evidence for evaluation. This evidence can be derived from observations,

conversations, and work samples. Once these summative assessment components are designed, teachers can build a conscious set of waypoints to stop and check for student understanding and give feedback. Such conscious progress checking allows teachers and students to adjust keep learning on track.

Finally, teachers choose texts and design instruction. To develop understanding, teachers develop a social constructivist pedagogy that features a ‘sea of talk’ (Britton, 1970, p. 29). With strategies for orchestrating social interaction, teachers help students activate prior knowledge, explore perspectives, and develop and deepen understanding.

The research on ELA teachers as curriculum makers is now unfolding in a new context. Exploratory research is needed to find out more about the ideas and perspectives of ELA teachers as they aim for conceptual understanding. The next chapter will outline the constructivist grounded theory methods I designed to gather ideas and perspectives, explore themes among these experiences, and develop a theory about how conceptual planning works this discipline.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Restatement of Purpose

In this study, I examine the ideas and perspectives of English language arts (ELA) teachers regarding planning for the conceptual understanding of their students. Since backward planning explicitly includes conceptual understanding, studying secondary (i.e., grades 7 – 12) ELA teachers who use such models helped me explore how concepts intersected with instruction and assessment and had an impact on the learning of their students. The design of the research was derived from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The central research questions that guided the research, first introduced in chapter 1, were:

1. How did conceptual understanding fit into teacher-created planning for ELA in a variety of contexts?
2. What were the perspectives of ELA teachers regarding a backward planning process?
3. What do these experiences suggest about the relationship between conceptual understanding and teaching ELA?

In this chapter, I will explain how the study design suited an exploration of these research questions. Then, I will position myself as a researcher and review strategies I employed to conduct this research in a manner faithful to the terms of the study's design. I will describe the participant recruitment strategy, the criteria for inclusion, and describe research participants. Finally, I will describe the strategies I used to gather, record, and organize the data and the process of interpretation.

A Grounded Theory Approach to Inquiry

As a researcher, I aimed to generate a workable theory about the role of conceptual understanding that had pragmatic application for secondary ELA teachers. Such an exploratory and pragmatic stance required a qualitative paradigm (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 4-7). A qualitative approach allowed me to gather data in the form of words and images from teachers in schools and document details about those contexts, preserving the complexities, anomalies, and tensions. As Howe (2001, p. 203) asserted, interpretivist research is based on the understanding that “humans are self-creating”, that they “actively shape and reshape [existing social arrangements and cultural norms] that act as constraints on behaviour” (p. 203). The qualitative paradigm started with the data and allowed me to make theoretical insights from the bottom up, examining teachers’ planning processes, and drawing meaning from their perspectives and experiences.

Because the purpose of this study was to explore the role of conceptual understanding in ELA, I employed a grounded theory methodology described by Charmaz (2006, p. 9). Grounded theory design is a “systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad, conceptual level, a process, action, or an interaction about a substantive topic” (Cresswell, 2012, p. 423). Grounded theory has grown since the 1960s into a family of qualitative research practices used in education, nursing, social work, management and sociology and other fields. Using this approach I explored ways in which ELA teachers helped their students develop conceptual understanding; choosing a research methodology that also aimed at developing new understanding seemed a logical and congruent choice. To contextualize the specific

methods employed in this study, I will provide a brief review of the development of grounded theory.

The Traditions of Grounded Theory

The methods for exploring ideas in this research project were derived from the traditions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2008; Clarke, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Social science was framed in the 1960s by theoretical positions established by such thinkers as Marx or Weber, and researchers tended to explain social phenomena as it aligned with the theory. In their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) developed qualitative methods that delineated systematic, disciplined practices of inquiry that generated theoretical explanations from close examination of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead of beginning with preconceived theories or hypotheses, the researcher was to begin without preconceptions and employ an inductive rather than a deductive approach. Glaser had trained in his graduate work on rigorous procedures to preserve objectivity in *quantitative* research. He extended this scientific, objective thinking to develop strict technical procedures that ensured valid, rigorous, impartial approaches in *qualitative* research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 32). On the other hand, Strauss was trained in ethnography rooted in theoretical traditions of symbolic interactionism and constructivism (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 32). What both researchers shared was a vision for a systematic method for theory to emerge from empirical data that could be considered as rigorous and objective as quantitative research might be.

A Constructivist Turn

While the early grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss offered rigour by making the procedures transparent and replicable, it depended on an implicit positivist view of knowledge that “assumes that reality can be discovered, explored, and understood” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 33). Glaser and Strauss split in their agreement about grounded theory methods, especially after the publication of Strauss and Corbin’s *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990, 1998). Glaser rejected what he considered a basic and mechanistic approach to research offered in the book and had several methodological criticisms (Bryant, 2009, p. 9). Strauss and Corbin’s text had been intended to introduce novice qualitative researchers to basic procedures. One example of a procedural difference of opinion was Glaser’s stance against conducting a literature review of the phenomena under study prior to commencing research, whereas Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 56) recommended critically engaging with the existing literature, without allowing it to impose itself over the researcher’s understanding and interpretation of the data.

Grounded theory has evolved as ideas from social constructivist theory have gained acceptance (Mills, Bonner, & Frances, 2006, p. 3). Other graduate students of Anselm Strauss, such as Adele Clarke and Kathy Charmaz working in the field of health studies, took grounded theory a step further adding concepts from constructivist theory. For example, Strauss and his students were less likely to adopt pre-determined codes, preferring instead to use *in vivo* terms drawn from the language used by participants (Clarke, 2008). Strauss was influenced by his background in the second Chicago School of sociology that was guided by symbolic interactionism, the theory which highlights the subjective meanings people impose on their experience in the world. This constructivist

grounded theory (hereafter, CGT) methodology developed by Charmaz, Clarke and others, drew upon the core idea in symbolic interactionism that researchers can study people's meaning from the language and texts they share (Clarke, 2008, p. 64). I employed several key elements of CGT in this study that demarcate it from other related versions of the grounded theory method, including an active involvement of the researcher, the use of inductive and abductive logic, and a focus on pragmatism.

Active role of the researcher. The first feature essential to define a constructivist version of grounded theory concerns the positioning of the researcher. As all social experience is mediated by language, the researcher is acknowledged as an important part of the study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) had originally theorized researchers as a 'blank slates,' freeing themselves from preconceived theoretical orientations to be unbiased and detached. By contrast, Strauss later began to emphasize the social construction of meaning, with an emphasis on multiple interpretations and perspectives (Clarke, 2008). The implication of this frame is that both researcher and participant share meaning in a discursive system, "a system of interlinked assumptions, values, beliefs, and interpretations forming a specific common sense about what is real, true, good, and important" (Stager Jacques, 2009, p. 308). The aim of a CGT researcher is to engage in the dialogue, explore meanings, and report on the important ideas that arise.

With this constructivist turn, proponents of CGT now positioned the interaction between researcher and participant as integral to creating and shaping the data (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz (2006) later explained that this view of social interaction reflected an ontological stance: "Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the 'discovered' reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and

structural contexts” (p. 524). Reality is co-created in context, so the researcher needed to remain open and flexible without becoming overly committed to preconceived methods and technical procedures (Charmaz, 2006). The implication for the present research was that I needed to develop procedures to reflect on how my own understandings and context shaped and limited meanings that participants from other contexts were communicating.

Inductive and abductive research logic. A second important feature of CGT is the emphasis on inductive and abductive reasoning. While Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally envisioned an inductive interpretive process, CGT researchers recognize that the interpretive process cannot be purely inductive. As Charmaz (2008) defined it, “Constructivist grounded theory is a 21st century form of the method that begins with inductive inquiry, adopts comparative logic, inducts abductive reasoning, and emphasizes interaction throughout the research process” (p. 32). In other words, with an openness to wondering about a phenomenon, and by interactively comparing cases for themes and considering ideas in the field, the researcher can move from observation to theory.

Instead of the ideas arising only from empirical data, in CGT the researcher invokes an iterative, dynamic, interpretive process, moving back and forth from the data to existing understanding and making meaning from the connections. From the beginning, Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized inductive logic, that the analytic process of coding (the ‘constant comparative method’) allowed codes and categories to arise from the data to prompt theory discovery rather than simply verify existing theories. The constant comparative method allowed for simultaneous data collection and interpretation so that theory could be constructed as the exploration unfolded.

Corbin and Strauss (2008, pp. 325-326) clarified that while the method is inductive in the sense that the findings emerge from data, the interpretive process of building concepts and linking statements features deductive logic. For example, while early grounded theory methods had discouraged researchers from conducting extensive literature reviews to preserve a more purely inductive, empirical method, CGT theorists encouraged *theoretical sensitivity* (i.e., detailed understanding of the research literature and one's experience) as a foundation for making new insights and judgements (Bryant, 2009; Glaser, 1978).

Certainly, inductive analyses of data remain a core element of the interpretive process of grounded theory; however, the process “moves beyond induction to create an imaginative interpretation of studied life. We adopt abductive logic when we engage in imaginative thinking about intriguing findings and then return to the field to check our conjectures” (Charmaz, 2009). Abductive reasoning is the process of making an informed, plausible inference from a result and checking that inference against the available data. According to Timmermans and Tavary (2012), the researcher adopts an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and theory, noting what is surprising, incongruent, puzzling, or fresh, and checking these discoveries against existing theory, and returning to the data. Invoking procedures that harness abductive logic, such as memo-writing, revisiting, or exploring anomalies or alternative explanations leads to more robust and practical outcomes: “abduction is sensible and scientific as a form of inference; it reaches to the sphere of deep insight and new knowledge” (Reichertz, 2010, p. 7).

Pragmatism. Finally, along with an integral role for the researcher and the use of abductive reasoning, a third feature of a CGT stance is its pragmatism. CGT aims not at

being purely theoretical, but developing a strong vein of practical application (Bryant, 2009). Pragmatism is a movement in philosophy that holds that a theory has truth if it works effectively, that meaning can be found in the practical consequences of accepting it (McDermid, n.d.). In the field of education, Dewey (1920) attempted to debunk many of the typical dichotomies: between deductive and inductive logic, and between theory and practice. Dewey rejected an epistemology where knowledge is accessible, universal and unproblematic; rather, he asserted that knowledge is context-dependent, provisional, and fallible (Bryant, 2009, p. 15). The goal of CGT is to garner theoretical insights appropriate to context rather than to develop an entirely new theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). One criteria for judging the success of CGT is its usefulness: offering interpretations that people can use, sparking further research, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and contributing to make the world better (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183).

Positionality

The researcher's biography affects the research process, from the development of questions to gathering data, through interpretation to drawing conclusions (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). Throughout this study, I have reflected on ways that my position in social structures has influenced my viewpoints and perspectives and has limited others. I have had a middle-class upbringing that included a stable home and extended family, post-secondary education, and parents with professional careers. As a mid-career educator, my perspective is shaped by secure entitlements earned in the work. In this study, I am exploring the views of teachers whose design decisions represented what they believed was important for their students. The teachers worked in diverse communities. Some participants worked in private schools where the demands and expectations placed

upon their students were beyond my own life experience having grown up in a rural, east coast community. Other participants served communities in working class mining towns with significant Indigenous and immigrant student populations. As my questions essentially pertain to choices about what conceptual ideas teachers deemed important for the communities that those teachers served, I had to be open to understanding their interpretations, to interrogating my middle-class biases and preconceptions, and to recognizing the moments where choices and perspectives were aligned with my own or caused disquiet.

I also acknowledged other positioning in social structures in the complex ways that being middle-aged, straight, and male situated my knowledge and shaped my relationship with the subject and the participants. For example, as of 2015 in Manitoba, the majority (>70%) of those in the teaching profession are women (Statistics Canada, 2015). Indeed, in this study, most participants who volunteered for this study were women, and one participant worked in an all-girls school. Where it pertains to choosing big ideas and themes, selecting suitable textual resources, or identifying with protagonists in literary works, my preferences and understandings and those of my participants are shaped by our interests, the roles we take on in social settings, our cultural identities, and the geography of the places we inhabit.

In mapping some of the geography of my identity (England, 1994) as a researcher, I accepted that my thinking and subjectivities are shaped somewhat by ethnicity. Being 'white' in Western Canada positioned me among the majority. I did not intentionally collect data on the ethnicity of my participants, but one identified as an indigenous educator, and the communities in which my participants served were diverse, including significant indigenous and immigrant populations. In this qualitative research, I

accepted that my biography played a central role in shaping my understanding, that my understanding would be situated and incomplete. I recognised that world views are shaped by culture, geography, gender identity, and sexuality. By acknowledging my own position and identity in these ways, I undertook reflective practices throughout the research process to interrogate the assumptions I made and the conclusions I drew.

Reflective Practices

Reflexivity in qualitative research is based on the premise that since the background, perspectives, and position of the researcher shape interpretation, the researchers systematically reflect at every stage of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before setting out to research the topic, I wrote reflections about my own prior understanding and experience of planning ELA. Flick (2006, p. 106) remarked that through the process of qualitative inquiry, researchers must question their personal theories to expand their conceptual framework and broaden the inquiry. In further written reflections, I probed ways that my understanding might differ from other positions I might discover, so that I could open myself up to possibilities. Work I had conducted in the field as a consultant helping teachers with planning had given rise to the initial curiosity and questions I formulated about this topic, but I knew I would need to get beyond my initial conceptions. Working with my advisor, I purposely sought participants at arm's length, from outside my sphere of influence, located in other divisions, provinces, and outside of Canada.

I also reflected on the sometimes-conflicting theoretical positions that manifested themselves in the work in which I was a part. For example, I had participated extensively in the creation, administration, and scoring of large-scale literacy assessments, and that form of testing represented a position that regards literacy as

essential, functional skill, likely arising out of a social concern for equity, but also set against the economic imperatives of global competition. In contrast, while participating in curriculum development projects, I encountered a more holistic approach to social-constructive curriculum that began with students in their own communities and emphasized an emancipatory agenda. Specifically, the school district where I am employed has mandated that human rights education feature in ELA classes in grades 7 – 10, spanning such territory as fundamentals of human rights, developing a sense of self-identity, developing empathy for others' identities, exploring global examples of human rights violations, and specifically exploring truth and reconciliation with respect to Indigenous peoples of Canada. I reflected on and problematized these theoretical perspectives, especially informed by Eisner's (1985) "Five Basic Orientations" to curriculum.

I reflected critically through memo-writing throughout the research process, from creating and revising research questions, to recruiting participants, to gathering and interpreting the data, and developing conclusions. I followed guidelines for memo-writing set out by Charmaz (2006, pp. 72-95). During the recursive data collection and interpretation stages, I adopted strategies for minimizing preconceptions. Most importantly, I paid careful attention to close coding at the beginning of the research process (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 67-69). While close-coding is time-consuming, it forced my attention at the word, line, and sentence level on what was happening in the data, and it helped me avoid making generalizations too early, especially while forming codes and categories. As I created categories from interview data, I closely read and reread the extant texts to verify and extend interpretations. My stance was to open myself up to appreciating what the interviews and artifacts revealed about choices in context, and to

allow alternative views, surprises, and unique perspectives to challenge my own thinking. Finally, while such practices might typically be cast as an individual reflecting alone in a journal, I considered such journal writing as a social act, as my ideas and opinions were persuasively affected by the dialogue I have engaged in with others in the past, particularly with the other members of my doctoral cohort (Lefevre, 1986). In addition, by getting feedback from internal and external members of the doctoral thesis committee on drafts of these ideas, I was challenged to clarify claims and confirm them with evidence from the data, and to provide additional explanation for assumptions and jargon.

Purposeful Participant Recruitment

To gain insight into the research questions, I identified and recruited participants who had background and experience with planning conceptual understanding in secondary ELA curriculum. I sought out teachers who had planned backwards at the unit level. Sometimes these teachers developed learning plans in workshops, curriculum mapping sessions, English department meetings, or professional learning communities. In other words, the origin of conceptual ideas emerged from the social and cultural setting in which the teacher worked – from other teachers and the resources on hand in the book room, for example. Planning ideas may be informed by a close reading of the official curriculum, the traditions of the school setting, the teachers' interests and experiences, the available resources, the demands of external assessment, the teachers' role in the school, the ideas the teacher personally considered most important, or the influence of other curricula.

The first step in selecting participants for this study was to locate teachers who would volunteer (with written consent) to discuss their planning experiences. Typically,

university researchers would send a letter of invitation to school division superintendents, but the specific attributes of the ELA teachers I needed required a more purposeful sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) approach to participant recruitment. Purposeful sampling is a procedure wherein “the investigator selects a sample of individuals to study based on their contribution to the development of theory” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 290). Inclusion in this study required experience with the phenomenon, including several criteria. First, the participants worked in secondary schools; that is, they worked in grades 7 -12. These grades are variously called middle years, junior high, or high school - in Canada school districts are inconsistent in how the grades are arranged. Another criterion was that participants had to be actively working in the field and have had significant experience teaching ELA. I excluded pre-service, early career (less than three years), substitute, and retired teachers from participation. Importantly, a further criterion was that participants had developed learning experiences for ELA using backward planning methods such as *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), *Universal Design* (Katz J. , 2012), or other variants. This provision ensured that they had explicitly considered conceptual understanding in planning. It is true that there are many and varied ways to plan that involve consideration of conceptual understanding; however, I sought teachers who had been explicit about conceptual understanding at the forefront of unit level planning.

After receiving ethics approval from the review board, I recruited potential participants by finding teacher design projects referenced by consultants and faculty of education professors. I then sent letters to these knowledgeable individuals, requesting that they distribute my letter of invitation to teachers who met the criteria. When teachers responded by e-mail message asking for more information, I responded and

provided a consent form that fully described the parameters of the study. Participants had to volunteer of their own free will. They reviewed the written invitation explaining the purpose of the study, provided written consent for participation, confirmed their consent orally at the beginning of the interview, and were informed that they could withdraw consent at any time.

Through the participant recruitment strategy, I attempted to gather experiences and perspectives from a variety of contexts. Western Canadian ELA teachers were likely candidates, as their provincial ministries had explicitly referenced backwards planning (e.g., Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015). Since I had worked in the province of Manitoba, I excluded teachers in school districts where I had provided service as a consultant to ensure that I encountered fresh perspectives and avoided conflicts of interest. Jurisdictions that had instantiated improvement projects that included reforms to assessment *for* learning, differentiation, and/or backward planning were also likely places to find participants who had engaged in such planning. Moving beyond Canadian borders invited perspectives from a somewhat different curriculum context that allowed some comparison. American teachers involved in university and school district UBD initiatives and who had posted unit planning documents online related to their planning were invited to take part.

This purposeful variation in sampling from different contexts was intended to deepen the credibility of results (Cresswell, 2013, pp. 156-157). I intentionally sought participants from public and private schools, from both Canada and the United States, from urban and rural settings, and with differing years of teaching experience and backgrounds. I contacted university professors and consultants who had existing

research and professional learning projects with districts. They forwarded the research project invitations to colleagues and teachers who fit the recruitment criteria. In all, I sent more than fifty invitations to personnel in a variety of settings, and in four cases those invitations were distributed to teachers who fit the recruitment criteria.

Using these strategies, I had eleven participants volunteer in nine sites in three Canadian provinces and one U.S. state. In *Table 7*, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her confidentiality. Through the transcripts, all references to their district name, location, or unique program names or titles were withheld and replaced by generic descriptions. Pseudonyms were formed by randomly combining the first and last names of fictional characters (for example, Michelle Thermopolis is comprised of Michelle from *Drawn* by Marie Lamba and Thermopolis from a character in *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot). The following table describes the participants:

Table 7. Participant information summary.

Participant Pseudonyms / Time of Interview	Career	School Context	Design Project
<p>Participant 1 <i>Charlotte Crane</i></p> <p>8:30 PM Central Standard Time (CST) August 20, 2015</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELA Teacher in tenth year • Has sub-specialty in ESL • Has become a teacher leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western Canadian sub-urban school; high ESL population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated ELA / Social Studies for grade 7 • Focus on personal and cultural artifacts

<p><i>Participant 2</i> Krista Kurtz</p> <p>6:30 PM CST August 21, 2015</p> <p>NOTE: Colleague of participant #6 (i.e., same school district but does not work in same school)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time Grade 9-12 English • Previously middle years teacher, mainly grade 8 English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large (1220), ethnically-diverse urban school • Academic (AP) programs and specialty areas (such as aviation, business, arts) • Located in large Canadian city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English 11 “Darkness in Humanity” inquiry project • “Happiness” inquiry
<p><i>Participants 3 & 4</i></p> <p>Liesel Quimby Meg Granger</p> <p>Friday, September 04, 2015, 4:00 PM CST</p> <p>Two colleagues in same school in the 2015-2016 school year speaking in the same interview.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LQ grade 9 – 12 teacher and literacy coach (to students) • MG grade 9 -12 teacher for 13 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large, diverse high school (1300 in grades 9 – 12) – dual-track (French Imm / Eng) with vocational and academic programming (I.B.) • Located in large Canadian city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Digital Citizenship” project for grade 9 English • Division-wide collaboration
<p><i>Participant 5</i> Eloise Pevensie</p> <p>September 02, 2015, 7:00 PM CST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches integrated prevocational course, combining English 10, Planning 10, and Social Studies 10 • Background as middle years / junior high teacher (nine years) • Completed a Master’s Degree in Education • Fifteen years of teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades 10-12 high school in a Canadian city with a student population about 600 • 30% First Nations • School has a significant number of immigrant and second generation visible minority students • Local community relies on resource sector (mining and paper mills) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry project reflecting on personal learning at the end of integrated Intro to Trades course

<p><i>Participant 6</i> Claudia Hopkins</p> <p>Wednesday, September 2, 2015, 5:05 PM CST</p> <p>NOTE: Colleague of participant #2 (i.e., same school district, but do not work in same school. They are talking about versions of the same unit)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches Grades 8-11 English • Career experience focused mainly with middle years / junior high school students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suburban secondary school with grades 8-12 school • Mixed socioeconomic population – farmland, social housing, and expensive homes • Significant immigrant and refugee student population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade 11 English: Are humans essentially good or evil? (with <i>Lord of the Flies</i> as a marquee text)
<p><i>Participant 7</i> Casey Jackson</p> <p>Friday, September 04, 2015, 12:02 PM CST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary English Teacher for 18 years; recently became district leader (school support and professional development) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very large school district with urban, suburban, and rural schools in Ontario, Canada 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade 10 Integrated ELA, Careers, and Civics • Integrated course involved a district-wide technology access • Unit includes a focus on becoming a good online, digital citizen
<p><i>Participant 8</i> Katniss Murry</p> <p>Saturday, September 5, 2015, 5:23 PM CST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches English at grades 8, 11, as well as Journalism and AP Literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All-girls private school; senior school has 300 students • Many students from high socioeconomic level families; all female; racially diverse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English 11 unit on “Cause and Effect” (What kind of impact can one have upon the world?) • Unit includes focus on personal essay writing

<p><i>Participant 9</i> Ramona Salt</p> <p>Thursday, September 10, 2015, 10:43 AM CST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches English in grades 9 and 10 • Experienced teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public secondary school of about 1200 in small city; students also come from surrounding communities and First Nations • Primarily Caucasian with significant First Nations population (10%); some visible minority students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combination of English and AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) • “How do you define success? How do people become successful? What leads towards overcoming difficulties?”
<p><i>Participant 10</i> Emma Hardy</p> <p>Colleague of Participant 11 Tuesday, September 15, 2015 ,7:31 PM CST</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher for over 20 years • Teaches grade 9 and 10 English at a private Catholic School for the last six years • Has both an English degree and a Master’s in Education degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catholic private school; co-ed • Mainly white, with a significant Hispanic minority • Located in large, southwestern U.S. city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary unit based on <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> that focuses inquiry into First Impressions
<p><i>Participant 11</i> Michelle Thermopolis</p> <p>8:30 PM CST September 22, 2015 Colleague of Participant 10</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher for six years • Teaches Grade 11 - 12 English, and AP Language and Literature • Undergraduate degree in English and Spanish, and a Master’s degree in Education • Acts as P.D. coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catholic private school; co-ed • Mainly white, with a significant Hispanic minority • Located in large, southwestern U.S. city • 200 students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A unit for grade 12 English based on the essential question: How does our past affect our present and future? [using <i>My Antonia</i> and <i>Huck Finn</i>] • How can our society’s physical surroundings shape our actions and our lives?

Data Collection

Grounded theory relies on diverse data sources. Interview protocols were developed to gather a range of perspectives, information, opinions, and feelings. To support the interview data, I also gathered extant texts that the teachers provided, such

as unit plans, assessment tools, or other related documents. The credibility of the study's conclusions depended on having rich data of high quality and appropriate sufficiency (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 13-19), including background and contextual details, a diversity of perspectives, and a variety of viewpoints.

Participant Interviews

An important source of gathering information for the study were semi-structured, focused interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). An interview guide provided shape to the interaction, but the question sequence, phrasing, and number of questions were modified to keep the interview responsive, situational, and conversational (Patton, 1980, p. 206). My intention in conducting the interview was to use plain language and a warm tone, and to seek a positive, reflective experience from the interview participant (Kvale, 1996, p. 30).

Eight participants were interviewed by telephone, one with voice-over-IP application (Skype) and two with an in-person interview. My intention in talking to participants individually was to preserve a more intimate and personal tone to the interview. However, two participants lived within driving distance, were colleagues in the same school division and worked on the same curriculum project, and asked to be interviewed together. While the format differed from the other individual interviews, I respected their request. I do not believe the change in format had a significant impact on the richness of the data. However, I observed an interplay as these two colleagues, who had contrasting teaching styles and backgrounds, compared their ideas and perspectives with one another. All the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder (with the permission of each participant) and the files were transferred to a secure file

location. I conducted all of interviews myself. The interviews ranged in duration from twenty-five to forty-five minutes per person.

In the first part of the semi-structured interview, teachers were asked to describe the context of planning. The questions were designed to be open-ended, elicit information, details about context, and background experiences. A second set of interview questions gathered information about the nature of the plan, exploring what participants believed were the important concepts of English language arts courses in senior high school. A third set of questions generated data about the experience of backward planning. These interview questions are available in Appendix A: Interview Protocol on page 298.

As much as possible, I conducted the interviews as a natural conversation. During each set of possible questions, I used probes to enrich and deepen responses. Probes “ask respondents to elaborate, add to, provide detail for, or qualify their response, thereby addressing richness, comprehensiveness, and honesty that are some of the hallmarks of interviewing” (Morrison, Cohen, & Manion, 2000, p. 278). Probes included questions such as “Would you say more about that?” or “How does that experience / strategy / method compare to what you had done before?”

Extant Texts

Artifacts of teacher curriculum-making were collected when they were relevant and made available by participants. These artifacts can be termed *extant texts*, those “varied documents the researcher had no hand in shaping...[that] were produced for other – often very different – purposes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 35). Such artifacts were produced for a specific purpose and audience, and embedded within localized discourses; therefore, they varied significantly in style, content and presentation. I used these

related artifacts as supplemental data to enrich and support the primary interview data, especially in exploring the nature of teacher planning. The extant texts mostly consisted of electronic documents, presentation slides, web page content, and other documents. I printed out each artifact, blanked out all identifying information with a black marker, gave each artifact a code, and organized them in a tabbed binder. Finally, I wrote interpretive notes about the meaning of the representative issue or connections to transcripts.

These artifacts of backward planning supported and extended the meaning communicated in interview data. Charmaz (2006) cautioned that “extant texts... all have serious limitations” (p. 37); for instance, the curriculum that is planned may be quite different from the one experienced by students. Two participants in the study co-constructed a unit plan that was published in a professional trade book for teachers; however, the plan they each enacted in their classroom varied in slight ways from the published version, as was revealed in the interview. For example, while the published version offered a wide array of possible texts, the teachers’ actual implementation of the unit made text choices much more limited. Documenting details about the rhetorical circumstances was important for situating extant texts. When analyzing artifacts, it was important I attended to both the content and the context: when, where, and for what purpose the document was created (Norum, 2008, p. 24). I document information about the context for which the text was originally meant, including its form, author, the occasion, intended audience, and purpose. To reflect on the content of artifacts, I open-coded conceptual ideas that emerged from teachers’ planning, the processes and skills the artifact emphasized, the approaches to formative and summative assessment, and instructional strategies. In collecting a variety of document types, I used the extant texts

to enhance the meanings expressed in the interviews. In Table 8 on page 141 each of the artifacts that I examined in relation to the participant interviews is listed. The artifact coding convention “A1” indicates artifact from participant #1 (Charlotte Crane); the number following the dash is a consecutive number for artifacts collected from that participant. For example, participant #2 sent me eight documents (A2-1 to A2-8).

I took specific steps to prepare and organize the data. I transferred audio recordings of key interviews from an electronic handheld recorder to a laptop hard drive, gave them consistent electronic file names, and backed them up to secure storage. I transcribed each audio interview using a word processing template document (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol on page 298). All identifying information – names,

Table 8 Artifacts

Artifact	Form	Description
A1-1 An integrated ELA / SS inquiry unit overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PowerPoint Presentation (37 slides) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An overview of a backward planned unit given at a teacher professional development workshop
A2-1 Darkness in Humanity Unit Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electronic document (18 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The unit plan this teacher used was collaboratively developed and contributed to a book and published in the section “examples from our classrooms”
A2-2 Darkness in Humanity Rubrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Success criteria for an essay (meaning / style / form / conventions) Group discussion self- and peer-assessment criteria
A2-3 Developing self-regulated learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PowerPoint Presentation Slides (14 slides) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describes self-regulation in learning
A2-4 Darkness in Humanity Unit Plan – teacher’s version	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electronic document (table depicting class by class plan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher’s own version of the backward plan depicting the way it was taught with a recent group of students

<p>A2-5 English 12 Happiness Inquiry Unit Overview</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic document (Table) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outlines stages of an inquiry unit and the plans for formative / summative assessment
<p>A2-6 “Happiness is... Passionate Personal Inquiry”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop handout (3 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A provocation to create a model of happiness
<p>A2-7 Creating a Passionate Personal Inquiry”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic document (2 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A handout from a teacher PL session that lists steps for creating an inquiry unit
<p>A2-8 Happiness is... Passionate Personal Inquiry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PowerPoint slides (18 slides) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation that contrasts a standard model of inquiry with one inspired by Shelley Wright (Canadian educator)
<p>A3&4-1 Digital Citizenship Dashboard</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperlinked Google Doc & QR Code 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An organizing “home page” providing links to resources based on the nine elements of digital citizenship (Ribble, 2014)
<p>A3&4-2 Digital Etiquette</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperlinked web page (2nd level link) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of one element of digital citizen in this collaboratively designed learning plan with hyperlinked resources
<p>A3&4-3 Why I Just Asked My Students to Put Their Laptops Away</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magazine article – resource for digital etiquette 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A text resource that was hyperlinked from the “Digital Etiquette” organizer page (i.e., A3&4-2)
<p>A3&4-4 Attention Literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog Post 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A text resource that was hyperlinked from the “Digital Etiquette” organizer page (i.e., A3&4-2)
<p>A3&4-5 Digital Literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperlinked web page (Google Site) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of one element of digital citizenship in this collaboratively designed learning plan with hyperlinked resources
<p>A3&4-6 Cyborgology: Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A text resource that was hyperlinked from the “Digital Literacy” organizer page (i.e., A3&4-5)
<p>A3&4-7 Grade 9 ELA Digital Citizenship Curriculum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda and lesson plans (11 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An agenda and hand out for the district-wide in-service giving an overview of the digital literacy curriculum for grade 9 students

A5-1 Template for Student-generated rubric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document (handout) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A blank template for students to describe levels of performance in reading non-fiction text
A5-2 Peer Presentation Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document (template) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A template for students to give “two stars and a wish” (strengths and needs feedback) to a group inquiry presentation
A5-3, 4, 5, 6 Student-generated rubrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of student-constructed criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four student generated rubrics including presentation, reading comprehension, and expressing personal views in writing
A5-7 Formative assessment – Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Table / template (2 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A log for students to keep track of feedback they receive on each writing attempt
A5-8 Spirals of Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide (7 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A summary of an approach to whole-school teacher collaborative inquiry
A5-1 Template for Student-generated rubric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document (handout) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A blank template for students to describe levels of performance in reading non-fiction text
A7-1 / A7-2 The _____ Project of _____ School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcript of YouTube video / YouTube video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A video providing an overview of the collaborative district-wide course design
A7-3 Professional Learning Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagram of Professional Learning Cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A flow chart outlining the PLAN – ACT – OBSERVE – REFLECT professional learning cycle
A7-3 _____ Project Goes Live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog Post(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A retrospective description of the collaborative project written by one member of the design team
A8-1 The Lower Ambitions of Higher Education: ‘Excellent Sheep,’ William Deresiewicz’s Manifesto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online book review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A book review regarding the book in T8’s unit plan, positioned as a marquee text in the ELA course
A8-2 Proposal for Grades 10-12 Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Curriculum Overview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of an emerging provincial curriculum referred to in the interview

<p>A9-1 What is AVID?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web Page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of the AVID program referred to in the interview (Advancement Via Individual Determination), with its WICOR elements (Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading)
<p>A10-1 Pride and Prejudice UbD [9th Grade]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit Plan (16 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unit plan referenced by the participant in the interview, publicly available in an online web repository
<p>A11-1 AP Literature Summer Reading Unit [11th Grade]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit Plan (32 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unit plan for <i>My Antonia</i> and <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> referenced by the participant, publicly available in an online web repository
<p>A11-2 AP Language Summer Reading Unit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit Plan (43 pages) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unit plan that focuses upon rhetoric and argument in non-fiction pieces such as Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant”

school, school districts, and so on were masked with pseudonyms. A table connecting the interview file names with participant names and consent forms was saved in a password-protected file in a separate location. The participant interviews and extant texts created a body of rich and rewarding data to interpret. In accordance with the terms of the ethics agreement, all data were destroyed six months after the publishing of the thesis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Coding and interpreting the data began as soon as the first interview was completed. The method for coding and interpreting of the meaning of interview data relied on the central idea of constructivism: “the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them, and how they assign meanings and values to events or objects” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 19). The constructivist view holds that reality is socially constructed based on a multiplicity of viewpoints, focusing upon meaning elicited from documenting participant perspectives and experiences. To

increase the richness and development of analysis in the study I triangulated sources of evidence (interviews, artifacts, research literature) and multiple perspectives (teachers in different contexts, grades, and backgrounds) to establish patterns (Flick, 2006).

Initial Coding

My process was to begin by reading the entire transcript while playing each audio file in its entirety to get a sense of the whole. I then engaged in close reading of the data and open coding (Charmaz, 2006), highlighting statements of significance. I closely read each line of each transcript and created a code for each line with a gerund phrase (e.g., “Showing leadership”) to preserve a sense of action (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). I reread each coded transcript and focused the codes into groups. I expanded and condensed codes with each newly transcribed interview. With further rereading, I highlighted codes and accompanying statements that logically went together to organize emerging clusters of meaning (Cresswell, 2013, pp. 184-186). I pulled together (i.e., copied and pasted) all the statements I coded with the same colour. This axial coding grouped data into categories such as “ideas within texts.” I wrote conceptual memos on why these codes and statements all belonged in the same group, and gave each meaning cluster a short, descriptive title, labelling the group. Beneath each statement, I kept a list of several illustrative comments to maintain the original voices of the participants, and deleted redundant ones.

Focused Coding and Categorical Memos

Subsequently, I wrote summary statement(s) that reflected the meanings in the group, advancing from the code I had given the category in a reflective memo. I monitored the coding to ensure sufficiency (or ‘saturation’) of meaning in each cluster. In addition, I confirmed categories with the constant comparison to new interview data

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). These procedures were used flexibly and recursively. Developing rough diagrams helped me consider relationships between categories and patterns among the codes. For instance, variation in the value that teachers placed on texts, ideas, strategies, and dispositions stood out as an important pattern.

After working carefully with each transcript in focused coding, I read and viewed the artifacts. As Norum (2008) explained, artifacts “can be used to support or challenge other data sources and literature, to generate or confirm hunches, and to help provide thick description of people and / or settings” (p. 23). Participant selection in the first place was important for establishing credibility; as I was selective in creating the pool of candidates (only those with significant experience with backward design), they could provide a range of documents that were rich for exploring. In this case, artifacts supported the researcher’s understanding of context, made teacher plans more explicit, and extended the ideas communicated in interviews.

Establishing and Maintaining Trustworthiness

I have taken specific steps in the research design to ensure the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the study results. Trustworthiness, a term drawn from Guba (1981), offers alternative terminology from notions of validity and reliability in positivist research. Guba offers four criteria for trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Several strategies were employed to ensure that findings were credible reflections of participants’ experiences. For example, I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim soon after recording to ensure freshness and authenticity of meaning. Consistent with CGT, I began open coding as interviews proceeded. As Charmaz (2006) advised, “simultaneous data collection and analysis can help you go

further and deeper into the research problem as well as engage you in developing categories” (p. 48). Ideas and perspectives that were uncovered in interview data were verified with artifacts where possible. Concepts and experiences identified in early interviews were re-examined across further interview data to ensure a best fit.

Categories were revised as the interpretive process evolved: rereading, memo-writing, and diagramming helped to clarify meanings (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 115-118). While the number of participants in the study was small compared with many published grounded theory studies, I believe that the expertise of the participants and the richness of the interviews and artifacts created a sufficient and credible pool of data to support claims. These measures were taken to secure confidence that the findings had credibility.

Dependability. Organizing, labelling, and storing data securely ensured dependability of the results. For example, I personally transcribed participant interviews word-for-word and rechecked each one for the accuracy of the transcript. Interviews and artifacts were dated and coded, electronic files were named with a consistent naming convention and organized in a secure location. A folder was established as a document trail to keep a record of evolving codes and categories. The artifacts were coded, blacked out to secure the anonymity of participants’ identities, printed, and stored in a tabbed binder.

Transferability. To ensure the audience reading the study has sufficient context to interpret the transferability of results, I documented details about the participants’ teaching contexts and teaching experiences. I varied participant selection to gather a broader range of school contexts (public and private, serving students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, a range of secondary grades, gender of teacher). A table of participants was constructed with relevant contextualizing details,

such as size and nature of the school, teaching experience, teaching assignment, and backward planning experiences. Since the purpose was to enrich understanding rather than to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses, the focus was on credibility of participant experiences rather than more traditional research constructs of internal and external validity (Lincoln, 2011).

Confirmability. The study design also included measures to ensure confirmability. The raw data, coding, and analysis have been organized so that one co-advisor could check on accuracy from the audit trail. As a convention, I have referenced each source of evidence using the abbreviation T for transcript and A for artifact, followed by the number of the participant, and then by a page number. I have italicized direct quotes from participants to make them visually stand out from the body text. These measures ensured that my supervisor could easily cross-reference my interpretations with the original source (transcript or artifact).

As the research unfolded, I have shared multiple drafts of the data with my advisors and committee members to receive feedback and revise my interpretation of the data. While coding and developing insight from a constructivist viewpoint can be highly personal, my advisor and committee members helped ensure quality by challenging me to get beyond description and see the patterns, insights and practical applications that emerged from the data. While the results of qualitative research have traditionally been viewed as subjective and non-generalizable, the exploration can nonetheless benefit from practices and procedures that ensure findings are credible, dependable, contextualized, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The two chapters that follow present an analysis of the data collected in the study. Chapter 4 reviews the plans that teachers made, while Chapter 5 focuses on the

experiences of backward planning. Open coding of both interviews and artifacts related to backward planning provided the building blocks for recognizing patterns and conceptualizing the process. The research methods used for this study were consistent with the idea that reality arises from social interaction, that ideas are constructed in cultural contexts.

Chapter 4: (Re)Conceptualizing ELA

This data chapter reviews the concepts, processes, and resources that participants designed for learning experiences for secondary ELA. Data for this chapter was drawn mainly from participant interviews and supported by artifacts that were shared by participants (e.g., documents, unit plans, web pages, and presentation slides). Study participants are referred to only by pseudonyms. Short descriptions of each participant's background, context, and design project can be found on starting on page 134.

Concepts in English Language Arts

One research question addressed by this investigation focused upon the nature of the concepts that English teachers in the study planned. Concepts may have been stated as *big ideas*, *enduring understanding*, or *essential questions*. The data for this section of analysis were derived from both interview transcripts and artifacts. The way I phrased the interview questions varied to suit the conversation and the participant, but they were versions of the following:

Think about one learning experience that you have designed:

- 1) What ideas did you devise?
- 2) What is the source of these ideas? Why did you choose them?

The coded data from these questions fell into three broad categories that represented the sources of conceptual ideas. The first category, ideas in texts, reflected the pattern that teachers typically drew upon a set of the themes in the texts students were studying. A second group of concepts were about the nature and craft of texts; they were derived from ideas about the purpose and elements of literary and pragmatic texts. Finally, teachers developed a third category of ideas that went beyond the texts to take a critical view of how texts were used and how gender and culture were portrayed texts.

Ideas in Texts

One type of big idea among the participants was to find a theme or motif within the text or text sets they were reading in class. Exploring the human condition in terms of how people form relationships was a common platform on which English teachers formulated big ideas. Sometimes these themes examined individual human experiences with an inward-looking, psychological lens. Other themes adopted a more outward lens, addressing issues and trends in society or civilization at large. While many themes were drawn from literary and aesthetic works, other ideas were developed with technological, historical or interdisciplinary focus. These themes could also vary by the additional lens of time: while many ideas dealt with ideas and issues in present time, some reflected on the past to find influences and others looked to the world ahead (a future lens).

Inward focus. Teachers developed plans for learning experiences that revealed a theme or universal experience to which students could connect, such as morality, identity, conformity, or coming of age. These themes were psychological or introspective in nature, looking inward at human values and behaviours. Liesel Quimby talked about her focus on human relationships as key in her planning:

LQ: If I think about my progression, what I try to say to my students who sit there and say, “Why do we have to read John Steinbeck?” – I try to help them understand that every story that we read is about human relationship – you’re human, you’ve got a great heart in there, and so let’s talk about it in those terms... So we can make relationships with the people that we meet in Midsummer Night’s Dream, we can ask what we have in common or don’t have in common. Or would we be anxious if we had to deal with it? Or why would we be thrilled if we had to deal with that? I find that I use that human relationship element for them to engage in a text that maybe they wouldn’t. (T3, p. 9)

Liesel had an overall, global theme in mind, “human relationships,” and connected the study of literary texts in her course by examining their ideas about relationships. The idea acts as a metanarrative, a connective tissue from which to bridge ideas across the course. Liesel wanted students to explore issues of personal relevance through the study of classic literary texts, asking her students to consider whether they would be anxious or thrilled. The focus is to put a personal, emotional lens at the forefront and to leverage the study of literature as an opportunity to explore the human experience. Conceptually, this idea was represented by a single phrase or topic, ‘human relationships’.

Another teacher that emphasized the nature of human relationships was the *Pride and Prejudice* unit taught by Emma Hardy. Concepts in the unit reflected the way people form first impressions and how they are often mistaken. An artifact from the *Pride and Prejudice* unit plan related the idea both as a statement and as an essential question:

Enduring understanding:

Judgements based on first impressions can be inaccurate; humility is required to change those initial judgements.

Essential Question:

When is it acceptable to change your opinion about someone, and what drives you to change your opinion? (*A10-1, p. 2*).

This idea about human judgment and its social consequences was directed inwardly toward a psychological understanding of personal decision-making. Emma explained her reasoning and the source of this idea:

EH: Pride and Prejudice ...So originally Jane Austen had named the book First Impressions, so that was my guide for all of that, for the essential questions and the final ... one of the big assessments. So first impressions – how do the

characters... how does that happen with the characters? They misinterpreted Darcy, Darcy misinterpreted her, their first impressions were that. O.K. so how can we do that in real life, I mean with friends, people we know. So when they get out into the real world, I really wanted to make it something that would be useful, a skill they would use ten years from now. When they're voting, how do they discern the best candidate for whatever office, president, senate, congress, whatever. (T10, p. 4)

Emma's plan oriented students to how the idea had resonance beyond the immediate story, exploring with them how the behaviour of individuals in texts connects with and has implications for their own lives. What is different from Liesel Quimby's broad human relationship topic is that Emma has focused a complete thought about the topic 'first impressions, being more precise about why the topic is relevant (i.e., they may be inaccurate and need to change). She locates the source of the idea in the author's biography and assumes authorial intention. Emma has put classic literature at the forefront of planning, a necessity for an Advanced Placement course and developed an idea about first impressions she regarded as timeless.

In the first two cases of ideas being sourced from literary works, the teachers' conceptual emphasis was on human relationships. Michelle Thermopolis also planned from themes in texts for her grade 11 unit on *My Antonia* and *The Adventures of Huck Finn* unit.

MT: The specific ideas that I created ... "How does our past affect our present and future?", because My Antonia is very much ...a book about reminiscing and remembering the past. ...I thought in ten years they would think about how their past affects their present and future. And then "How can our society's physical surroundings shape our actions and our lives?" Talking about physical surroundings and their impact on us. That's shown in My Antonia and Huck Finn. (T11, p. 1; A11-1, p. 4).

This idea used a retrospective lens, looking backwards on past experiences, and concerned how the places people spend their youth shape their values and identity. Rather than looking in present time at relationships, the concept encouraged students to look backwards in time to determine the significance of episodes and places on personal development. The classic American literary selections reflected the requirements of the AP Literature course she was teaching and her private school context. Michelle's assumptions rest on this idea being in the book, that the book is 'very much about' the concept, it is 'shown in' the work.

Ramona Salt's unit plan idea examined the nature of success in life, exploring how people can be resilient when faced with obstacles:

RS: ...we were looking at the big idea which was "How do you define success? How do people become successful? What leads towards overcoming difficulties?" The idea is that if it's going to be different and you want something, you have to be responsible making happen what you want to have happen. (T9, p. 3)

In this case, the conceptual idea was one that could apply to the immediate and future lives of Ramona's students. The concept for Ramona is expressed both in the form of questions and also a statement. An interesting contrast to Emma and Michelle's plans is evident here: while the theme is reflected in one illustrative non-fiction book, the idea also carries across a range of other texts. Concepts are not constrained to a single text's theme, but lay more broadly in the world, reflected by a range of titles. The orientation to curriculum was in developing the personal qualities that prepared students for success in world. In all these instances, the conceptual idea explored identity and values, examining human lives vicariously through literary and other texts. The lens is a psychological one with an inward focus on individual human experience in texts.

Outward focus. Rather than looking inward at individual human behaviour, some conceptual ideas had a wider, outward-looking scope. Contrasted with the inward lens, these ideas shift from individuals to people and society more broadly. For example, Krista Kurtz' plan emphasised exploring the human condition in this "Darkness in Humanity" unit for grade 11 students, but the lens widened to consider human impulses more broadly:

KK: The essential question is "Why do ordinary or good people sometimes do bad or even terrible things?" And the second question is "How might we deal with the darker impulses within ourselves and within others?" So those are, to me, big ideas about a real problem in the world. ...And then, I follow that unit with a unit on hope – "Hope for Humanity." ... Darkness and then hope, and often another unit somewhere in there as well, so to try and get them really thinking critically about problems in the world, people, but also to themselves, because darkness is not just out there. ...I also have in grade 12 a unit on "Happiness." Again, it's a big idea unit, an inquiry unit, and it's a backward designed unit. (T2, p. 2)

The exploration considered "people" and "problems in the world" – a wider, more collective focus. This wider lens may also reflect the fact that Krista's students developed understanding of these themes across multiple texts rather than only focusing on a single text. One of the artifacts Krista shared phrased the enduring understanding as both a statement and an essential question. The statement read, "*Our perceptions around evil, war, and violence are influenced by our contexts and experiences*", and the companion question was phrased, "*How can we make sense of the darkness in humanity?*" (A2-1, p. 2). This point may represent a different position regarding where conceptual ideas exist. In this formulation, ideas are not in the book, but in many books. Books echo and reflect broad ideas in culture. With such a wide conceptual lens, there are many avenues of thinking to travel that students can explore. Since these patterns of

emphasis have become a rich vein, I will consider them in more length later in chapter 4 in the section “how resources were positioned”.

Although the two did not work in the same school or district, Krista Kurtz and Claudia Hopkins had been united by a professional development initiative in which they collaborated on backward planning. These two participants were unaware that the other had volunteered for this study, but by happy accident, both talked about the same “Darkness in Humanity” unit. Claudia took a similar approach to exploring human nature through an essential question: “*The big ideas were around ‘What is at the core of humanity? Are humans essentially good or evil? Or do they fall somewhere in between?’*” (T6, pp. 2-3). Again the theme the “Darkness” plan was reflected in the texts, but it differs markedly from the designs of Emma and Michelle because the theme was not constrained by a single text, instead echoing across a span of literature (including myths), and non-fiction. What is also interesting here is a subtle difference between Krista and Claudia. Krista’s version considers evil as an individual’s perception, shaped by context and experience. Her open-ended invitation asks students how to “make sense of [evil]”. On the other hand, Claudia’s questions present the classic contrasting binaries of good and evil that lay at the ‘core’ of humans. The assumption is that we make sense of dark and violent behaviour on a continuum that is good, bad, or ‘somewhere in between’. The difference between these two conceptual statements is subtle but important. Krista’s statements imply darkness is a cultural construct perceived by humans in different ways; on the other hand, Claudia’s statement suggests people’s souls are inherently created somewhere on a binary spectrum between good and evil. While essentially this unit is the same, the fundamental philosophy of the two teachers contrast in an interesting way. This difference reveals that a single word or phrase for a

theme, such as ‘Darkness in Humanity’, does not capture the complete concept as accurately as a complete statement does.

The integrated ELA and Social Studies course developed by Charlotte Crane asked an overarching essential question for the entire course, “*What makes a successful civilization?*” (A1-1, p. 13). Her grade 7 students connected with this key idea in the ‘artifact / art-of-fiction’ unit she described in the interview. When teachers paired ELA with History, the lens on content tended to be historical and sociological. Throughout the study, when English is integrated with another subject such as social studies, civics, or technology / new media, these choices shape and constrain the concepts and perspectives students explore in the course. Having stated that, I thought Charlotte’s plan artfully navigated the conceptual ideas from both ELA and Social Studies. At first, it explored how artifacts can reveal people’s behaviours and values in the past, but then the lens shifted to reflecting on what everyday objects and symbols students believed currently reflected their identity. Alternating between a wide historical lens on how artifacts illuminate our understanding of societies in the past, to a personal lens on how personal objects reflect identity, connected meaning across subject areas in important ways.

Krista, Claudia, and Charlotte’s wide-spanning ideas that cut across many text selections contrasted with the narrower range of ideas that were planned to suit a literary title. The conceptual territory could thus be either *tight* or *loose* when ideas were focused on themes in texts. Some ideas were tightly connected to the situation presented in a single literary work (for example, “first impressions”). Others were loose in that they globally connected to situations presented across several texts, even across the entire course (for example, “human relationships” or “what makes a civilization

successful?”). A tight approach might have the advantage of delving deeper into a more specific idea. Perhaps the danger of designing for a single text with a defined idea is that reading may become a process of gathering information that aligns with the teacher’s predetermined interpretation of the meaning. In other words, the stated conceptual idea might suggest a meaning that could be objectively identified, a ‘right answer.’ In contrast, a more loosely-formed conceptual idea might have the benefit of giving students room to explore what they find relevant across broad conceptual territory. Such broad territory may become the focus of open-ended inquiry across a broad set of texts and allow students to develop their own unique perspective. At the same time, broadly-conceived ideas might run the risk of remaining too global and overgeneralized, and text sets may be formed that do not connect concepts as clearly as their titles and topics suggest. The conceptual statements reveal important philosophical beliefs about how texts mean and where meaning resides (in the text, in the cultural context, or within the reader / person).

Ideas about Texts

While conceptual ideas in the participants’ work emanated mainly from inward- or outward-looking ideas of the human experience, close coding of the data revealed a second category of concepts that pertained to the form, genre, and craft of texts in literary and transactional texts. In several cases these ideas were paired with ideas from the texts. Participants articulated such concepts in their planning for elements of both literary and pragmatic texts and highlighted the purposes of each.

Exploring the purpose of forms and genres. Some conceptual ideas explored the purpose and role of texts. In the list of statements of enduring understanding included in the Darkness in Humanity unit, one of the concepts read “*An understanding*

of literature is key to an understanding of oneself, one's community, and the world"

(A2-1, p.2). This statement broadly focused on the role of literature in culture. The focus is not on the theme of an individual work, but examines the benefit of reading books in the first place. In her plan, Claudia Hopkins contrasted the purposes of literary fiction (allowing readers to explore ideas) to the purpose of non-fiction (to help clarify ideas). This contrast clarified how reading both kinds of texts can contribute to the development of a broad, holistic understanding. In this case, students interpreted the extended allegory contained in the literary text *Lord of the Flies*, added exploration through short fiction, then read and viewed non-fiction texts from social psychology to build understanding further:

CH: The texts that we're selecting in this particular context – as I mentioned it's a combination of fiction and non-fiction – we have the novel Lord of the Flies, we have non-fiction texts which come from various disciplines, and then the short stories. As we're going through the unit, we look at different ways that – obviously, when we look at Lord of the Flies it is an extended allegory trying to convey a particular message, a message that can be interpreted in different ways, depending on kids' perspectives. Whereas in Milgram's experiment in terms of psychology the outcome of that experiment in that text is very clear. ... [it shows] how texts can inform us in different ways, different types of texts can inform our opinions and our knowledge in different ways. (T6, p. 3)

From the interview transcript, Claudia was making the purpose of texts clear in either case, applying an interpretive lens when exploring literature and reading for clarity of understanding with non-fiction. By alternating literary and transactional forms, Claudia enables her students to see “horizons of possibilities” (Langer, 2011) and then to find clarity and confirmation of ideas in non-fiction.

Elements of literary texts. While some teachers focused on form and genre, others zoomed in on text elements, such as characterization in literary texts or emotional and rational appeals in argument. For example, Emma Hardy had students trace character development in a literary text:

EH: I do focus on characterization and how they change. Dynamic characters – I have them trace – part of their reading guide is to have a journal at the end of each section where they’re keeping track of one of the main characters – Elizabeth, Jane, Darcy, or Bingley. How do they change? What’s your first impression? Who changed? Have they changed? Why? (T10, p. 6)

This conceptual understanding, that “character change reveals theme” (A10-1, p. 2), is fundamental to understanding how to interpret story. From this conceptual focus, students might develop a better understanding of how important ideas are crafted in literary texts. Conceptually, it reflects a position that ELA, in addition to insights about the human condition, should help students understand how literary texts work. The selection of *Pride and Prejudice* aligns with the academic rationalist orientation to curriculum that posits intellectual growth results from exploring timeless ideas from established works (Eisner, 1985).

In other interviews, participants commented that some conceptual understanding of how texts work is more complex and advanced. For example, Ramona Salt commented that satire is one form students find difficult to read and evaluate:

RS: even if they get an understanding of what the concept is, then actually applying it to something or being able to go on a deep level to explain why is missing. Satire is a great example. I look at some satire with my grade tens, and then they look at whether it was an effective use of satire. Would it have been better if it had been written in a straight style? Why would the author choose to

use satire? They really struggle with those questions, for sure. It's a really hard concept. (T9, p. 6)

Ramona's comment that satire was "a hard concept" reflected the development of cognitive tools among grade ten students. Ramona's insight aligns with Egan's (1997) assertion that cognitive tools are developmentally acquired from rich literacy experiences. Egan's final stage, where people develop a reflexive and nuanced use of language he terms 'ironic understanding', includes appreciating the ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and the limits of expression. Ramona's questions probed for understanding of the purpose and effect of satire. To understand and produce satire, students would need to understand that it might be humorous, but its purpose is to use wit to constructively criticize societal issues.

While Emma and Ramona helped students understand character development or satire in a shared text, Meg Granger talked about one unit that focused upon archetypes (story patterns) in books that students were choosing to read. She argued passionately that if ELA teachers focus on archetypal patterns in character and plot, they can allow students to develop an understanding of literature and still offer choice:

MG: ...The idea that no story is original, they all have common elements - archetypes. I found this thing called the Periodic Table of Storytelling Elements. ...it has, say, "PG" for "Plucky Girl", right? So it has all these interesting ideas. Like "RS" is "red shirt", which makes a whole lot of sense to Trekkies who know that the character in the landing party with the red shirt almost always dies first. [laughter] ...you don't necessarily have to read everything in the world, but if you can get an understanding of common elements of stories, then that might make your understanding things a little easier. What I had them do is build molecules for whatever they happened to be reading, and they had to pick a certain number of elements, and they had to design them. They could say, you know, that The Hunger Games was a classic love triangle, and there was a plucky girl, and there

was knight in shining armour, and then there was a bad boy ... Sometimes I think that we're so stuck in anchoring everybody in the same text, that that text doesn't accommodate everybody. If we anchor students in the idea that there are similarities between stories, you can bring any story you want to the table, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a written text, it can be a graphic novel, a movie, or a video game, and we can still have these conversations about storytelling, but we're not stuck in one book one chapter. (T3, p. 8)

Thinking conceptually about the patterns of character allowed Meg to teach an understanding of literary elements while still offering choice to her students. Her interview revealed a commitment to multimodality (Kalantzis & Cope, 2011), seeing character development in storytelling broadly, no matter whether the story occurs in film, book, or video game. Later, she taught students about seven archetypal plot lines, such as the hero's quest, coming-of-age, or the fall from grace. Meg's study of narrative patterns, gleaned in this case from an Internet site, echoed the work of Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye (1957) in his book *Anatomy of Criticism*, which developed ideas about archetypes across an array of classic narrative texts. However, Frye's criticism relied on classic literary texts, and Meg's point-of-view is more in line with curriculum orientated toward personal relevance (Eisner, 1985).

Beyond form and genre and the elements of fiction, participant comments suggested that language use can be a conceptual focus when studying literary texts. Once again, these concepts were a secondary themes, companions to the main ones about the human experience that emerged from texts. For example, Liesel Quimby believed that students needed time to dwell on figurative language in literary texts to deepen their understanding:

LQ: And I love how people say, 'They should just know this! They should be able to tell me all the figurative language within this' instead of saying 'how are you

thinking through that figurative language' or how does it confuse you. Like, why can't we dwell longer with the confusion of figurative language, because a lot of our students are there? "I don't know why all of a sudden they're talking about..." and then they name some metaphor they just aren't getting. (T3, p. 15).

Asking about how students were thinking through metaphor and inviting them to dwell on their confusion was an important step in learning how figurative language has meaning and impact. Liesel's emphasis had students get beyond mere identification of figures of speech to understand the role of metaphor in a literary text. Her comment also reflected a reality of teaching for concept attainment – students need to reflect on their confusion, dwell on the uncertainty, and puzzle their way to greater understanding of challenging literary texts. They need to build a tolerance for complexity and develop a degree of comfort for ambiguity as they develop understanding. These ideas, coded from across all interviews, reflected an emphasis on conceptually understanding how aesthetic texts develop meaning and achieve an overall impact.

Elements of transactional texts. When communication was the focus of instruction, several study participants planned concepts related to the elements in transactional texts. For instance, Michelle Thermopolis taught one class that focused on appeals in argument:

MT: The units that I have made for my AP language class, which is equivalent to the first year of college writing class. We focus a lot on rhetorical appeals, and we focus a lot on particular literary and rhetorical devices, and we focus a lot on argument. That whole year is about argument. So we read argument, and we study arguments and we create arguments. (T11, p. 9)

Michelle was developing the concept that persuasive arguments appeal to an audience's emotions and sense of reason. This timeless idea dates to Aristotle (322 BC / 1954 AD), and her unit plan artifact made explicit reference to ethos, pathos and logos, the three

appeals (A11-2, p.9). In her unit plan (A11-2), Michelle navigated between her state's standards, Advanced Placement Language and Composition expectations, and emerging national standards. The task set for students was to construct an argument about whether it was better to have more certainty or to be more doubtful. An assigned, prompted topic gave students the opportunity to apply their understanding of classic rhetoric. The AP curriculum orientation remains one of cultural heritage (Eisner, 1985). Lesson plans revealed how students examined appeals to logic, emotion, and character in essays by Orwell and others. Making these ideas about rhetoric explicit to students seemed foundational to a secondary ELA program that prepared students for post-secondary writing.

Other participants' exploration of the elements of transactional communication contrasted. The concepts were not so much about form and genre, but the nature of making and expressing meaning. Another of the four statements of enduring understanding that Michelle Thermopolis wrote for her unit plan included one essential question about communicating to clarify a perspective: "*How can we best use written language to successfully synthesize, evaluate, and interpret our perspective on a topic or issue?*" (T11, p. 9). Similarly, among the list of conceptual statements in the "Darkness" unit Krista Kurtz co-developed, two had a similar focus on understanding meaning making: "*Dialogue and discussion develop, synthesize, and clarify ideas*" (A2-4, p. 1), and "*Meaning making is a constructive and creative process; the quest for meaning making is never complete*" (A2-1, p.2). On one hand, these are processes that students must learn how to do; on the other hand, they also need a working theory of interpretation and learning that makes ideas about "perspective" and "dialogue" and "meaning making" explicit. These concepts of meaning-making are more open-ended

than applying the tenets of classic Greek logic in argumentation. Instead, they reflect a curriculum orientation that values cognitive and social processes, engages students in dialogue, and seeks personal engagement.

Closely related were participant ideas about the elements that vary in any act of communication. Contained in the digital citizenship unit plan shared by Liesel Quimby and Meg Granger was the skill that students “*consider the context, audience and purpose*” when crafting an appropriate message (A3-3, p.6) Given the overall aim of the project, to help students become better digital citizens, helping students understand the elements of the rhetorical situation seemed fitting. During the interview, one of Liesel Quimby’s comments pointed out that sometimes teachers expected too much. At that point in the interview we were talking about developing understanding for real contexts beyond school. In her jurisdiction, students write a provincial test where they were expected to discuss form, audience, purpose, and context in relation to the content and style of their writing. Liesel noted that:

LQ: we mock them for having a thin understanding when they say, ‘I think this essay should be on the Internet because that’s where most 18-year olds are going to read it.’ Then we say – man, that’s such a thin understanding of how the context and audience match. (T3, p. 15).

Her comment reflected the idea that ELA teachers will teach the writing process, but do not necessarily develop an understanding of the ‘why’ of writing. She implied that a thin understanding comes from inauthentic situations such as a mandated examination.

An artifact from another jurisdiction also focused upon these communication variables.

The co-developed grade 11 unit “Darkness in Humanity” included two statements:

- *Expression requires a form determined by purpose, medium, convention, and style.*

- *Effective communicators choose and generate strategies depending on purpose and audience. (A2-1, p. 2)*

Taken together, these statements represented this essential idea about communication variables. If students write an essay, it seems important they make that choice of form consciously (i.e., because an essay would best fit the occasion). To show that students understand transactional communication conceptually, they explain why they used a suitable style and convention, and chose composing strategies appropriately.

Learning concepts related to communication theory or classic rhetoric seemed like plans for English that had been around for decades, but new and emerging forms of transactional communication necessitated a new set of conceptual understandings. For instance, Meg Granger's digital citizenship unit focused mainly on the way language and texts interact in culture. She talked about aspects of the craft of social media use, such as the hashtag on Twitter, and how one teacher used the website "the Way Back Machine" to emphasize how communicating on social media can be more permanent than is typical for social media communication:

MG: I mean, it's embedded in there, like somebody puts up a Tweet, so it's like, 'What is a hashtag?' ...His lesson was that the 'Net is permanent, and the outcome that we connected it to was "Understanding forms and techniques." (T4, p. 14; A3&4-7, p. 6).

The conceptual idea Meg identified was that despite the seeming impermanence of social media, the consequences of online communication can be more permanent than first imagined. Hashtags reveal how digital texts rely on new conventions that users co-create as they learn to engage in a new form of communication. In the other digital citizenship project, Casey Jackson's students used web 2.0 tools for learning within the integrated ELA, Civics, and Careers course. By using the tools to learn, the twelve-school

collaborative project asserted that it would “*change the way we think, how we learn, and how we express ourselves as individuals*” (A7-3, p. 1). Once again, this statement speaks to the question about how understanding is developed – if we want students to understand how to be digital citizens, it seems better to harness the social nature of online tools for learning at school and embed big ideas about being a good digital citizen into that experience.

It became clear that elements of craft in texts was rarely the central focus of unit planning, but rather subsidiary to the themes in the text. Two participants shared that this second category of ideas (form/genre and craft) was less important than the thematic ideas in the texts. Katniss Murry saw ideas about craft as knowledge rather than understanding. However, her craft lessons for writing an effective personal essay, for example, included statements about how to hook a reader or to create tone:

KM: ...the knowledge would be different than the understanding. This was a cause and effect personal essay that they were writing, so the knowledge, the more particular things that I was asking them to learn had more to do with creating a hook, and effects of ‘showing versus telling’, how we create tone, so those were more of the ‘know’. Like if we’re going to talk about KUDs I put them with the Ks. (T8, p. 3)

KUD is an acronym popularized by Tomlinson which stands for Know, Understand, and Do, a way of talking about different kinds of learning outcomes (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). In the interview, Katniss was saying that she considered matters of form and craft as knowledge not understanding. In a similar fashion, Michelle Thermopolis constructed an essential question about form and craft, but in her interview, she called it “embedded” and “the last essential question”; in other words, she believed the texts carry the main idea, and learning about craft is a matter of factual knowledge that

enables the interpretation of ideas. The relative emphasis reveals a structural relationship between ideas in the minds of the ELA teachers who participated: ELA offers a chance to explore the human experience, but along the way students will learn the elements of effective expression of ideas.

To conclude, teachers in the study have planned a second set of conceptual ideas, these ones about the form, genre, and craft for both literary and transactional texts. The exception might be made when communication, especially persuasion, is the focus of study. In most cases, teachers treated these ideas as secondary, parallel, or even as knowledge level outcomes compared with themes in texts. However, an important idea emerged that understanding textual elements and communication variables requires a dynamic, applied context.

Ideas Beyond Texts

Some of the concepts that were the focus of participants' designs for learning in ELA went beyond the ones communicated *by* the text or ones that were *about* texts. This third category emerged from participant ideas about how texts were used. In the digital citizenship project, Liesel Quimby and Meg Granger (two participants from the same jurisdiction who were interviewed together) were designing a unit because of behaviour problems that had appeared in the school district related to students' use of online social media. Beyond learning the form and craft of these new forms of communication, the conceptual understanding focused the impact of digital communication:

LQ: This unit has been designed out of the need for students to understand how to respect themselves and students to learn how to approach the idea of social media as something that they need to put their best foot forward in, and that need has come from really poor choices by our students. ... engaging our

students in discussion and in deeper understanding of how social media can affect their living, in a positive and in a negative way. ...

MG: ...because they take it [the Internet] so for granted. Internet access to them is free, especially in our building when the Wi-Fi goes on and everybody's got access. One of the most interesting – I don't know if it's a paradox or not – but I love the idea our generation has had to work to become public, and their generation has to work to become private. (T3, p. 15)

Because students were actively interacting online in ways that were anti-social and problems emerged at the school, this school district made room in the curriculum to think critically about aspects of digital literacy. The unit had students considering the ramifications of posting content that that might have a wider and much more public audience than their immediate friend group, and might last much longer than one would assume. Meg recognized, however, that these concepts were best learned when schools became a part of the online world, and did not hide from it:

MG: The emphasis in our unit tends to be how to exist online and be respectful, but I would also rather have it extend to 'How can we participate?' – to stop just being consumers and to start being creators and collaborators. It something that we haven't quite gotten to yet, because we need to see what we've already put in motion first, but I would hope that eventually the conversation could evolve that way. (T3, p. 16)

The importance of this idea cannot be underestimated. Many students will have identities, relationships, employment, and entertainment mediated by online texts. Casey Jackson's digital learning project *did* have students being creators and collaborators. In this school district, twelve schools participated in a course that engaged students in online communities. Students thought critically about the nature of their participation in these collaborative spaces:

CJ: ...the only one we did agree, because all the teachers are taking part, is the digital literacy one. Well, that was the theme – digital literacy and digital citizenship. How are you a good citizen online? What to post, what not to post; what to believe, what not to believe. We have gone there centrally because the students are online interacting with students from across our board. We're getting them on Twitter, Facebook, Google docs, so teachers do a lot of work around that theme. (T7, p. 4)

This design allowed teachers to build concepts of digital citizenship as an aspect of their learning community experience. In the first case, teachers engaged students in conversation about the use of texts on the Internet. In the second, the course required students to use the Internet as a learning platform, so students could reflect on how they actually used social media in practice. I believe the difference is a significant one in relation to depth of understanding, because it harnessed a dynamic alternation between teaching students how to use tech tools (didactic pedagogy), to experiencing social media (authentic pedagogy), and then to critically reflecting on its use (critical pedagogy) that Kalantzis and Cope (2011) refer to as a *responsive pedagogy*.

Katniss Murry's intention with her all-female private-school students was not only to ponder abstract concepts about cause and effect, but also to think critically about their choices and apply these principles from a more personal viewpoint:

KM: the big ideas - All events have causes and effects that come before and lead up to them. That was one of them. And then: Change happens to events out of our control and events in our control. ... The idea of cause and effect – it's kind of like Karma – what they're curious about at this age... they're heading out into the world. What kinds of things can they effect, what kinds of things can they not effect? ... So the personal essay with the idea of cause and effect in it is – I think – or I found this year, that they were deeply interested in considering what kind of

– where they were headed and how they'd gotten to where they were. (T8, pp. 2-3)

These last ideas are as much about habits of mind – recognizing the nature of personal change, the willingness to take risks, and envisioning future selves. These ideas were inspired by texts, but the thinking went well beyond the texts. While the exploration of ideas has a curriculum orientation towards personal relevance, it also reached more widely to critically examining societal trends. Katniss engaged this wider lens with a text, *Mindless Sheep*, that acted as a stimulus for thinking about the purpose of university education and career pursuits.

With similar thinking to the digital projects, Katniss was asserting that these critical thinking ideas are difficult if students are not free to choose some of what they read. She also shared examples of critical thinking about language and texts. She talked about the difficulty of bringing feminist perspectives into focus for her students at an all-girls private school:

KM: I picked Sylvia Plath to start. ...She's such a great poet. I just thought, here are these kids soon heading off to university, and in The Bell Jar young Esther Greenwood is heading off to college, so I thought they could relate a little bit. ... well you can't say 'feminism' anymore, I don't know what it's like where you are. It's the F word in present day classrooms: girls just hate it. Girls just go to school and they don't want to be beaten over the head with the works. You almost have to come to it surreptitiously. They haven't really experienced sexism and they're not in a school with boys, so they don't even see it there. I'm trying to say, you know, there are still glass ceilings, you're going to have to wait to experience them. This generation is so interesting. I need to not turn them off it and still... you know, I need them to recognize it. ...I want them to see it in its subtlety now. Also I don't want them to think "Ugh! Feminism." (T8, p. 9)

For Katniss, it was important for her senior students to think critically about gender roles as part of their education. Her frustrations also bring into focus the challenge of confronting students' existing beliefs and theories. Katniss has formulated some important ideas about sexism and believed that by vicariously exploring the experiences of characters like Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, she could help students understand concepts about gender equity like the glass ceiling. However, when her somewhat sheltered students have not had experiences with sexism, and carry with them anti-feminist memes from social media, this critical conceptual ground becomes difficult territory. A big idea from Katniss' draft provincial curriculum (A8-2) communicated a key concept that captures this dilemma: "*People understand text differently depending on their worldviews and perspectives*" (A8, p. 3). A generation of female students have entered Katniss' classroom with a different worldview where it comes to feminist thinking than generations that have come before.

Critical thinking about ideas from gendered or minority perspectives appeared in other instances in the data. During Eloise Pevensie's inquiry approach to integrated ELA and Social Studies in grade 10, she developed historical views of gender:

EP: ...back in the Seventeen- Eighteen-hundreds, there was a forty percent chance of women dying during childbirth or while being pregnant, and then they had ten children. ... We do look at taking – because the [prescribed learning outcomes] say to look at the roles of women from the early in the centuries to what we have now... And I say I say think back to when women were chattel, and I tell them about the meaning for the saying "Rule of Thumb". So I tell them about that. O.K. could you imagine your mother obeying your father, so we look at the trends, the way things have changed from the seventeen- eighteen-hundreds. (T5, p. 6)

Again, thinking critically about the role of women was attached to the study of other ideas and perhaps was not the main concept, but it remained an important conceptual emphasis. The critical thinking focus sought to examine how texts reflected and portrayed gender, understanding along the way how gender roles have shifted and how equity might be gained. The critical examination of the changing role of women aligns with a curriculum oriented toward social justice; however, I question whether critical thinking about gender and race is possible when didactically teaching a steady diet of classics that contain antiquated cultural norms such as *Huck Finn* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Not only were gender portrayals an important idea for critical reading, so too were cultural portrayals. Michelle Thermopolis included some critical thinking about culture and language in the context of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

MT: this week we're talking about Huck Finn...one of the big components that we're talking about is the language that's in there. We looked at the different dialects, the vernacular that was in there, and we looked at the extensive use of the derogatory language that's in there that now we completely consider derogatory, that at the time that word was not considered derogatory...language is incorporated into every unit we do. It's not always or generally the essential questions that I use, but it is always a part, a smaller part at least, of some of the activities or the daily lessons or that kind of a thing, that we'll do to build them up to that final task. (T11, p. 8)

Especially in the context of reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* today, not building understanding of diversity, cultural change, and language use would seem a grievous oversight when reading books from the slave era of the American South.

In addition to looking at how language and texts portray and reflect culture and values, another vein of thinking examined how people in different cultures assign

significance and value to objects and texts. Charlotte Crane explored the idea that objects can be both personally and culturally significant:

CC: How artifacts can be used as a symbol for both a person, something personally significant, and how that can also be culturally significant, and how we can understand what was important to people in the past, or even people today by the things that they make and use. (T6, p. 3)

When artifacts can communicate meaning, cultural dress, fashion, home design, tools and technology all can be considered “texts”, open to critical interpretation. Such a view of representation expands the concept of text beyond the written word. It also explores a concept across diverse people and cultures, and does not privilege the signifying practices of one culture over another.

The data from interviews and artifacts supported a three-part typology of conceptual ideas. This framework for thinking about ideas may serve as a practical heuristic for ELA unit design. To illustrate, study participant Michelle Thermopolis had formulated four essential questions, two focused on themes in text, one on the craft of texts, and one related to thinking critically beyond the text. Michelle’s first concept explored how where we live affects who we become. This idea of a sense of place and its relationship to identity formation related to themes in the texts students were studying. Another of Michelle’s questions explored ways that literary texts can help us explore and synthesize perspectives. In this question, she planned for her students to develop understanding of how texts work. Her final big idea had students explore conformity and self-reliance, ideas that had students think critically about their identity and what values guided their actions in the world. This third concept went beyond the immediate text. These three sources of conceptual ideas in ELA formed a connected set that would help students explore multiple themes, concepts about texts / language, and ideas about

culture. The same three-part structure was evident in the kinds of ideas Katniss Murry noted in new ELA curricula that her provincial ministry was creating: these were ideas about “identity”, “what makes good writing”, and “why we tell stories.” These ideas aligned similarly in a three-part conceptual set: identity is very much a theme reflected in texts, good writing puts the focus on language and craft, and story-telling reflects critical thinking about the role of language and texts in culture. The three part conceptual set could be a practical heuristic for planning for conceptual understanding in ELA. Participants in the study were not planning with one big idea or statement of enduring understanding, but had a multi-pronged set of connected ideas in the texts, about the texts, and beyond the texts. The next part of the analysis will reflect on how teachers planned to teach transferable skills.

Procedural Understanding in ELA

Along with the conceptual ideas, teachers also planned procedural knowledge (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) or “cognitive process skills” (Carson, 2004, p. 71). It is important to note that for some participants, processes and strategies were at the forefront of their planning and conceptual ideas were of secondary importance. This emphasis was congruent with current programs of studies in ELA. For example, one designer, Eloise Pevensie, put skills at the forefront of planning for her course which integrated English language arts with other humanities courses:

EP: if you teach skills and keep your focus on the skills that you want them to learn at the end and you use the curriculum as the pathway to that skill, you can give them long-lasting skills that will be transferred throughout their life. ... Self-regulation, time-management, and being able to communicate and work with peers and other adults... (T5, p.4)

The orientation that Eloise had towards curriculum was such that if teachers emphasized the skills and strategies of the English language arts curriculum, students would be able to transfer these skills with success to content area courses like Science and Social Studies in high school and college and university courses after they graduated. Curriculum in this sense is a set of literacy life skills to succeed in life.

Claudia Hopkins and Casey Jackson were also of the opinion that the purpose of content was “to achieve the skills” (reading, writing, oral, and media skills). In other words, for these educators, skills or processes were of greater importance than conceptual ideas for teacher planning. Conceptual territory was dependent upon students’ choices in the lines of inquiry they pursued. There were no cases where ideas and processes were not fully paired together.

Reading Comprehension and Response Skills

Undoubtedly, how teachers regarded skills depended upon their understanding of the source of meaning-making. For example, Emma Hardy devised the procedural aim for reading to “*analyze a variety of texts in order to recognize themes*” (A10-1, p.3). This traditional approach to literary analysis cast meaning as residing within the text, ready to be recognized by the careful reader. On the other hand, participants who saw meaning as a transaction between readers and authors regarded the development of meaning in a more constructed way. Casey Jackson’s emphasis in planning was for students to develop comprehension and response skills to explore their own conceptual ideas:

CJ: I’m quite happy with [teachers] just saying, I need you to demonstrate reading skills. Over the year I’m going to negotiate with you, personalize your education, but you need to find texts that engage you and that you want to talk about. You need to demonstrate your reading skills. So whatever texts they’ve

selected we can see whether they can synthesize, visualize and pull out the main ideas, and make connections between the texts and other texts or other work that's been done. But I don't think I need to say it's got to be Shakespeare, or your essay must be on cars. I need a demonstration, but here are the skills. (T7, p. 4)

Personalizing learning meant offering a choice of texts, differentiating for student interest and engagement, and individualizing students' learning. Reading skills here included synthesizing main ideas and making connections between texts, so concepts varied depending on student choice. The case also demonstrated how a teacher emphasized reading comprehension and response processes for high school students more explicitly than might have been the case in the past.

The "Darkness in Humanity" grade 11 unit plan discussed by Krista Kurtz and by Claudia Hopkins also mapped out transferable reading skills (A2-1, p. 3), including "close reading" (A2-1, p. 3). Close reading meant marking up text to identify and track symbols, images and language (considering connotation, diction, figurative language and rhetorical devices). Close reading also involved identifying main ideas. These skills were modelled by the teacher with shared text, practiced in small group discussion (including literature circles), and applied to independent reading (along with a literary essay) (A2-1, p. 3). The pattern of modelling with a mentor text, practicing with choice texts in pairs or small groups, and applying understanding in individual reading and viewing was repeated in short cycles each time a new form of text was introduced. For instance, the inductive skill set for narrative knowing, such as rereading to trace the development of an image, demonstrated reading skills for literary fiction or viewing skills for interpreting film. The pattern demonstrates a middle ground between mandated texts and free choice. Krista and Claudia employed certain texts, such as *Lord of the Flies*, that they could use to model and teach elements of literary fiction, but then

offered text choices in small groups that enabled students to practice their skills with collaboration and dialogue acting as an enabling scaffold. The teachers could also adjust text complexity so that a range of learners could find the right degree of challenge.

More advanced processes of teaching reading strategies for senior students, such as becoming more metacognitive when reading, annotating text, questioning, and discussing literature, were also incorporated into the designs of study participants Liesel, Katniss, and Ramona:

LQ: The analysis that the students have to do to really understand the ramifications ...one of the things that I am really wanting to do through my introduction of 'talking to the text' and things like that is that exact awareness, that it's something that we do as good readers. We don't necessarily know how to teach that to our students. It's to let those metacognitive ideas connect while you are reading (T3, p. 14)

* * *

KM: We talked a lot about annotating texts at the beginning of the year. (T8, p. 4)

* * *

RS: reading comprehension was involved. We worked on questioning skills. We worked on discussion, like literature circle discussion. (T9, p. 4)

These educators took the position that conscious meaning-making strategies (such as 'talking to the text', 'annotating', and 'questioning') were significant elements in their planning. In addition to the cognitive, inside-the-head strategies, these processes were also distinctly social, with active discussion of text in small groups a common feature. The processes of reading comprehension and response were congruent with an orientation to curriculum that emphasized the development of cognitive processes (Eisner, 1985). These participant perspectives do reflect the idea, however, that

cognitive and metacognitive processes for reading need to be modelled and developed through practice in dialogue structures such as ‘literature circles’. Pedagogically, this represents a shift from a more psychological view of constructivism to a social and cultural one.

Writing Process Skills and Strategies

Although planning reading processes and strategies emerged a strong vein in the data, Ramona Salt lamented that ELA teachers tended to plan more for reading and literature than they did for teaching writing processes:

RS: I think it would make sense to me that you might want to start by identifying what skills you want to focus on. I am coming to the conclusion over time as English teachers that we focus more on literature because it's easier to teach than writing. And that probably more love and attention needs to be given to writing. So I would say look at what are those skills and then figure out what you could best do that would tie in those skills and get them involved. (T9, p. 7)

While process writing and workshop approaches have certainly been around for decades, Ramona's suggestion was that the focus on these writing processes may have faded, in part because of a recent emphasis on reading strategy instruction.

Where teachers had strong summative assessment demands such as Advanced Placement (AP), Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), International Baccalaureate (IB), or provincial examinations, their planning focus on transfer skills was influenced by the academic skills necessary to succeed in these tasks. Teachers admitted that without the examinations, the nature of their skills focus and their transfer task would have been more project-based and authentic:

MT: One of the big things that I did in this unit for them was introduce at that time the idea of timed writing, and work with them a lot on timed writing ...to help them particularly with SAT essays and their AP essays and that kind of

thing. ...Since it was for an AP class, it was one of their AP style essays that was the transfer task. It was not a really cool project or that kind of a thing. It was a culminating assessment for them, and based on that they had to take the literature and write a literary analysis essay. Through that, incorporate the analysis that they have done from the reading, and also incorporate the writing skills that they have learned and honed throughout the unit. And these essays were also AP style in format, so they're timed, and then we use the AP scale and talk about that, and then they revise them for final drafts. (T11, p. 4)

Michelle's unit plan made connections to national standards, but with the Advanced Placement Literature Exam as a filter, her range of writing focused upon the mandate to "compose an analytical essay" (A11-1, p. 4). Specifically, students had to "*explain how [an American classic novel's] representation of childhood or adolescence shapes the meaning of the work as a whole*" (A11-1, p.5). The emphasis here was on the craft of the novel. Imported curricula, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate, clearly affected ELA teacher decision-making. Whether that effect was positive or negative is not the point, only that imported curriculum and the external examination system shaped the decision.

In other backward planned units, particularly where teachers used inquiry pedagogy, there was a distinct shift away from the traditional high school English essay. For instance, Krista Kurtz and Claudia Hopkins had students develop a personal essay in their "Darkness" unit. The lesson plan for the writing task included an article, written by Graham (2004) that explained the kind of essay students were to develop. Rather than writing a traditional thesis-support literary essay, Graham suggested that "an essay doesn't begin with a statement, but with a question." Graham encouraged writers to develop ideas based on hooks, surprises, questions, and things that seem wrong or humorous. Katniss Murry also developed a personal essay with her students (T8, p. 4).

In her unit plan, she used an essay from Canadian author Margaret Atwood as a mentor text, a text that can be used as an example of good writing. Writer's workshop mini-lessons included "*creating a hook, the effects of showing versus telling, and how we create tone...*" (T8, p. 3). This shift in the style of a personal essay enabled students to view meaning as a tentative set of possibilities rather than establishing a firm position and defending it in a one-sided way, as is typical in thesis-support essays.

In the digital citizenship project, Liesel Quimby and Meg Granger's approach to writing was to collect grade 9 student thinking in a series of journal entries. For example, one prompt asked students to explain what they needed to do to protect themselves online (A3&4-7, p. 4), while another had them analyze a case study of inappropriate use of social media (A3&4-7, p. 7). The final writing assignment directed students to "Elevate a journal entry into a [formal] response paragraph" (A3&4-7, p. 2). The method of developing the paragraph included mini-lessons on "Idea-Discussion-Voice" or "Point-Example-Analysis." The mandate was to explore meaning, in this case related to digital citizenship, to determine what was personally relevant and to develop it in a formalized final reflection. Students built on their existing understanding of online conduct and teachers lead them through a process of collaborative discussion and critical reflection that finally led to an expression of new understanding. Casey Jackson's digital literacy project addressed the "goal of improving the ability of students to communicate their thinking in writing" (A7-3, p. 2), with "tools and techniques for improving written communication (e.g., student exemplars, anchor charts, non-fiction writing, graphic organizers / frameworks, open-ended critical questions)" (A7-3, p. 3). The aims of the project emphasized critical thinking in expository, digital writing forms such as blogs and web pages. The key insight here is that students are learning to write

in forms that are relevant to the times by sharing writing publicly within the school district for all fourteen schools participating in the initiative.

Open-ended, extended, written reflection served as one means of documenting students' understanding. Writing assignments like personal essays or extended written response lent themselves to more constructivist approaches to the development of understanding. The stance toward understanding was that it was built over time by examining prior knowledge, exploring perspectives in texts (especially in dialogue), writing ongoing reflections (for example, in journal entries), and formalizing a final expression of revised understanding (for example, in a personal essay).

Inquiry and Collaboration Skills

Reading and writing skills were not the only procedural knowledge sets valued by study participants. Another category of procedural understanding emerged around inquiry and collaboration skills. Charlotte Crane planned the transferable skills of inquiry, including strategies for research, representing, and thinking critically. In terms of reading, she defined research as involving locating, paraphrasing, note-taking, and synthesizing and applying new learning (A1-1, p. 3). In her plan, she also included specific strategies for guided exploration, including questioning (pp. 12-13), knowledge-building (pp. 14-17), information gathering and note-making (pp. 17-19), and for representing, presenting, and reflecting (pp. 30-34). These skills were specially designed for project-based learning.

Krista Kurtz also planned skills for inquiry in both unit plans that she shared. In her inquiry project on "Happiness," students first created a model based on their own prior knowledge, and then used research skills to gather information, evaluate ideas, and revise their understanding (A2-8, p. 19). This slight variation, emphasizing an

explanation of prior knowledge first, likely had a significant impact on student engagement and learning, because it made later learning more personal and purposeful. The emphasis on an exploration of prior knowledge or existing schema is an important one in planning for deeper conceptual understanding. A teacher cannot describe growth in development without a description of understanding at the start of instruction; likewise, students cannot reflect on and self-assess growth in their conceptual understanding if they do not spend significant time exploring ideas at the start.

Katniss Murry advocated for critical dialogue about engaging in various discourses. She asserted that an inquiry skill set might include why readers choose books and why some books are considered literature:

KM: If we're saying 21st century skills, and critical thinking is one of them, it's like the meta-thinking, right? Not just thinking about the content of the text, but what and how we should be thinking about it. ... Why are we even looking at this? Is it worth looking at, and what are the ideas underlying a text, rather than selecting texts for students. ... Those are the questions in English, why do we choose what we choose. I think – those are the questions that I like. How do we get students to be thinking about that? Also, how do we get ourselves out of selecting the same things, because lots of us are getting stuck. (T8, p. 8)

Beyond an understanding of the book itself, Katniss asked her students to adopt critical lenses on literature. She encouraged her students to be reflective about the choices that they select for themselves and how they find these text choices relevant. For Katniss, 21st century literacy is about choosing to be a reader and entering into dialogue about what ideas a text offers, highlighting the need for an infusion of purposeful metacognitive reflection about purpose.

Beyond research and critical thinking skills, some participants extended their process focus to include personal and collaborative skills. The integrated ELA, Civics,

and Career course for grade 10 students in Casey Jackson's multi-school project put such habits of mind into the forefront. Not only were students expected to integrate technology to learn, but also to learn to both collaborate (learn teamwork and interpersonal skills), and to exercise independence and agency (make choices, work independently, gather evidence of learning, and self-assess) (A7-3, p. 1). Collaboration skills were also part of the plan for the collaborative literary inquiry into the darkness in humanity. Krista Kurtz' unit included "oral language from small group discussion skills to oral presentation skills to listening skills" (A2-1, p. 3). In a similar fashion, the AVID program that Ramona Salt's students took part in encouraged them to stay organized in terms of materials, time, priorities, and to take personal responsibility (A9-1, p. 2). The program also emphasized collaboration skills such as sharing responsibility for work (positive interdependence) and sharing ideas and opinions (supporting the learning of others) (A9-1, p. 2). This focus on soft skills support self-regulation in ELA learning. The expectation for these planners was that students collaborate with one another to explore and build consensus on ideas, and that learning is powerful when it is grounded in meaningful, authentic, social interaction.

In terms of important skills and strategies, participants put the most emphasis on reading comprehension and response. However, some teachers focused attention on writing and believed it needed renewed emphasis, while still others in the study emphasized the skills of inquiry and collaboration. Some external assessment narrowed skill development to timed responses for a narrow range of inauthentic prompts. An important vein of skills and strategies related to habits of mind, such as dealing with failure, working independently, and reflecting on growth. What was notable was that the process these teachers focused upon emphasized strategies students needed in order to

develop conceptual understanding, such as valuing and exploring prior knowledge, making choices, clarifying the purpose of reading, engaging in ongoing reflective discussion, and inquiring further. Jim Burke was right – teachers are “thinking about planning in ways that are new” (2015, p. 250)!

How Resources Were Positioned

Now that some of the conceptual and procedural knowledge that backward planners emphasized in their planned ELA units has been examined, another strong vein of meaning clustered around how texts were positioned to support these explorations. Specifically, texts were cast as objects of study, as marquees, as mentor texts, or as catalysts, an idea adapted from Brauer and Clarke (2008).

Texts as Objects of Study

In several cases, a certain book title took a prominent role as a focal point of unit planning. Emma Hardy and Michelle Thermopolis, close colleagues at a small private school whom I interviewed separately, coordinated the ELA curriculum and resources for the school. They had selected literary titles for each grade, sticking closely to British and American classics such as *My Antonia*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. Michelle’s unit plan for *Pride and Prejudice* (A11-1) included references to short texts of various forms that supported the exploration of ideas in the Austen novel. For example, several non-fiction fact sheets explored literature, art, economy, and politics of the Romantic period, and a YouTube video entitled “The Real Jane Austen” also provided context. A picture book, *The Lorax*, by Dr. Seuss invited exploration of style. The title of the unit plan and the emphasis of the lessons suggested that the unit of study is mainly the book itself. It was a “*Pride and Prejudice* Unit”. Austen’s novel is the revered, canonical, literary text, the focal point of study, and the

others are peripheral, supporting texts. The text in this case is positioned as “sacred” (Brauer & Clark, 2008) – one to be studied and revered for its artistry.

Texts as Marquees

In other cases, teachers’ plans included a whole class novel, but it was chosen to lead a focus on meaning – a headliner or marquee text that would spark the exploration of ideas in the rest of the unit. Claudia Hopkins also started with a marquee text in mind (*Lord of the Flies*), and then found several supplementary texts to fit the unit:

CH: For me there is two pieces to the backward design: there are the big ideas that we’re exploring in terms of what are the ideas that the texts we’re using are exploring. In this case we used Lord of the Flies as our core text, but then had a number of different texts that we used to supplement it. There is the content piece – what’s the novel we’re doing, what are the issues explored, but then thinking about our curriculum outcomes, what are the outcomes we want to achieve through that text? It’s a two-piece process. (T6, p. 2)

In contrast to Emma and Michelle, for Claudia the idea comes first and the resource selection is secondary. It was not a “*Lord of the Flies* unit”, but rather a unit plan that explored evil, a “Darkness in Humanity unit.” Still, everyone in the class was required to read the same core text. Golding’s novel was the marquee, mentor text that launched the exploration.

In a similar way, Katniss Murry’s marquee text was a non-fiction selection entitled *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by William Deresiewicz (A8-1). The book accuses the current generation of high-achieving university students as being too conformist and serves as a challenge to Murry’s up-and-coming students to forge their own paths. This use of an extended text as provocation for personal reflection and growth also featured in Ramona Salt’s AVID

program, which depended on a marquee text written by Dr. Ben Carson entitled *Gifted Hands*. The book developed ideas about self-determination and grit:

RS: The book starts with a poem that the boy's mother had given him as a kid, and it says "You have yourself to blame" I think is the name of the poem, but it goes "When things go wrong and you want to blame everybody else, take a look at yourself because maybe you're part of the problem", and the line "you have yourself to blame" keeps coming up. So, when you have no friends, you have yourself to blame. When you don't get things done, you have yourself to blame. And it's so contrary to the cultural message right now. It's the idea of looking at 'no excuses'. One of the concepts would be "How would you find success? What would success look like for you? What are the stages you do in order to be successful?" (T9, p. 4)

The study of *Gifted Hands* acts as a source of ideas about self-reliance, a habit of mind or attitude the AVID program wished to promote. It is significant that these two full-length non-fiction texts, *Excellent Sheep* and *Gifted Hands* are used exclusively to convey ideas and not for analysis, as teachers might do analyzing the elements of fiction. One prompt students to reflect on purpose and meaning of life choices while the other conveyed acceptance of personal responsibility.

A slight variation in the marquee texts seemed to be Casey Jackson's integrated approach to ELA, Civics, and Careers which included a choice of selections for grade 10 book clubs with the discussion facilitated on a digital platform:

CJ: ...we started a, we called it an online book club. Let's say I had fourteen teachers teaching in this [project name withheld]. Each teacher selected a novel appropriate for grade ten that they were going to be the teacher of that novel, but when the students came time to sign up for the online book club they picked the novel they wanted, but instead of picking the novel the teacher was teaching in their classroom, they had a choice of fourteen books to choose from. I might be teaching in [city name withheld] but the teacher in [city name withheld] is

teaching a book that I really want to read, so I would sign up and study the book that that teacher would read. Then we formed online discussion communities where that teacher would lead a discussion for any student in the region, [several cities mentioned, names withheld], would take part in online discussions with that teacher to experience the text, and to read the text, but the assessment itself would be done by their home-based teacher. (T7, p. 3)

Once again, choice of texts was a prominent feature in this design. However, each of the choices featured a teacher leading the discussion of a mandatory, marquee text. This project seemed to hold the middle ground between a teacher teaching a book title and students having choice. In this project, the teacher could still have some expertise and knowledge about the book, but students could also have some choice that was not limited to their immediate classroom.

Texts as Catalysts

Finally, some teachers did not really have a specific, extended text anchoring or headlining the unit. Instead, the unit plan mainly featured short texts – articles, short stories, and poetry – to activate schema, model skills and strategies, and launch choice texts. For example, the collaborative plan for the “Darkness in Humanity” unit as it was written out and published (not necessarily as Claudia and Krista delivered it in their classrooms) did not privilege one title. The unit was built on a concept: ordinary people have dark impulses. The unit plan contained multiple text selections for a literature circles approach, with classic novels like Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* alongside modern titles like Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Although both Krista Kurtz and Claudia Hopkins lead with a whole class reading of *Lord of the Flies*, the unit plan they collaborated on and published featured an array of choices. The plan started out with a series of short stories, one shared and one choice feature film, sets of poems that ranged

in degree of challenge, and sets of novels. The pattern was to share the reading of a mentor text in each genre, and then provide choice texts for further exploration and practice. The following table gives a sampling of some of the choices that were listed:

Table 9. Sample of 'Darkness in Humanity' titles

Text Selection	Sample of Titles Listed in Unit Plan (A2-1, pp. 3-9)
Short stories	"The Destructors" – Graham Greene "The Cask of Amontillado" – Edgar Allen Poe "The Lottery" – Shirley Jackson
Shared viewing of feature film:	<i>Life is Beautiful</i> – d. Roberto Benigni
Choice viewing of feature film:	<i>The Color Purple</i> – d. Steven Spielberg <i>Hotel Rwanda</i> – d. Terry George <i>Rabbit Proof Fence</i> – d. Phillip Noyce <i>A History of Violence</i> – d. David Cronenberg
Shared Poetry	"The Man He Killed" – Thomas Hardy "The Generals" – Shel Silverstein "The Baker" – Heather Cadsby "Luka" – Suzanne Vega
Small Group Poetry (e.g., set 4, "Challenging")	"Do Not Weep Maiden, For War is Kind" – Stephen Crane "A Work of Artifice" – Marge Piercey "The Bull Moose" – Alden Nowlan
Novels for Literature Circles (in different combinations)	<i>The Wars</i> – Timothy Findlay <i>Catch-22</i> – Joseph Heller <i>The Lovely Bones</i> – Alice Sebold <i>The Kite Runner</i> – Khaled Hosseini

These selections indicated that there were short texts and films for the teacher to model meaning-making processes. In addition, there were a wide variety of thematically-related extended texts for individuals and small groups to choose to read, discuss, and follow their own lines of inquiry. Some of the longer texts were modern, some classic, but most were of high value for exploring the big idea. The text selections ranged significantly in terms of complexity and maturity for reading and viewing, offering an opportunity for choices of different challenge levels to suit a mixed ability classroom.

Texts here are positioned as conduits (Brauer & Clark, 2008), as opportunities to convey ideas in the wider culture or society.

Another unit plan that Krista Kurtz described unit was designed for grade 12 students and featured catalyst texts on the theory of happiness. The texts listed for this learning experience represented a mix of narrative fiction, non-fiction books, and documentary films. Here were some sample titles from that unit:

“Wings” – Christopher Myers

“The Happy Man” – Naguib Mahfouz

“In Selfish Pursuit” – Anthony Brandt

“Man’s Search for Meaning” – Viktor Frankel

“Stumbling on Happiness” – Daniel Gilbert

“The Happiness Project” – Gretchen Ruben

“This Emotional Life: Happiness” – PBS.org (A2-8, p. 13)

These texts were assembled to provide inspiration that would spark student understanding, invite them to join and broaden the conversation, and to challenge their pre-existing theory of happiness. The artifact I analyzed consisted of a set of conference presentation slides. In the presentation, one slide promoted the idea to other teachers that offering choice in theme-related texts supported diverse learners and broadened thinking about the big idea (A2-8, p. 14).

Other projects incorporated new and emerging electronic text forms as catalysts for discussing ideas, including YouTube videos, Ted Talks, graphic novels, and young adult literature. For example, Krista Kurtz used a variety of texts to fuel student inquiry:

KK: I was using articles that I had found in a psychology book about the bystander effect and Kitty Genovese. I found an article by Dr. Phil Zimbardo on psychology and evil. I use a Ted Talk by Dr. Zimbardo on the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prisoner experiment. (T2, p. 3)

Many of these diverse text forms are more readily available than ever before. Ted Talks, in particular, provide timely lectures from experts in a variety of fields in a concise, engaging form freely available to classrooms.

In an artifact provided by Charlotte Crane, the resources for an integrated unit on “*What makes a successful civilization?*” included text sets. These were collections of non-fiction texts on past civilizations that also ranged in reading levels (A1-1, p.13). This approach would stand in contrast to having the whole class read the same textbook pages. The collection included both non-fiction books about past civilizations as well as collections of myths and visual art.

Other projects also took this wide-open approach to positioning texts as catalysts for ideas and inquiry. The digital citizenship unit offered lessons on nine elements (Ribble, 2014). Interestingly, the printout of the digital citizenship dashboard contains a QR code that, when scanned by a smart device, takes a user to the web page (Google Doc) containing links to all the resources. Embedded in each lesson was an online set of texts. For example, the document on “Etiquette” (A3&4-2, p. 1) contained a link to a five-page magazine article entitled “Why I Just Asked My Students to Put Their Laptops Away” by Clay Shirky. The lesson guide (A3&4-5) revealed a mix of resources – visuals, Wikipedia pages, statistical reports, applications, short films, parodies, magazine articles and web sites (e.g., the “Way Back Machine” at <http://archive.org/web>). This collaborative approach allowed schools participating in the initiative to have easy online access to the resources, collate and update resources as trends and technology necessitate, and do it all for free.

Patterns of Emphasis in (Re)Conceptualizing ELA

Stepping back from the conceptual and procedural aims teachers mapped out and the texts teachers positioned in the unit plans (as objects, marquee, or catalysts) to support understanding, what was revealed was that the emphasis and pattern within backward planning ranged significantly between participants. Some ELA teachers started their planning with texts in mind, some with specific big ideas, some with overarching ideas, and, finally, some with skills and habits of mind. These patterns were somewhat determined by traditions of curriculum, by attitudes towards texts, and by the pedagogy employed.

Text-centred pattern. Several study participants took a planning approach that foregrounded the text itself (see *Figure 4* on page 193). In this pattern, backward planning began with the literary work as an object of study, and then developed a focus on the key idea within that text. Once these ideas were mapped out (sometimes as

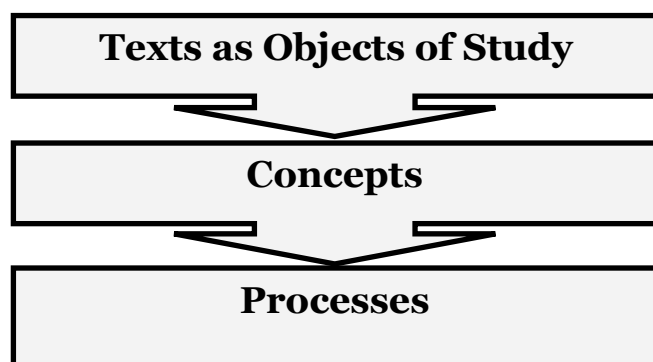


Figure 4. Pattern 1: text-centred planning

essential questions), the teachers layered in the reading skills and strategies, particularly as they were needed for standardized tests like the AP exam. For example, Michelle Thermopolis stated “*I really took the ideas for the essential questions off of*

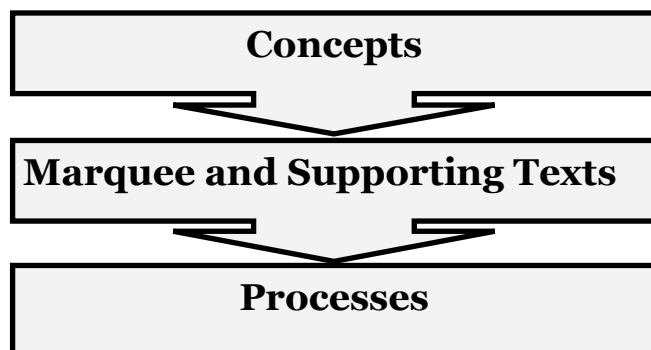
the thematic concepts of the books, so that students would be able to make connections between the larger work they were reading and their own lives.” (T11, p. 3). In this approach, the ideas in the book took the greatest importance, while ideas about craft or critical thinking were secondary questions. While this approach may seem traditional, it

did have the benefit of clarifying which concepts in the learning sequence were most important, and teaching focused on routines that developed understanding, such as close reading, discussion, and simulation. In some ways, the pattern conformed to a traditional notion of ELA where the main role is to teach the classic works of literature. There were some echoes of *transmission* style teaching. For example, Emma Hardy, a veteran teacher, admitted that she was “*very structured. I have certain lecture days and certain writing days and certain grammar days, and I stick to that*” (T10, p. 7). Liesel Quimby also took this book-first approach regarding *Of Mice and Men* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. While her colleague was influencing her to change, she still planned mainly with book title in mind and then thought through big ideas and strategies (T3, p. 9).

Concept-centred planning. A second planning pattern evident from the data was one where teachers foregrounded an idea or concept, offered a range of texts, and then layered in the comprehension, collaboration, and composition skills students needed (see *Figure 5* on page 195). Krista talked about her ideas-first planning process in contrast to typical planning:

KK: so, my process is often: I’ll have the big idea, I might brainstorm some cool texts I can think of off the top of my head, and then I’ll start thinking about the assessment, and then I’ll go to “how the heck am I going to get them there.” That’s my last thing. Other teachers might start with “I have some awesome activities that they love to do, and here are the texts that I have, and what’s going to be the big idea?” Everybody has their own way of accessing this process, but that’s my typical process, in that order. (T2, p. 5)

In other words, this concept-first planning pattern can lead to opening text choices that form a thematically-related set, potentially varying the books to appeal to a diverse



range of interests and challenge levels. The digital citizenship project Meg Granger described revealed how the work began with a framework of ideas about online communication, and then a divisional committee found articles,

videos, visuals, and web sites (i.e., diverse resources) to fit these ideas. Afterwards, the ELA teachers knew they could match ELA outcomes because they worked within a process-based curriculum:

MG: ...we took the essence of what we know the English curriculum to be and carried that forth when selecting texts and activities that we had, knowing that at the end when we sat down, it wouldn't be that hard to say, "This goes here, this goes here." So, if we had to put it in a gradebook, we now can with category and outcome. (T3, p. 5)

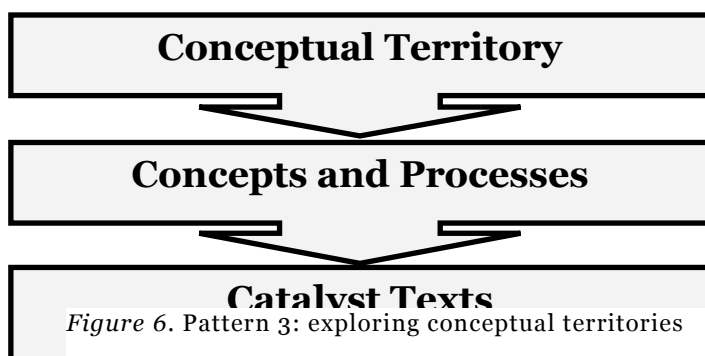
This focus on concepts about texts suits the traditions of studying media / digital literacy from communication studies or rhetoric. Meg explained that the difference in approaches was due to “*who holds the knowledge. I think when it comes to digital citizenship we're all going to agree that - at least think that - the kids know more than we do, whereas in an English classroom, traditional English classroom, we see ourselves as the keeper of knowledge*” (T3, p. 9). This key point – ‘whose concept is it anyway?’ – results in different approaches to planning. As the teachers saw themselves as co-learners in digital environments, they repositioned themselves and were more open to co-constructing meaning with their students.

“The Darkness in Humanity” unit (to which both Krista Kurtz and Claudia Hopkins contributed) was similar in that it followed the pattern of starting with an idea or concept of the unit up front. The concept put at the forefront of the plan a broad territory for inquiry: “*understanding the reasons why people do terrible things (or fail to stand up against them) can motivate us to make changes in ourselves and the world*” (A1-4, p. 1). In Krista’s own version of the unit, this idea was also stated as two essential questions:

1. *Why do ordinary (good) people sometimes do bad or even terrible things?*
2. *How might we deal with the darker impulses within ourselves? Within others?*
(A2-4, p. 1)

Since these questions foregrounded the unit, they valued literature as a means for exploring a wide range of ideas through dialogue (A1-4, p. 1). These units were supported with multi-genre resources from the literary end of the spectrum (prose fiction, poetry, visual art, film,) and the transactional end of the spectrum (prose non-fiction, documentary, short film, web pages).

Exploring broad conceptual territory. A third pattern for planning was to state a broad overarching idea broad that acted more like a territory than a specific concept (see *Figure 6* on page 196). The plan by Charlotte Crane followed this pattern. For example, the inquiry / problem-based learning was guided by the overarching

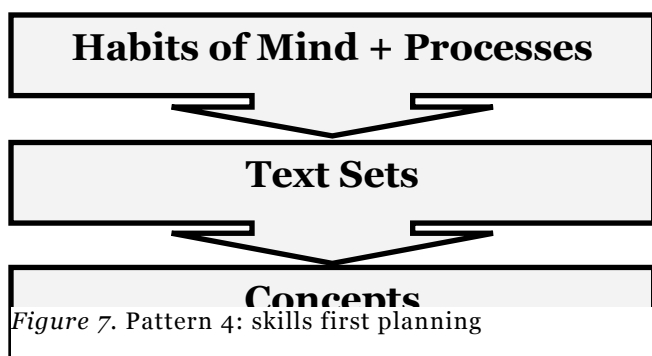


question “*What makes a successful civilization?*” (A1-1, p. 13). This essential question spanned the whole year, so it acted more like territory or topic than specific

concept. At the unit level, what was foregrounded was a process of inquiry into representation through artifacts. Diverse texts supported wide-ranging exploration.

The “Happiness” unit plan (A2-8) Krista Kurtz shared followed a different pattern from her “Darkness” unit. It followed this ‘overarching idea’ pattern, being wide open to establish a territory for inquiry, then planning ideas and processes, and offering a whole range of texts that would relate to the exploration. Krista shared a set of PowerPoint slides from a conference where she presented the Happiness unit plan, which showed how she contrasted inquiry methods that were primarily developed for science with a more inductive approach. Students began their inquiry by constructing a model of their own thinking and then shared their model with others. Then, they began a cycle of inquiry in which they had an opportunity explore new perspectives and to revise their initial understanding (A2-8, p. 8). This method represents a profound shift toward privileging the students’ existing schema and engaging them in constructivist learning.

Skills-first planning. The fourth backward planning pattern was one in which the teacher put habits of mind (attitudes, social-emotional outcomes) on the forefront of planning, as well as simultaneously targeting academic skills and strategies (see *Figure 7*). Ramona Salt’s plan, likely because it was set within context of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program and philosophy (A9-1), placed an equal emphasis on organization and collaboration skills as academic skills such as writing,



inquiry, and reading (A9-1, p. 2). In her interview, she recommended “*start by identifying what skills you want to focus on*” (T9, p. 6). Ramona believed that if teachers knew the skills they

wanted to develop, such as critical thinking, they could then use any concepts and questions:

RS: One of the things I like about English is that it is ... it really lends itself toward being skill-based, and you have specific kinds of skills you develop, but you can do whatever you want within it – the concepts, the big ideas, the big question. Focusing on critical thinking – that seems like a huge piece right now that’s missing to me in school. Kids want to regurgitate, they’ll do a project, they’ll do whatever you ask, but the actual thinking piece of it is something they’re trying to avoid. Unless we develop some critical thinking, then we’re doing our kids a disservice. (T9, p. 5)

Ramona’s preference for a focus on critical thinking allowed her students to make interpretations and connections. Her emphasis on thinking skills positioned students as the ones formulating big ideas, not the teacher. The idea in this planning pattern was that ideas should not be pre-determined, but rather arise from students taking responsibility for exploration and discovery.

Casey Jackson also expressed a belief that planning begins by identifying the transfer skills students need to develop:

CJ: for English, it has four main strands – you develop their reading skills, writing skills, oral language skills which are both listening and speaking, and their media skills which are both creating media and understanding media as they watch or listen to it. That’s my mandate. So, if I want them to become really good readers, that’s my goal. Now, sure I can have an agenda that I think they need to understand the novel or to understand Shakespeare or science fiction or things like that. I could go that way, but I’m so far off that that ...I don’t have a problem with them having personalized learning. (T7, p. 1)

Casey’s “personalized learning” implied an emphasis on literate processes, which allowed students to choose texts and writing projects that suited their interests and

aptitudes. For instance, in the course students could choose a book club from up to a dozen on offer.

Claudia Hopkins agreed with this skills-first approach. She stated “*English is a very skills-based course. We use the content to achieve the skills, or at least that’s the way I look at it. We use the different texts... you know, texts are there for lots of different purposes, but in a lot of cases we’re using those texts to teach those skills*” (T6, p. 4). What these teachers are calling skills are not the diagramming of sentences of old, but broad process of reading comprehension and response; as Claudia’s unit plan expressed it, it is the ability to “*synthesize, visualize, pull out the main ideas, and make connections between the texts and other texts*” (A2-1).

These participants were using backward planning methods, and all of them included these elements – concepts, processes, and resources. However, each of them differed in the emphasis or priority they placed on each element during planning. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to draw from the differences in relative emphasis is that teachers need to find the planning pattern and strategies that make the most sense to them. What comes to the foreground or background of planning may vary because of the nature of the concept, the skills that are the focus of instruction, the positioning of texts, or the pedagogy employed. The pattern of emphasis also reveals teacher beliefs about where meaning resides and how students learn best. The next chapter will move away from the plans themselves and explore the experiences that teachers reported when planning backwards.

Chapter 5: The Experience of Backward Design

Not only were participants asked to describe the plans they had designed, but also to reflect on their experiences of planning backwards for English language arts. Using the interview transcripts as the main source of data, this chapter highlights significant themes that emerged. Interpretation processes mirrored those used earlier, such as coding transcripts of the recorded interviews, then writing memos about the codes, categories, and themes that emerged from participant experiences.

Building on the finding that conceptual understanding paired with processes at the forefront of planning can yield a more robust sense of the purpose and goals of ELA, this chapter will focus on backward planning with the understood premise that conceptual understanding is a part of that landscape. In this chapter, I examine contributions across all cases. Participants described several benefits to planning backward, but also expressed cautions. Participants suggested both enabling factors and barriers to the use of backward planning, especially in the context of wider school improvement.

Benefits Experienced from Backward Planning

Participant interviews revealed the advantages they experienced from backward planning. First, participants communicated how having a sense of the whole imbued planning and teaching with a profound sense of purpose and helped them find ways to make learning more relevant for students. Participants also incorporated fresh approaches to pedagogy and assessment in their designs.

Greater Sense of Purpose

A key impression shared by several participants about planning backwards was that it clarified the purpose of instruction. Because the focus was on learning, not on activities or resources, teachers could be flexible and invoke whatever lessons or texts

seemed appropriate to learning. Since twelve-year teacher Claudia Hopkins had initially learned about backward planning through the lens of universal design and formative assessment practice, she expressed value for the focus on learning:

CH: I honestly think that it is a better way of teaching. It is a better way of planning, and I don't find it to be particularly time-consuming, it's just a different way of thinking about it. Instead of doing it lesson-by-lesson or whatever, instead of thinking about the activities that I'm going to do with the kids, I'm thinking about the learning. It's just a shifting of focus, and I think that once that you can think about it in terms of shifting your focus it won't seem as onerous. (T6, p. 6)

Claudia's reflection cast backward planning as a shift in perspective rather than a wholesale change; specifically, she paid more attention to the main aims of learning. This change in emphasis resulted in reported improvements in her practice.

Claudia was not the only one to express this sense of a greater purpose. Compared with her past practice, veteran American teacher Emma Hardy described planning backwards with words such as 'logical', 'goal-oriented', 'structural', 'purposeful' and 'connected'; conversely, she characterized her former practice as 'fragmented', with piecemeal lessons and activities that focused upon excerpts from a prescribed anthology. Even though Emma was later in her career, she made significant changes in her practices by implementing planning methods she adapted from *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) summer workshops:

EH: I am not the expert at all, but I believe in the units, I believe in the design, and I just every summer now I'm convinced, you know. Totally thinking this is the best way. I've been teaching for a long time and this is something I think all teachers do, like "What's your final goal and how am I going to get there?" So it's so logical. (T10, p. 3)

An experienced U.S. English teacher, Emma gradually became more convinced of the logic of *Understanding by Design*, becoming more goal-directed and more focused on how students could be successful on the final assessments. Here was how Emma described the change in her practice:

EH: I used the teacher book, you know, I had an anthology of literature, because I taught seventh and eighth grade. They give you a literature book, you know, and here is a unit on theme and a bunch of stories and poems that go with it, you know. Then you go to the book and you do whatever: "Oh this story focuses on setting, so I'm going to do setting." ...before if I thought about the whole end product, it was really kind of haphazard and as I was going through it.

(T10, p. 3)

Her previous planning process had focused on the resources and activities from anthologies that use excerpted material and essentially do the thinking for the teacher. Contrast that depiction with the way she thought after she had taken up her version of backward planning:

EH: More thinking "What do I want them to take away from this? What's the big picture first of all, like what's my end goal?" And I've always been a big picture rather than a details planner ...but not so focused on, O.K., what are my objectives here and what is going to be my final assessment, and how am I going to connect The Iliad and The Odyssey to the bigger world? ... [Michelle] always asks me this as I'm planning – when we're coming up with ideas or brainstorming she always says, O.K. ten years from now what do you expect them to know about this? Excellent question. (T10, p. 4)

Emma's reflection indicated that she focused more upon how learning would be useful beyond high school, how the ideas and themes in the literature could resonate for her students. Her students are reading complete texts rather than anthology excerpts. Conceptual understanding becomes a connective tissue to evaluate priorities, make

meaning, and structure instruction. Part of what is different about backward planning is connecting these broader conceptual goals in a culminating assessment.

Her colleague, Michelle Thermopolis, also felt that backward planning had an inherent logic and that students benefitted when she was more explicit about long term goals:

MT: It's logical that you would think about the end, the products, and what you want kids to think about and to do, before you plan what's going to get them there. Maybe it's logical to me, because I've used it from the beginning ...I just naturally thought that way, I guess. It just made sense to me that you would think about the end, and then go backwards from there.... if I never make those things explicit and if I don't plan my entire unit around those things, then they're never going to become explicit to students. (T11, p. 5)

Michelle's comments also reveal that being purposeful in the design of assessment led to her being explicit about the goals during instruction. It is also significant that Michelle characterized her planning as being logical and sensible, that the process felt inherently right to her. Both Michelle and Emma talked about backward planning being a natural fit, that it felt like common sense. Emma declared that she intended to rewrite all her units using UBD (T10, pp. 7-8). The sense of purpose was significant.

Other participants pointed out that when the teacher planned conceptually and aligned assessment, it led to a better learning design. For instance, as an ELA teacher and as a district leader, Casey Jackson suggested that backward planning took time to understand fully, but it led to a stronger program, with more coherence between instruction and assessment (T7, p. 1). Casey contrasted backward design practices with previous planning processes:

CJ: So let's say I was doing a unit on Romeo and Juliet, so I'd say all right, let's start reading Romeo and Juliet and one day I'd say Oh, let's do this with the play,

and the next day we'll do that with the play, and I'd kind of meander through, experiencing the text in various forms. And then at the end I'd look back and say, what did I do, let's create a final assessment to cover what I did. Whereas with backward design, I'll say what definitely do I want for student success? Am I using Romeo and Juliet as a tool to get them to demonstrate reading skills, is it a text to inspire so that I can assess their writing skills or their speaking skills? What's the purpose of studying it? I determine that assessment, from the curriculum document, that I want to do at the end, then I'd go back and say O.K., as we work through Romeo and Juliet everything has to be targeted toward having them having success in that final assessment. (T7, p. 2)

Casey emphasized the importance of clarifying the purpose to ensure instruction was intentional and that students were successful. His aim was to create a plan that was “rich” and “purposeful” and focused on having students find success on the final assessment.

Like Casey's characterization of the benefit of planning backward, Ramona Salt explained how she found the three-phase structure of backward planning processes helpful because it clarified what components were needed. The three phases to which she was referring included identifying desired learning, determining evidence of achievement, and then planning instruction. Ramona Salt pointed out how these steps helped her devise a logical progression while keeping the purpose at the forefront of her thinking:

RS: I think it does in some ways provide... I'm going to say more structure... I don't know if that's true or not... definitely knowing what you're trying to get to helped in reading through all the ideas. I think it helped to find the gaps. When you're creating a unit, sometimes you'll be doing something and you'll realize you missed something or left something out that the kids needed to know or understand to be successful in the project that you've got culminating at the end. Whereas with backward design, when you've got that laid out, it does seem to

help with 'how am I going to get myself there? I'm going to do this, this, this. O.K., they've got all the pieces they need.' (T9, p. 6)

Because Ramona mapped out the goals and assessment tasks first, it gave her a structure for considering whether instruction would follow a logical and connected progression for success on the unit goals. This process set up a reiterative model for her planning, where forming broad goals led to a set of criteria for evaluating the contribution of instructional activities, and planning formative assessment ensured she could provide her students (and herself) with opportunities for adjustment. For Ramona, backward design allowed her to be reflective about whether the instruction and assessment she had planned fully addressed the main aims of learning. One participant, Charlotte Crane, asserted that it was focusing on conceptual ideas in ELA specifically that made planning easier:

CC: when you're thinking of a specific language art, ...it's a little bit trickier to plan something from a backward design perspective. When you're thinking thematic, however, it makes it so much easier for me. I've also backward designed units in social studies and science, but when you have that theme, for some reason it cements it, it makes it so much more concrete. (T1, p. 5)

Keeping the theme or 'enduring understanding' in mind helped Charlotte become more focused. It seems significant to me that Charlotte uses the cement / concrete metaphor to describe planning with conceptual ideas. She is describing a confidence in planning that guides her decision-making, that the process of defining concepts offers a coherent structure that planning with processes does not.

In participants' experiences with backward design, they expressed the sense that it focused them on learning rather than on activities. While past practices may have been more fragmented and activity-based, backward planning increased the connectedness

and purposefulness of instruction and assessment. Participants characterized such planning as logical and natural, and some found planning with conceptual ideas made the process easier than planning with processes.

More Relevant Learning Experiences

Besides a greater sense of purpose, a related theme in the participants' experiences of backward design was a desire to have learning experiences that were more relevant for students in their specific context. Ramona Salt offered a series of questions that represented her thinking process to find relevant ideas: "*What's a theme that would really get your kids' attention? What's going on in your school? What do your kids care about, and is there a way you can take that theme and then go backwards into your unit so that it's a topic that they care about?*" (T9, p.7). Ramona taught in a place where ideas in the ELA curriculum were more open-ended and negotiated. In exploring or expressing concepts, her backward planning focused on connecting with her students' lives.

In two cases, the teachers determined the big ideas based on what they felt was developmentally appropriate and then chose resources to suit the ideas. They worked with available resources. For example, Krista Kurtz admitted "*All we're limited by is what's in the book room*" (T2, p. 2). Krista Kurtz and Claudia Hopkins, who both contributed to the "Darkness in Humanity" unit, described their approaches:

KK: If I know that school, or if I know the kids, [I ask] "Where are they developmentally and what might they be interested?" and then I try to get big ideas that I think will fit that group of kids, THEN I go find the text. ...sometimes I have actually polled the students and asked them what big ideas they are interested in.... (T2, p. 2)

* * *

CH: Grade 11 students are cognitively ready to think of nuances and not think just in black and white terms. The unit is set up in binary terms of good and evil, but the texts show how good people are capable of evil, and some show how we can understand why people do evil things. (T6, p. 3)

In both cases, planning for the developmental readiness of a grade 11 class was difficult because they represented such a range of achievement, but by formulating a broad theme and offering a range of texts, these teachers could accommodate individual student needs. This significant feature of teacher backward planning highlighted how backward planning for these teachers allowed them to choose a wide enough concept that did not limit or pre-determine the range of texts students could explore or the possible meanings they could make. In this way, backward design is compatible with differentiated instruction or universal design.

Both digital literacy projects featured in this study were framed by a sense that big ideas should align with students' interests, immediate context, needs and concerns. The plans focused upon skills to communicate more effectively in modern online environments. Liesel Quimby commented that her divisional team based their digital citizenship framework on ideas that were timely and significant: “*Ultimately, our framework was driven by the needs that we saw in student behaviour...what is relevant right now...*” (T3, p. 6). Later, Liesel and Meg expanded on why these ideas were so necessary and developmentally appropriate:

LQ: ...go back to where your kids are at, and please start where they are – this isn't digital literacy for the sake of covering digital literacy. This is for their development. I know it sounds simple, but if they're already here, then take it one step further. Look at what they're already doing in their literacy and acknowledge where they are at.

MG: And you would hope that would be the case, right? Especially in our division where we have kids coming through a middle school that has a one-to-one project, our hope is that they've had this kind of conversation three years running. When they come to us they're ready to revisit the concepts, but push them forward a bit. (T3, p. 6)

This school district team recognized the rapid pace of change in the texts and tools students use to communicate. When they began to formulate ideas to address such digital literacies in ELA, these school colleagues recommended adapting ideas from existing frameworks, rather than formulating them all from scratch:

MG: And luckily there already were organizations that had already designed activities that fit under these categories, so it was a matter of asking 'will these work for us?' What should we take? What should we leave behind?

LQ: ... and what are the needs of our students? Where are our students at...Where do we want to see them progress? Not only did that include our series of our nine to eleven lesson plans, but you could even ask 'Where could a grade twelve class take this stream of respect?' Take a look at the outcomes in each stream with a grade 12 lens. (T3, p. 7)

By organizing learning activities by concepts, the developers could assemble a range of possible lessons from which teachers could flexibly choose whatever was most relevant for their students. It was not difficult to admire this team's rapid development approach to get responsive curriculum projects designed and available for implementation quickly. Because this team co-developed curricular plans using online collaboration tools, all the draft plans were available to the whole team as they were being developed. Plus, by collaborating in a digital space themselves, they learned some of the web 2.0 tools they could use with students. Later, when I asked Meg what other topic she thought might be relevant and timely to millennial students she answered, "*Mental health...the realm of addiction and everything*" (T3, p. 17).

Some other participants worked in a circumstance where resources were more prescribed, such as those teachers who had provincial standard examinations or Advanced Placement exams. In these cases, teachers found meaningful ways to connect books and to identify ideas they felt would have resonance for students. For instance, Michelle Thermopolis and Katniss Murry both taught in private schools where students prepare for the AP English exam and SATs:

MT: [The texts] were already given to the students as summer reading before I came. I had to go with it and make a unit work, but it ended up working out nicely because there's a lot of thematic ties and links between those two books. (T11, p. 4).

* * *

KM: I didn't have any leeway with the texts for this. They had already set the texts for that year. What I had to do is come in and I created and chose which standards I was going to have for English 4 and for AP Literature. Then based on those standards that I created units from the texts. Like the hook for the unit was – ...this really excellent book by an ex-Princeton professor called Excellent Sheep, and so he's talking about how all these kids get to university, ...and at end of four years they are all going in the exact same direction. ...So this is vastly interesting to these kids because that's where some of them are headed. (T8, p. 3)

The nature of teacher planning clearly changed when the resources and culminating tasks were prescribed. This circumstance restricted these teachers' planning to finding relevant links between the mandated materials and gearing the processes towards the mandated final assessment and adding supplementary resources that connected with students' lives.

More Innovative Pedagogy

In addition to a sense that backward planning made for purposeful and relevant learning experiences, study participants also frequently associated backward planning with ongoing educational change. Pedagogical changes included inquiry learning, literature circles, and writer's workshop, while assessment reforms included embedding formative assessment and reforming to summative assessment practices.

One key innovation was that participants sensed that backward planning required new pedagogies. Part of the rationale in *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and other backward planning conceptions call for a shift in pedagogy in order that students gain a greater depth of understanding. For students to develop and substantiate their own understanding, participants were designing more opportunities for facilitated inquiry and dialogue, and a stronger emphasis on formative assessment practice. Many of the innovations that participants named aligned with a social constructivist paradigm.

Inquiry. Several teachers in the study used student-led inquiry as a main pedagogy. For example, Charlotte Crane designed an independent inquiry as the pedagogical frame for the integrated ELA and Social Studies unit that addressed “*What makes a successful civilization?*” This design developed student proficiency in research, representation, and critical thinking (A1-1, p. 3). Krista Kurtz’ pedagogy also used inquiry in the “Happiness” project. In this unique instructional pattern, students explored their existing theory of happiness first and then used strategies to gather other perspectives in order that they could evaluate and revise their initial understanding (A2-8, p. 19). This project had students explore and enhance their own theory as a vehicle for developing understanding. Many of the instructional approaches in this study featured

student inquiry, reader response, critical thinking, problem-solving, and writers workshop.

Formative assessment practice. What was more apparent about the innovative nature of these ELA learning designs was the degree of commitment to formative assessment practice. This theme in the data reflects an emphasis in the literature variously called *formative assessment* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 247), *responsive teaching* (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), or *assessment for learning* (Brownlie & Schnellert, 2009, pp. 23-40). These practices include expressing clearer goals and success criteria, monitoring student progress and giving feedback, and encouraging students to engage in peer- and self-assessment. For many study participants, extensive reform to traditional assessment practices (such as an overemphasis on summative assessment, use of norm-referenced grading, reliance on forced-choice testing) was a central feature of backward planning initiatives, and, in some cases, a focus on assessment reform led teachers to the need for backward planning. In her interview, Ramona Salt expressed the idea that formative assessment reforms were somehow embedded in backward planning:

RS: ...the longer I teach the more formative assessment I give. ...when I give more formative assessment I have less marks. It feels like it's way more valid because I have given them a lot more feedback. I don't know how connected those are, but they happened along the same time, so I assume there is a relationship between the assessment for learning and the backward design. (T9, p. 6)

Ramona expressed the idea that these two initiatives, backward planning and assessment reform, were connected. Casey Jackson's school district had been working on changes to assessment practices before some of the design work began: "our board hired [consultant name withheld] to help us implement our assessment, evaluation,

and reporting policy, which was a response to [provincial policy]” (T7, p. 1). Backward planning seemed a natural fit for these reforms, including clarifying learning goals and success criteria, increasing monitoring and feedback, and more frequently employing peer-and self-assessment. However, it is a reasonable inference that the attempt to bring about grading reform and subsequently more responsive teaching with formative assessment practice uncovered a need for more explicit planning.

Clarity about learning goals and success criteria. One key enhancement of formative assessment practice is that because participants had made the goals clearer for themselves in the process of backward planning, they could communicate them to their students more effectively and deliberately from the beginning. For example, Charlotte Crane talked about goal clarity:

CC: the big thing that helped us was making sure the kids knew the learning intentions, setting them out from the beginning, and posting them in the classroom, and having the kids be aware of them, and making it a big deal for them, ...So all of those sorts of things were the things that changed the most. It's not like maybe we weren't doing them, but weren't doing them as intentionally, and making sure that the kids knew about them. (T1, p. 2)

While Charlotte's sense was that backward planning led to more intentional goal clarity, Krista Kurtz implied that the clarity did not come only from communicating goals, but specifically by aligning assessment to these goals:

KK: You have to have some kind of big ideas that you're working with. That can be broken down into ...essential questions or essential understandings, some people might say that's your theme, ...we're talking about big ideas, and then you've got to have some good assessment that fits with where you want to go with those big ideas: what do you want students to do at the end AND how am I going to assess that. (T2, p. 1)

Krista communicated an intentional alignment of her conceptual goals with her assessment practices. According to Ramona Salt, intentionally making learning goals clearer lead her to give more effective feedback earlier in the instructional sequence:

RS: ...now that I know the skills that I will assess at the end, and I have the focus of what I am doing, then it makes it easier to know what I am looking for earlier on and I can target those students and give kids more specific feedback. (T9, p. 6)

Having that clear destination in mind enabled her to be more responsive to student needs. Eloise Pevensie explained how clear descriptions of success and enabled her to generate feedback:

EP: So they're quite comfortable with rubrics, because they have used them all the way along. I have student generated rubrics, and I give them to the students and allow them to adjust them as they see fit for their own classroom. By the time we get to the project at the end of the year, they are also helping to develop the rubric that gives them that formative feedback...That's where the self-regulation comes in. (T5, p. 7)

Eloise's goal for assessment was to help students become more self-sufficient, not just to justify a grade. The repeated data from participant interviews made a strong case for planning at the conceptual level if a school were implementing formative assessment reform. Claudia Hopkins communicated that it was important to express learning outcomes in plain English:

CH: one way it's really exciting and engaging to be thinking about the purpose of what it is I'm doing, and it ...helps to focus the learning. It gives kids a road map to where we're going. I share all of the learning outcomes with them. ... for me the struggle is how to make those outcomes more understandable for kids, putting them into ... student-friendly language. I think that piece is very important so they know what it is that we're focusing on in this unit, but it's something that I still struggle with, because in a science context or in a math context the

curriculum outcomes are very clearly laid out. Students have to learn, in math, to be able to add positive and negative integers, whereas in an English classroom they're much more abstract and more difficult to put into student-friendly terms.
(T6, p. 6)

Claudia understood the importance of goal clarity, but admitted that stating goals and criteria for success from the ELA curriculum in plain language can be difficult. The science and math examples that Claudia referenced relate to the fact or sub-skill level learning, whereas modern ELA curriculum frameworks have focused on higher order cognitive and social processes.

More deliberate progress monitoring. In addition to better goal clarity and alignment, a second element of better formative assessment practice is ongoing, deliberate checking for understanding. Teachers in the study also reported ways of checking on the development of understanding and skills. In some cases, backward plans began with a diagnostic assessment to establish a baseline. Casey Jackson started by exploring students' prior knowledge and skills at the beginning of the unit plan:

CJ: ...with backward planning I know in the end what curriculum strands, what overall expectations I want to assess, so I would start ...with a baseline, a diagnostic – where are their skills right now? And what do they need to work on? And then that for assessment throughout would be based on how well are they doing approaching it. If I know where the goal is at the end, how are they making progress towards that? (T7, p. 5)

Casey's practice sets out the intention to be responsive to student needs, and then personalizes learning by focusing on their needs. The stance is one of inquiry and response rather than a priori knowledge. It was notable that Casey talked about diagnostic assessment for skills, but not for understanding. In contrast, Claudia Hopkins' "Happiness" project started by exploring in depth students' prior

understanding by setting out their own theory of happiness before launching their inquiry (A2-8, p. 19). While it is common for ELA teachers to take a writing sample at the beginning of a learning sequence, it may be rarer to establish a degree of prior knowledge of a concept. Two other projects also featured diagnostic assessment. Meg Granger encouraged teachers to explore what digital tools and knowledge students had at the beginning of their digital citizenship unit. Eloise Pevensie's pre-vocational integrated courses also explored student starting points in terms of skills.

Knowing clearly students' needs, teachers in the study found opportunities to monitor progress on both conceptual and procedural goals and to give students feedback on their progress along the way. Charlotte Crane worked backward from the final assessment:

CC: If I know what I'm going to be looking for in terms of a summative assessment at the end of the day, I can really break it down into very easy bits that the kids can accomplish in little tasks, and give them feedback along the way, so they know where they're at any particular point and learn or grow or rework what they need to in order to move forward. The kids know where their skills are at, and I know where they're at, and can map that as we go through. Then if I can build those mini-skills into what the big assessment is asking at the end, then there's no surprises for anyone. (T1, p. 4)

Charlotte's assertion that she "*break it down... in little tasks, and gives them feedback*" reflected a commitment to ensuring student success. Charlotte later reiterated this idea that monitoring student progress was essential for informing and adjusting her instruction, "*If you can chart where your kids are as you go along, then you are going to make the changes you need as you teach in order for them to be successful*" (T1, p. 4). By clearly mapping out the literacy and learning skills that make for student success, Charlotte's pedagogy became more responsive to student needs.

Rich opportunities for feedback and revision. A third element of formative assessment practice that emerged from the learning designs reported in participant interviews, in addition to clear goals and criteria and monitoring growth and giving feedback, was designing opportunities for increased student participation in dialogue and discussion. For instance, Krista Kurtz used classroom discussion to ensure her students' depth of understanding of ideas grew as they read and responded to text. She painted a clear picture of an episode of formative assessment that was part of her "Darkness in Humanity" unit plan:

KK: I think at the end, or I guess throughout, you've got to have constant teacher response to the students, like "Are they getting this or not?" ...When they do their discussion of the novels, [they do] ...a couple practice discussions on some of the non-fiction texts, and then I can give them some feedback on that, so I would go around and listen in and give them whole class feedback on that. ...They do two formative discussions, and then they have the summative one, and for all of these discussions, I'll walk around the classroom with a clipboard with a checklist on it and I'll make little notes, especially for students who are struggling. The students who I notice are quiet, I might make eye contact with them or tap them on the shoulder, and say 'you need to contribute', so that kind of formative thing. The other thing I might do is put up on the overhead an example of student's really detailed formative assessment. ... anyway you get the idea that they get lots of feedback to do better on their discussions. (T2, pp. 3-4)

The classroom lesson sequence began with frequent episodes of practice. During this practice phase, Krista was listening intently and keeping systematic anecdotal records of what she noticed. From these notes, she generalized patterns that she used to give whole class feedback and generate success criteria. She then wrote out these criteria for students to self-assess, and gave individuals specific feedback for improvement. These features of strong formative assessment practice coincided with her backward planning

innovations. What is important about student feedback is that students have the opportunity to use the feedback to improve their work. Krista's reports of feedback practices are frequent and happen in the course of learning, not after the test or assignment is over.

One episode of formative assessment that Krista described showed how she helped students monitor their own development of conceptual understanding. When participating in group discussion, she listened in as her students defined and defended positions and subsequently revisited and reconsidered their previous positions. She took note of the evidence of understanding, while students recorded their own reflections in a response chart:

KK: [They] had to track their thinking every time they read a text. If they viewed, read, or discussed a text they had to fill in a little chart with personal response, questions about the text, and key quotations. As they did that, I could collect those or I could see them on the desks as they worked ... (T2, p. 4)

As she listened in and students self-assessed, Krista had multiple sources of evidence of her students' evolving understanding and allowed her students to reflect on whether or how much their understanding had grown. For Krista, talk in the classroom allowed her to make understanding visible:

KK: I mean all the way through this ...we had class discussions, you know, whole class discussions or small group discussions, like, circle discussions (like a lit circle, but in a small circle) where I can listen in and see the thinking all the way through the class. (T2, pp. 4-5)

The phrase "see the thinking" is notable – her listening and notetaking strategies allowed her to qualitatively determine whether understanding was growing.

Krista Kurtz was not the only one who described dialogue in terms of strategies for generating feedback. Eloise Pevensie built in ongoing checks to keep students on track from the beginning of the course, and as they developed criteria, they took on the roles of self- and peer-assessor, so that by the final inquiry project, they could handle more self-regulation:

EP: Well the kids have already had formative assessment with me. I start at the very first day they walk in. It's pretty much the first week they walk in my classroom; we do formative assessment. I teach them the provincial standards. We do some checks on it along the way. Then when it comes to the inquiry, I basically have them create their own rubric and they give each other formative assessment along the way as I do as I walk around, because this is about a month-long project. (T5, p. 7)

Eloise saw backward planning as a course-long time span, with students growing ever more independent to the point where they could monitor their own learning. Her goal for feedback was to transfer responsibility to students so they were the ones assessing.

Increasing the amount and quality of classroom conversation was a key design feature in many of these teachers' plans, whether it was conducted in whole-group, small group or one-on-one. Liesel Quimby, talking about the digital citizenship project, asserted that the teacher monitored understanding by being an active participant of the learning community, by hearing their authentic reaction in classroom dialogue:

LQ: you know that they're understanding by being in the process of inquiry with them. One of my favourite lessons within the unit is having them look at diversity – and what does that mean really ...You know they're getting it through the authentic conversation. (T3-4, p. 10)

Teachers in this case, according to Liesel, found it more natural to see themselves as co-learners in a project that involved new and emerging technology and current topics. For

Claudia Hopkins, developing student understanding and skills depended upon conversations in the practice phase. Here monitoring progress involved one-on-one conversations, effective feedback, non-graded practice, and a chance to use the feedback to improve performance:

CH: To me that is the piece that is where the learning happens, is in that formative assessment. The marking or the final summative assessment is not necessarily where the learning happens. It happens in those conversations between teacher and student, it happens in the conversations between student and student, and it happens in written feedback. When students know that they have an opportunity to get better at something before there's a summative, final assessment, I think it changes the way that they look at their own learning. The fact that that I might get another chance of doing this, or I can ask for feedback in this area because I am unclear, or I'm going to use this feedback because clearly it's something that I need to work on. I think that it shifts the way that students feed their own learning as well as how they see their relationship with their teacher, too. (T6, pp. 4-5)

Because the backward design of the final task represented an independent opportunity to show evidence of growth, Claudia did not hesitate to give multiple occasions for feedback along the way. Typically, students receive few opportunities for non-graded feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Katniss Murry set up opportunities for drafting and revising written work. She designed stations so students could examine models and generate self-reflection and feedback from the teacher and peers:

KM: They could work through their original writing piece and take steps that were laid out at each station and get feedback from me and feedback from their peers about the work that they had done at each of the stations. ...often it's not even necessarily the feedback they have given that has necessarily helped as much as going through the class and looking through someone else's work. I often

say, you don't have to take the advice you get from your peers, but you are going to learn a lot by being forced to be an assessor. (T8, p. 4)

The design involved reading models and interactive dialogue. In the private school that Katniss Murry worked, learners' needs in terms of writing varied significantly. The review and revision stations where students could work to find ways to reflect on and improve their writing were designed to customize improvement:

KM: The stations are basically an opportunity for differentiation because students are – well, first of all, they have choice. Secondly, they're working at their own pace, and often with peers, so they're self-selecting in terms of what they need to work on. I ask them to rate themselves in terms of best to worst in the different areas that we are working on. Some of it is actually looking at the logic of cause and effect, some of it are some grammar pieces that they need. They rate themselves, then they go first to the stations that they quote unquote "worst at", and then I can also go to the different groupings and target my help. I can see where kids have placed themselves and go to the places it looks like students are going to need the most support. (T8, p.5)

Unique in this expression of self-review is that students' feedback was being generated over both understanding the concept of cause and effect and the quality of writing. Each station scaffolded a revision and editing focus with learning community interaction.

For Michelle Thermopolis, monitoring progress meant purposeful checking, offering chunked practice, and if needed, giving extra support:

MT: When I'm creating a unit with backward design, I build in a lot of checks for understanding, formative assessment. We do a lot of smaller practices that encompass individual skills or a couple of skills together before they ever do the culminating piece that will ask them to use all the skills at the same time. I can use those assessments as a way to check for understanding along the way. If a certain student is struggling with trying to find evidence when they have to do a smaller paragraph when we're discussing a smaller motif or something like that,

then I can work with them on, O.K. well how do we find evidence and brainstorm with them ideas to do that, or give them more specific skills to help them with that. ... I think all the assessments along the way help in that. Socratic Seminar is just one of them. (T11, pp. 5-6)

In this study, participants associated their backward planning with more purposeful learning designs. Backward planning made it easier for them to communicate goals and develop success criteria. From there the design of their learning sequences included strong features of formative assessment, such as initial diagnostic assessment, progress monitoring, and feedback. Tasks that featured classroom conversation made thinking visible, self- and peer-assessment possible, and generated additional support.

Adjustable for interest and challenge. A key feature of the experience of backward planning reflected teachers' goal to increase student agency. Along with a sense of purpose, expanded formative assessment, and enhanced dialogue, several participants related the way that conceptual ideas allowed students opportunities to explore. In Eloise Pevensie's case, since she had modelled the process extensively, her students could choose something in the real world outside of school that they were interested in pursuing for a final inquiry:

EP: I interview the kids, they decide what it is that I haven't covered in class that they're still interested in, and that becomes the project. They decide their topic. They have to decide on their question, and they have to decide how to answer it – they go through the whole process. (T5, p. 5)

Eloise offered personalized choice in the focus of the final inquiry because her curriculum design modelled the processes early in the course and fostered more independence by the end. Katniss Murry chose the overarching topic, cause and effect,

and allowed students to co-construct the essential questions that narrowed and individualized the focus:

KM: ...it was a cause and effect unit, and the big ideas were – I actually designed them with the students ... “How do boring and repetitive tasks that I do today make my future different?” “If I want tomorrow to be different, what do I need to do today?” “If we know that things will always change, why are we afraid of change?” “How do I become the sort of person I want to be?” “If we know the end result, will we change our actions – why or why not?” (T8, p. 2)

In this case, Katniss negotiated the conceptual understanding with her students, giving them ownership over the inquiry processes that followed. Keeping the essential questions broad and building in a personal dimension made the learning experience flexible. Claudia Hopkins asserted that designs can allow students different entry points and challenge levels:

CH: You think about the learning outcome for the group as a whole, but it also helps to put in perspective the different levels and plan for different entry points for those students who are working at different levels, not just in terms of a language perspective, but in terms of different skills or needs as well. (T6, p. 4)

A sense of choice was also an important consideration in the experiences of Meg and Liesel’s digital citizenship project. While the overall ideas provided a common focus for the whole class, the teachers could use a variety of text forms and text difficulty levels to be inclusive:

MG: ...when sourcing out information for each of the topics, they were from a variety of different types of media, and they varied the reading level of the articles. When you presented that unit to the group you expressed to the teachers that if you have a stronger group of readers, this is probably the topic that you want to push them towards.

LQ: ...We worked really hard at that and actually spent a lot of time saying, “O.K. is this really easier?” or “Is this really entry level?” And we decided, yes, because there was choice. ...You’ve got that student who needs that challenge, then here’s this comprehensive article on China and what its government does and does not allow. Wow, the language in that ... in fact, the grade 12s that I piloted this with were like, “Ms. Quimby, this is such an intense article.” (T3-4, p. 12)

For Liesel, since the unit offered diverse resources in terms of topic and text complexity, she could negotiate the choices with students, encouraging some to persist through the complexity and others to find equivalent content in easier-to-access texts. The experience of participants here suggested that concepts and processes can be adjustable in terms of challenge level as appropriate for student learning needs.

Eloise Pevensie also shared how backward planning helped her find success for a diverse student population that included a significant number of minority students. She was gathering evidence of this success. Of course, the success was not entirely due to backward planning, but it was a key feature of this pre-vocational program:

EP: [School name withheld] is generally between 550 and 600 students. We are on the [First Nation name withheld] territory. We have approximately thirty percent First Nations... ..back in 1970, I saw that the graduation rate for First Nations was about 5%. We’re almost at 100% graduation with our First Nations. (T5, pp. 1-2)

Eloise attributed some of this success to the way she designed with an emphasis on skills, an approach she claimed to be promising even for students who previously struggled:

EP: ...every kid has a gift. Some of them, like the little girl had a severe learning disability, she’s not good at reading...and she really had to learn by doing it. ...by the time that she reached that final project she had learned so many skills and had learned so much, that our brand new principal that observed her

presentation and the interview afterwards did not know that six months before she had been deemed intellectually disabled. And she finished the course with 60%. If you focus on where you want them to be, if that's your guiding light, it's not a problem to get them to it, as long as that is where you're going with it.
(T5, p. 6)

Eloise believed that because she had clarity about the important transferable skills she wanted her students to practice and acquire by the end of the year, she could structure the experience so that more students succeeded. The pre-vocational program featured larger time blocks and work placements, all designed with a clear vision of a successful graduate.

The general sense from these experiences was that teachers needed to design learning flexibly for interest, ability, or needs. The contexts for these design experiences featured diverse classrooms, with a range of ability and prior knowledge. Participants designed to establish an appropriate level of challenge, and chose ideas and texts of interest so their diverse students could succeed.

Reformed Summative Assessment Practices

Along with a shift in emphasis to more formative assessment, these backward designers experienced significant changes to summative assessment practices, such as a move to criterion-referenced scoring of understanding and skills, longer units and fewer marked assignments, and more authentic final assessment.

Less summative assessment. One significant change when participants design for conceptual understanding is that they mark fewer summative pieces of work. Krista Kurtz, an experienced teacher, contrasted her past practice with what she had been doing since emphasizing backward planning:

KK: I wouldn't say my marking went down, because I still do a lot of formative assessment... but that idea of having twenty or twenty-five columns in your mark book... I have in any given reporting period typically four to six items in my marks book, and sometimes what I'll do is take in some kind of task again, and I'll replace the poorer mark with the better mark. ... I used to be someone who would do a lot of testing, who taught a poetry unit, and a short story unit, and a Shakespeare play and a novel. I had the whole... especially when I'm thinking grade 11, I would "do" Lord of the Flies and I would "do" Macbeth. You know I just cringe when I think about how I used to teach. When I started changing this, it wasn't an instant change, it took probably me a few years, but I do definitely see the better aspect of it ... but certainly I would never go back to the final exam on Lord of the Flies, which I used to actually have three different versions of so that my three blocks of English couldn't cheat. Those are now long gone in the shredder. (T2, p. 5)

Shifting away from grading knowledge tests to conducting more performance assessment represented a significant shift for Krista. In addition, moving from strictly paper and pencil final tests to fewer, more authentic final assessments represented a key change. For example, in the artifact for the "Happiness" unit, summative assessments included:

1. A written analysis of a model or image of students' own understanding of happiness.
2. Contributions to small group discussion exploring others' perspectives on happiness.
3. An extended written response to perspectives on happiness explored in texts.
4. A final (revised) model of students' understanding of happiness, presented to an audience (in a form and context negotiated with the teacher). (A2-8, p. 9 "English 12 Happiness Inquiry Unit Overview")

These summative assessments honoured the process of constructing understanding, from assuming prior knowledge was welcome and valid, to exploring multiple perspectives from primary and secondary sources, and revising, consolidating, and expressing new understanding. Evidence from teacher judgements came from observations, conversations, and written products and presentations. Several aspects of both the content and format of the summative assignments were negotiated with students so they were as meaningful as possible, such as the form, context, and intended audience for the final expression that reflects a theory of happiness. In these ways, the summative assessment more authentically reflected student understanding and application.

Uncovering understanding. Another key experience related to changing summative assessment practice was the need to assess the development of understanding. As participants designed performance assessments to uncover understanding, they shifted the tools they used to assess. For example, Liesel Quimby asserted that understanding could be judged by explaining opinion or interpreting an idea, and marshalling evidence from texts for support:

LQ: when we're looking at that response, we're looking for deep understanding, then we're looking for idea development and then evidence of texts that they've used, and whether or not it's just based on their own opinion without much connection to texts.... – it's great that you have this opinion, but a little bit more development would be nice! (T3-4, p. 11)

Liesel described criteria such as opinion, connection, and the degree of development to assess understanding. In addition to such criteria, Meg Granger admitted, “*We're not there yet. We need student exemplars*” (T3-4, p. 11).

Products and performances. Eloise Pevensie noted changes in her summative assessment practice. One of her culminating tasks asked students to develop self-knowledge: a diagram of people who had been influential for growth and development:

EP: I've learned so much from the cultures of my students. I have the kids determine who their families are. They do a family tree based on who they see as having developed them into the people they are, and I have learned a lot about other cultures.... And the point to the family tree is determining where they are and how they got to [city name withheld], and who has given up what in their past to get them to that point. (T5, p. 2)

Self-knowledge of important influences would be a task that developed metacognitive understanding. With the help of a consultant and the support of a regional network, and with the additional collaboration of a student teacher, Eloise innovated another of her culminating assessment tasks so that students could apply the skills they had learned:

EP: I said to the class since they already knew so much about drugs and alcohol, I wasn't going to teach that specific unit, they were going to teach each other. They had to determine what they wanted to teach each other. One set of kids produced a video that really should be a Public service announcement. ... about teenage suicide. It was an incredibly powerful video, produced by these little grade 10s ..., and it was all based on the skills we taught them along the way and whatever they thought was very important in the health aspect of planning that they thought they should teach other peers. (T5, p. 3)

Later, the final assessment at the end of Eloise's course took the form of an oral presentation with accompanying visuals (Prezi), plus peer evaluation and interview of the collaborative inquiry process. The criteria for this final assessment was related to "*their ability to educate*" (T5, p. 7); that is, their use of a specific form for a specific audience and for a specific purpose (to educate):

EP: And then at the end, when they do their inquiry they present to the classroom. It's generally done as a Prezi. I take those, the presenters, out and interview them while their classmates stay behind and give a peer evaluation. One of my questions to the students who have presented is, "What did you learn outside of the curriculum?" Almost invariably, time management and working with others are the two big ideas that the kids pull out of it, and I want them to learn that. That is my intent. If we look at the twenty-first century skills, besides reading, writing, summarization, communication, it's also the ability to work with groups and time management. (T5, p. 5)

For Eloise, her summative evaluation was partly guided by product (the class presentation), but teacher judgements were also supported by observational notes along the way and an oral interview about the learning process at the end. Her emphasis in designing the task was in creating an independent opportunity for application of skills to a new topic.

Several teachers talked about using constructivist final assessments to allow students to develop their own interpretations. For example, Claudia Hopkins' summative assessment consisted of a completed persuasive essay, "*so students by the end of the unit had to use the material that we provided and discussed and come to their own conclusions about that*" (T6, p. 2). These varied dimensions of understanding – exploring perspectives, applying knowledge and skill, developing and supporting interpretations, and exploring self-knowledge – square with Wiggins and McTighe's facets of understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 82-104).

Reformed grading practices. Casey's experiences with the design process for online digital learning communities were contextualized by ongoing policy changes for summative assessment. These changes were more wide-reaching: new grading

guidelines - no zeroes or late marks, no group grades, no marking of work that was meant for practice:

CJ: ...our new policy that we implemented is that students could no longer lose marks off work that was late, because that totally skews their skill representation, you're marking a behaviour by taking late marks off. We have also said teachers cannot give a zero for work not handed in, because that suggests you've assessed the work and found it valueless. We said well you've never ever seen it, so you can't give zeroes. You have to wait until the work comes in. We've also said students caught cheating or plagiarizing don't get zeroes, they are made to redo the assignment. We also emphasized what [provincial policy document title withheld] said which was don't assess students, you don't give them a group mark, because a group mark doesn't give them a precise indication of that individual student's skill. Students can work in groups, but their final demonstration has to be individually assessed and completed. You can't mark homework. You can't mark them during the learning stage, the formative stage – you mark them at the end with their final project. So we really shook up the system by bringing in these policies. (T7, p. 6)

The innovations in Casey's school district, such as backward planning integrated courses, infusing technology, and developing project-based learning required a different approach to grading. The policies obliged teachers to separate grading academic outcomes (such as understanding and skill) from behavioural ones (such as effort, participation, and attitude).

Several themes within participants experiences have been explored so far in this chapter. Participants felt it was a significant change, one that instilled more purpose and relevance into the learning experience. They felt that their designs were innovative, especially by using new pedagogies, embedding formative assessment, and offering more authentic summative assessment. Some participants offered students more

choices in summative assessment. In these tasks teachers defined understanding as exploring perspectives, interpretation, exploring own identity, and explaining the results of inquiry. The rest of the chapter shifts the view away from the discrete planning of a unit toward the broader context in which the planning was conducted.

Enabling and Inhibiting Factors for Backward Planning

In transcripts of interviews, participants characterized factors that enabled and those that inhibited backward planning. They also demonstrated how backward planning was being used in the service of curriculum integration and as a catalyst for school improvement.

Potential Enabling Factors

Specific elements emerged from participants' experiences described enabling factors for backward planning, primarily collaborating with others. Collaborations required including productive uses and conceptions of time and productive patterns of and protocols for dialogue. Several forms of collaboration for backward planning included mentorship and district professional learning. Leadership was also cited as important driver of change.

Collaborating with colleagues. Rather than being a solo effort, participants often characterized the context of backward planning as a collaboration between education professionals. Several participants repeatedly talked about both a role for collaborating to learn *how to* plan and collaboration in planning. For example, Claudia Hopkins recommended, "*work with someone else. I would say that support from another teacher is really helpful and helps to clarify what it is that you're doing*" (T6, p. 6). These sentiments were echoed by several other participants:

CC: Collaboration is definitely one of the strongest tools that you can use when you are planning ...because having another person to help you bounce ideas off of, or to go to when things are going wrong or to stretch your thinking and help you along the way is definitely key. (T1, p. 5)

* * *

KM: I think some of the most enjoyable parts of the backward planning have been collaborating: being in a learning team, having conversations with people about it, and even just arguing about it. I was on a team with someone who was pretty skeptical about it, but it was a person that I really liked and who was really smart, and those were some of the best conversations, so having people, you know, letting there be lots of dissent or disagreement about it. But having the time and the space for collaboration and working together is probably the highlight. I haven't enjoyed as much just doing it on my own. (T8, p. 7)

These comments implied that content teachers may have an easier time with backward planning, as they are more specific about knowledge and understanding. In these excerpts, participants characterized collaborative dialogue as sharing ideas, being supportive, stretching thinking, clarifying thinking, and maintaining a healthy degree of skepticism.

Several ELA teachers noted that their initial experiences with backward planning were not necessarily with other ELA teachers. Claudia Hopkins and Katniss Murry each explained how they developed backward planning ideas in a professional learning network:

CH: ...I would say that most of my support has come from colleagues that I have worked with, not necessarily in the English language arts field, though. Like the person who turned me on to the assessment for learning / universal design for learning was a science teacher, actually. What we did from when we started, there was a few of us at my school who started exploring it in more depth in a study group setting. Then, personally, I went to workshops and we'd bring it

back to the smaller group. It started filtering out, we had more, and more people join our little group, which was great. (T6, p. 2)

* * *

KM: I had a colleague ... we were all in Education, but she was doing Social Studies and I was doing English. Her curriculum professor, who was teaching her curriculum, like the Social Studies curriculum course, was using backward design, and then her practicum teacher was also using it. (T8, p. 1)

These comments demonstrated that backward planning collaborations for ELA teachers do not need to be confined to the English department, as the format can be useful across disciplines.

Allocating time and using it efficiently. One important enabling factor for backward design projects that several participants identified was a need for time and flexibility when it came to implementing a backward planning initiative. Charlotte Crane advised that teachers ranged in their capacity and willingness to take the time needed and to invest themselves in collaborative design work:

CC: Of course, there's a range. Everybody's different and everyone has different personalities. I find some people are a little bit more "Fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants," and they don't buy into a grand scheme, or a big theme, or some sort of big idea. They have difficulty, because it's a hard job and there's lots and lots to do. Taking the time they need, especially early on in their career, to build units in such a solid, designed way. There's a range. There's a lot of teachers that stretch my thinking, and help me as we work together, but there's a definite range in my school of people using backward design and UDL [Universal Design for Learning] strategies and people that are just doing the best that they can. (T1, pp. 4-5)

Charlotte's observation implied that teachers vary in their need for planning explicitly, some preferring less formal planning. Teachers tend to plan in detail only early in their

career and as they practice and internalize their program, they simply do not need detailed plans (Marsh & Willis, 1999, pp. 190-191). Charlotte's observed that teachers might benefit from backward planning at the beginning of their careers. She also pointed out that colleagues that help one another using a backward planning frame, and that such learning is a long-term endeavor.

Krista Kurtz' reflections about how she learned backward design revealed that it was a gradual process that took reading, workshops, and multiple trials for her to deepen her understanding, but over time she became more proficient:

KK: ... doing these readings, and going to district workshops, that sort of thing would be how I learned about it, and then the more I learned ... it all folds into everything. Eventually because I was teaching it to other people, I created my own model that I wrote up that made sense to me. It's just kind of flowed until I got it... (T2, p. 1)

Not only did planning proficiency improve incrementally, but, according to Ramona Salt, the unit design itself improved incrementally as well:

RS: What I find is that I end up with a file on a topic. It just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Each time I do it, there's something that I didn't like or a hole that I found or a piece that was missing, and so I add that in there. It tends to be a process over time rather than all ... yeah, I think it's not like all of a sudden I have this great unit that's backward designed, it tends to be layers, so that it comes that way. (T9, p. 7)

These perspectives revealed that learning how to plan backwards takes time and the plans themselves develop gradually after teaching them repeatedly.

Given this need for time, several study participants communicated how they found the time for collaborative backward planning. For example, Ramona Salt found grant money to engage in professional inquiry and build units:

RS: I've had the fortune the last couple of years to be involved in a couple of ... they call them inquiry projects, and I think where we've had five release days. We were able to create a couple of units that way. I was mentoring a new teacher last year and we created a collaborative unit on slam poetry. For me it tends to be time to work with colleagues – that's the most effective way to get me to backward design a unit. (T9, p. 7)

After Ramona learned about backward planning with some release time for professional inquiry, she could extend her thinking by working with other colleagues. In a similar fashion, after Krista Kurtz took advantage of funding for collaborative planning herself, she has since been leading others:

KK: Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of time to do this during the school year, unless you have something like collaboration days or where you've decided to plan with someone and you take every pro-d day and you do it. This is what I did when I did it with my job share partner and my colleagues at my old school: we were able to get district funding to get half-days off. We had three or four of them. We combined them with pro-d days. That worked very well. ...I have worked with teachers in the Yukon and they brought me up there to teach their teachers about backward design. I went up there and I did, I think, four sessions face-to-face with them. The teachers all got a full day paid for, and then I did some online sessions with them after that. ...and they had to in between the sessions, work on their unit, and then come back and share and then hopefully at the end of the year, share with their colleagues. It takes some time and some money. (T2, p. 6)

Clearly, some districts and provinces/territories have found backward design processes valuable enough to allocate professional learning funding and collaborative time for teachers to design learning.

Time was also a carefully considered factor in the digital citizenship collaboration. According to Meg Granger, groups needed to have face-to-face time for backward planning, especially when groups took advantage of online collaboration tools:

MG: One full day together, two half-days, and then a full day at the end to share with everybody. So development was two days on three occasions. But that was breakneck speed. ...Even though that was three months you walked away with the expectation that you had put stuff in the Google Doc by the next meeting. ...I think that was kind of the push and pull of what we had is that we only had this amount of time. Ultimately, I think [coordinator name withheld] could have massaged a little more time in there, but it was that push and pull that worked.
(T3-4, p. 17)

An important insight in Meg's collaboration was that the group did not use as much time as committees typically use. The insight from these observations might be in determining how to efficiently use the time spent collaborating face-to-face by training teams to share and collaborate asynchronously using the power of networked computers and new web applications. Casey Jackson's planning team also made use of such tools:

CJ: Social media – Google circles, Google documents – allows teachers to work once they get to know each other centrally, they start to work on their own using online platforms. That didn't exist twenty years ago. (T7, p. 2)

This point was not an insignificant one: the quality of the tools has improved rapidly in a short space of time. In the past, adults may have needed significant technical knowledge to productively interact; for instance, the early versions of building wikis required users to learn wiki markup language. Now tools like Google docs have familiar graphical user interfaces and are available across multiple devices (computers, tablets, cell phones).

Ramona Salt, who teaches an ELA course in grade 10 for pre-vocational students, made an important distinction between the amount of time that is allocated for teachers to collaborate, and the time spent engaged in the task of backward planning:

RS: When I first heard about [collaborative backward planning] I was really excited by the idea. I am a natural collaborator, so I really wanted to collaborate. At that particular juncture, most of the English teachers at my school tended to be people with younger kids; we tried to collaborate, but we weren't super successful. Since then I've done a bit more with in-service stuff that our district has provided where we work on inquiry and work on creating stuff. So definitely some collaboration, but as is the case with most high schools, it's really hard to find the common planning time. It's not nearly as collaborative as I would like it to be. ...I think in part - I don't know if this is going to sound dumb - but I think we get so distracted by teaching in our classrooms that we don't realize that we can make time to make other things happen. Considering that matters in our classrooms are so pressing, especially the big stack of marking as English teachers, realizing that we can take this time – two hours or three hours – and do something different with it. We seem to think we're too busy, and I have trouble with the whole notion of too busy, because I am not sure that we truly are, even though I think we think we are too busy, if that makes any sense. One of the things that was hard for us when we were trying to do planning together was that we had so little time to actually talk and collaborate, and we when we got the time to get down to the task, we would often use it talking about other things, and then the amount of time we had left to plan was a much smaller percentage of the time we had overall, and we didn't accomplish as much as we intended to.
(T9, p. 2)

Ramona's reflection underlined the need for effective collaboration strategies to focus, to disrupt regular business, and shape the dialogue toward a common purpose. It also highlighted a need to adjust strategies based on the developmental stage of a teacher's own professional learning. Since common planning time was rare, making the most of

these opportunities was important, especially in the context of heavy marking loads. Where the district finds opportunities for inquiry and collaboration, some focused facilitation seems warranted.

Facilitating effective professional dialogue. According to almost all of the study participants, another important enabling factor for collaborative planning was to effectively facilitate professional dialogue. If collaborative teaming helped these teachers plan and get better at the process, it would be worth exploring how to design productive backward planning teams. Meg and Liesel's digital citizenship project carefully considered ways they could facilitate collaborative curriculum design to make it more productive. For example, their team established collaborative norms to stay on task.

LQ: I would say that the one challenge I found was not allowing personal viewpoints against the digital era to cloud our purpose and our goal. ...I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly that hurdle was overcome. ...you always worry that a 'Negative Ninny' will take up too much time. ...but it was handled and it was like here is our purpose, and here we go, let's do it.

MG: We agreed on the basic principles. ...If you don't like it, could you suggest an alternative, or could you give us an alternative and talk to us about piloting that?"

LQ: I really appreciated everyone's open mind to have diversity with the lessons. When you say, if you think of something, could you add it? Well, people ...did the jobs that they were assigned. (T3-4, pp. 12-13)

Not only did they establish collaborative norms, they also purposefully chose an appropriate size and composition of working groups. Meg Granger stated that "*There was strategic grouping, too.... If there were too many more people in the design process it would have slowed down really, really quickly. ...or if the people who were facilitating were in conflict about our purpose, things would have slowed down really*

quickly, too” (T3-4, p. 13). Their team also needed norms for interacting using online collaboration tools so that the plans updated in real time:

MG: ...we created this Google doc, and we were all working on it at the same time. So if you wanted to say to Liesel, hey there’s this video you should see, you could just cut and paste the link into her part of the doc and they could go and explore it.

LQ: That Google doc that we gave you is a cleaned up version of the Google doc that we worked on. Literally, Meg could go into mine and all of a sudden, Meg was adding to it, and so that idea of collaboration with colleagues that are not necessarily my neighbour, and the answer was that that hurdle was easy to overcome. (T3-4, p. 13)

These norms for adding to a common document may benefit from explicit practice and new collaborative norms. What was most important in the collaboration for the project were strategies for creating the right size and composition of group, focusing on the purpose and handling negativity, encouraging a range of ideas and approaches, establishing online space to record and share ideas and to curate resources, and trialing ideas in the classroom for revision and sharing.

Mentoring. Several participants stated a specific form of professional dialogue played a substantial role in their learning how to use backward planning: mentoring. For example, Krista Kurtz suggested that mentoring and book study could be important tools to learn about backward planning:

KK: It’s only when people are ready, then they need some kind of mentor or support. They need to know what are the good books that will support them, or find people in their district. ...Find a mentor to help. Either an actual person or a book mentor. ...Find someone who can give them a template or talk them through it or some district workshop, but they really need support. It’s hard to wrap your

head around it, it really is, when you're used to teaching the content or genre-based units. (T2, p. 6)

Eloise Pevensie worked with mentors from an agency that collaborated with schools for educational change, and had a backward design collaborator in the form of a student teacher. There were at least three instances in the study of an older teacher collaborating and learning with a much younger one on backward planning:

EP: I've been working with [two specific regional consultant names withheld]. They are part of the [agency name withheld – a regional network for educational change]. So I've worked with them for ten years now. They're who I've been doing my Master's through. When I had the student teacher, we looked at inquiry and she had two pages from the chapter in her textbook on it, and it was useless. There was nothing there. Basically, we just leapt into it, and through discussion and I mean, her and I became quite good friends, so there was a lot of dialogue about what we wanted the kids to learn. It was amazing. (T5, p. 3)

Eloise and her student teacher collaboratively designed an inquiry learning experience for students on drugs and alcohol that culminated in students producing a public service announcement video. Several teachers in the study served as a mentor for others. Emma Hardy recommended “...make sure there was someone who truly understood [backward planning], someone like Michelle [pseudonym – her mentor] if possible, like an expert, your go-to person” (T10, p. 8). Such coaching and collegial modelling and feedback were not always found in expected places. Ramona Salt said, “I was mentoring a new teacher last year and we created a collaborative unit on slam poetry. For me it tends to be time to work with colleagues – that's the most effective way to get me to backward design a unit” (T9, p. 7). These anecdotes highlighted how teachers can deepen their understanding by teaching others and by being open to learning from

others. Michelle Thermopolis was mentoring more her older colleague Emma, and according to Emma:

EH.: Michelle ...forces me to think outside the box. She forces me to change my teaching for the better. She doesn't just come in and say, you've got a really stale teaching style, which I know I do in some ways. I am very structured. (T10, p. 7)

As a new teacher at the start of her career, Meg Granger had found a mentor in an older colleague at a different career stage:

MG: Then I started talking to colleagues, like [teacher name withheld] was four years away from retirement, and just flipped everything over. She and I were both at a similar point, despite being at completely different places in our career. We both looked at what we were doing and said, "This just doesn't make sense! It's not authentic!" So then we worked together, and it was interesting because it was somebody else who believed in the same thing, and we could tag team. We could work on resources together. We acknowledged that, while there were things we could do together, they didn't have to be exactly the same, which in my previous two years had been such a fundamental belief in general – that everybody should be doing the same thing at roughly the same time. (T3-4, p. 3)

In turn, Meg has collaborated with Liesel, and Liesel acknowledged how such mentoring had shaped her thinking, “*I am learning how to think about it more like ‘How can we talk about elements?’ – right? – Meg’s been a great mentor for me for that*” (T3-4, p. 9). In Liesel’s case, she was a mid-career teacher trained in music who had recently switched to high school English; both Emma and Liesel were finding the mentoring relationship spurred change to their thinking about ELA. In these cases, co-planning learning experiences together acted as a forum for professional dialogue and interaction within which mentoring took place.

District professional learning groups and committees. Besides mentoring, another form of effective facilitation of planning was collaboration in district

or regional groups. For example, Eloise had extended what she had learned from her mentors, and was now acting as a collaborator with other educators in her network:

EP: So I have a core group that I speak to. Some of my most favourite colleagues have become my best friends, and we talk about this stuff. They talk about new stuff that they do. I often talk with elementary teachers who tend to be very progressive and it inspires me to keep going with what I do. ...Also another teacher and I are promoting a network question for this [agency name withheld – a regional network for educational change], we're going to be looking at how we might be able to promote pride in one's heritage as a way of promoting First Nations students and recognizing that their culture is important and we know it leads to success. (T5, pp. 9-10)

The consultants with whom Eloise worked developed a network that extended throughout the region towards goals that were unique for those communities.

Collaboration in both digital literacy / digital citizenship projects took the form of a committee with representatives from schools in the district. The initiative had administrative support, financial backing, and a curriculum coordinator to steer the project:

LQ: Our fearless leader, [name withheld – consultant at district office], was hearing this need from several schools, and so it became an issue at principal meetings. They were given a task, and they came to a framework that might have been pre-existing... There was a group of seven English teachers representing all of our high schools...For clarification, when we did make the curriculum, we had everybody in our division who was anticipating to teach grade 9, we inserviced them on this... (T3-4, p. 7)

The project featured a design team and a subsequent dissemination of the plan through in-service. One project that Casey Jackson helped coordinate received district funding for backward design planning days for ELA:

CJ: We did an initiative last year ... grade 9 English teachers... were going to implement digital learning projects in their classrooms second semester. So we had them come in first semester and work together to plan the implementation. So we had them in working together once a month September through January before they actually began the project in February. We were encouraging them, so let's map out where this course is going, what do you want to do.... (T7, p. 2)

These district projects had key characteristics that aided their success. First, they enlisted consultant support to facilitate dialogue and administrative support to provide a clear mandate. The projects were scheduled with some collaborative time, but also with an expectation to work independently between sessions. Finally, the district teams were given short timelines imbued with a sense of urgency to get plans up and running within the year. At the same time, the planning was undertaken by the teachers themselves and was not top down.

Several examples in this data set used backward planning to integrate curriculum. Some cases involved bringing together disciplines, while others infused a single course with a focus on technology, job skills, or habits of mind. These efforts to integrate curriculum seemed a natural fit with backward planning, as it allowed designers to analyze the aims of curricula from different disciplines, find common ground, and eliminate redundancies. Some integrated designs infused elements, while others combined entire courses. For example, Charlotte Crane used backward planning to find common ground between ELA and Social Studies:

CC: One of the units that I have worked the hardest on and been able to do repeatedly two or three times (which is so nice when you can go back and do things again and get better and better at it) was an integrated English and Social Studies unit that focused on artifacts. It was grade 7 social studies curriculum, which is ancient civilizations – that was the content area that we were able to

look at, and through that lens of the artifact we were able to look at the concept of artifact: “What is a personal artifact?” and “What is a cultural artifact?” Then being able to weave in our English learning intentions, we did a lot of our writing through there, we did a lot of our poetry through there, definitely a lot of our oral language through there. (T1, p. 2)

Several other projects combined English with courses exploring either careers, technology, or both. Eloise Pevensie’s grade 10 curriculum combined three courses in an integrated program that led to vocational education:

EP: I take three academic courses, [local course names for Grade 10 English, Grade 10 Social Studies (Civics), and Grade 10 Planning] and I teach them all at the same time, and I teach it in the time span of only two courses. ...the group of kids are kids who have self-identified as interested in the trades. ...the kids are split into two cohorts – and for one week I teach them academics while the other cohort is taking one of five trades. And then we switch the kids the next week and the second group comes to me and I teach them their academics again.... Because the three courses are humanities, many of the PLOs [prescribed learning outcomes] overlap. This way I can emphasize the PLOs that do overlap, so rather than giving three lessons that are all basically the same format, which is what happens if they take three separate subjects, I integrate all three together. (T5, p. 1)

Clarifying the conceptual ideas and transferable skills allowed the course integration team to see where common ground existed. Casey Jackson’s district-wide digital literacy project combined English, Civics, and Career Studies at the grade 10 level (A7-1, p. 1). Students worked in a digital environment in a three-hour time slot on these three combined subjects.

While some district teams were using backward planning to combine courses, others were infusing ELA with a program that enhanced habits of mind. For instance,

Ramona Salt taught a course that infused the personal and academic skills needed for success in post-secondary education:

RS: ...the culminating unit for a class that was [post-sec prep course name withheld] and English together... It's a program designed for all these kids, all these immigrant kids and families that didn't understand the system and were smart, but weren't succeeding very well in school, didn't have access to the support they needed, and the knowledge to be able to apply for post-secondary and get themselves there. So the idea is that this was middle of the range kids who have potential but don't have the skills to actually get themselves to university. It's a lot of literacy in there –reading, writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization are the five main components. (T9, p. 3)

The aims of how to develop the personal organizational skills and study habits were added to Ramona's goals for her English course. These instances of integrating one curriculum with English language arts were common among participant experiences, and backward design models facilitated that integration. Whether one teacher combines two subjects (Charlotte), the school creates an integrated program to introduce the trades (Eloise), or the district offers a collaborative digital approach to project-based learning (Casey), backward planning engaged teachers in professional, collaborative dialogue to design learning integrated experiences for students.

Leadership. In addition to efficient use of time and effective professional dialogue, another enabling factor participants noted was school and district leadership. The role of the principals was specifically mentioned in several collaborative projects. Principals' roles seemed complex. They had to show administrative support, but whether they took part had to be negotiated after that. For instance, Casey Jackson asserted that the principal had to be there; Katniss Murry debated whether things were better after the principal left the room:

CJ: Our work in our board has found that you need that principal in there as a co-learner. He [or she] doesn't need to be leading, but co-facilitating or prodding or being there with them. I think it's got to be a commitment over time. A one-off meeting or workshop doesn't work. It's something you introduce and revisit, and come back, and come back, and come back to. (T7, p. 7)

* * *

KM: I think the best thing is to create learning teams, to have people, educators who are interested and creating the space and the time for teachers who are interested to work together and brainstorm in really low stakes environments, often without administrators. I ran a learning team this last year, and I ended up asking the administrators to leave, because I found that people were – I don't know if posturing is the right word. One meeting happened when no administrators were there and we had our best conversation that we'd had, and after that I just asked them not to come anymore, because people were vulnerable and were now willing to talk about mistakes, although by the end of the year very few people were coming. It's hard to know if having the administrators there motivates people to come in a way, because they're showing up to something, and it's being noticed and recognized. That's important – anyways, there's a balance in there somewhere. (T.8, pp.5-6)

While Casey saw the principal's role as co-facilitating discussion, Katniss recognized that there were times when the principal needed to be present and times when he or she needed to give the group some space. Recognizing this dynamic was a subtle, complex situation for leadership.

Not only was principal leadership important to participants, so, too, was curriculum leadership by district or agency personnel and liaisons with faculty members from local universities. In a large district where Emma Hardy had worked previously, the curriculum department designed units, gave them to teachers, and trained them to design their own. Later on Emma took part in a university-sponsored *Understanding by*

Design institute where teachers shared their designs in a digital repository: “[Michelle] invited me to do one of their writing institutes...it’s an intense eight-hour, five days straight, just writing these units, and then you submit them and they publish them” (T10, p. 3). It would seem the buy in and understanding from the teachers was far greater when they were the ones designing the learning. Here was how her mentor, Michelle Thermopolis, described her experience in the same summer institute:

MT: Pretty much the whole faculty there advocates [UBD], and it’s the way that they teach, it’s the way that they show us, we design all of our units that way during the master’s year. And [university name withheld] sponsors every summer a curriculum writing institute, which is what produces those units that are on the repository online. (T11, p. 3)

This collaboration between the university faculty of education and the local schools represented significant regional leadership. Michelle described the way that ideas spread through these institutes:

MT: When I was at my past school, a lot of staff used [backward design], because mostly the [university name withheld] people that I knew had graduated from the same university. And when I came here, I continued doing lessons that way and plans that way. We have a lot of autonomy to do as we wish in terms of how we design curriculum. (T11, p. 9)

The local university planning institutes, especially because they disseminated the units teachers designed, created a design community in the region. The specific aim of the project when it started was for university faculties of education to continue to support their teacher-graduates in their first few years by reconnecting them with the social support network they had established in faculty (Van Zandt Allen, 2014). The program boasts higher teacher retention and success rates, and now invites former graduates to bring colleagues to join them in the week-long curriculum and networking institute. In a

similar regional way, several projects made use of curriculum coordinators at a district level. For instance, both digital literacy projects involved district coordinators who provided both the organization, and backward planning expertise. Eloise Pevensie found leadership from a regional agency that had established networks for professional inquiry and innovation.

To summarize, participants shared several enabling factors for the success of backward planning initiatives. Collaborative backward design required efficient use of time, effective facilitation, productive team structures, and attentive leadership. Participants characterized the role of leadership as necessary, but it needed to be flexible, invitational, and have long-term vision. Leadership came from multiple sources: the district, the school, and sometimes from outside agencies or faculties.

Potential Issues

In contrast to factors that enable, participants detailed significant problems with backward planning and collaboration for ELA. First, some teachers found backward planning overwhelming and confusing. Second, some teachers and leaders interpreted the process in too linear a fashion. A third issue was that people underestimated the time it can take to learn backward planning. Finally, some adults were naturally resistant to change, and the magnitude of some change processes was sometimes significant.

Teachers finding backward planning overwhelming. Teachers have existing planning preferences, and as they learn about backward planning, they needed flexibility and appropriate pacing. Krista Kurtz advised that teachers should find a book and template for backward planning that made sense to them: *“I wouldn’t recommend McTighe, I find their book way too complicated. I recommend Wilhelm instead”*

(T2, p. 6). Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) work is geared generally for all curricula, whereas Wilhelm (2009) specifically outlined an inquiry learning approach. Whether teachers began backward planning with a resource, a big idea, or a set of literacy practices, choice was important. They need to find an approach to backward design that suits their preferences, whether that be inspired by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), Erickson (2007), Cooper (2010), Schnellert (2009) or some other method entirely.

Meg Granger and Liesel Quimby implied that some teachers felt a bit overwhelmed because they thought they were starting development from a blank slate; instead, these two recommended curating and adapting existing material:

MG: Take a look at what exists now and adapt. That's what we did. We didn't start from scratch. Our unit is a hodgepodge of resources we've pulled from different sources. Just continue that process. ...What we ended up settling on in terms of a framework was a progression of already understood goals, and then within that framework created the lesson plans that followed three streams – under respect – digital literacy, under education – this is digital literacy, and under protect – right? (T3-4, p. 5)

One key to keeping backward planning manageable, then, was to draw upon existing frameworks. Instead of 'writing curriculum plans', the project was reframed as adapting and expanding an existing framework and curating and sharing diverse resources.

Katniss Murry also believed it was better not to start with a blank slate, but to find a logical place to innovate existing plans:

KM: ...one of the other big things that I've learned and I'm continuing to learn is that it's important to let people just begin wherever they are. It's not about necessarily creating a unit from scratch. In fact, it's almost better not to. That's what I've found in constructing this. If you're teaching the unit for the first time, it's almost – I don't want to say impossible – but it's certainly tricky. In fact, it's

better to have taught something once or twice, and then go back and recreate it, almost hone it using backward design. That's an excellent place to start. (T8, p. 5)

For Katniss, planning a ELA unit is a reflective and recursive practice that may take years to develop. To address teachers' feelings of being overwhelmed, Claudia Hopkins also urged starting with a manageable chunk and gradually working up to larger unit- and course-planning:

CH: I would also say to start small. Start with a lesson. Then maybe work up to a sequence, maybe a couple weeks, and then go from there. I'm at the point now where I can think about my year, think about the units I want to do in the year, and then go from there. I say O.K. these are the outcomes I want students to achieve in this particular unit, and then I can go down starting big, and then do down to O.K. this is the unit, these are the outcomes I'm going to have in this unit. I think that starting small is the best way to do, just with anything, you know. It's all learning. And also to be easy on yourself. It will take time, just like anything else. (T6, p. 6)

Claudia suggested that backward design is scalable to different time frames. To keep collaborative planning from feeling overwhelming, participants recommended finding a template that made sense, adapting existing plans, and starting small. The overall message was to keep collaborative planning manageable and not to take on too much development work too quickly.

Being too linear or inflexible. A second set of potential issues was treating backward planning in too linear an approach. Charlotte cautioned that she had sometimes created a grand plan, and realized there was a danger in that she might march relentlessly through without pacing appropriately:

CC: The biggest struggle for me is, of course, wanting to go with the flow, and wanting to slow down when I need or step back when I need to and follow the pacing of the class, and so I often have to give myself permission, and I often

have to remind myself that, yes, this is our path, this is our goal, but we can get there different ways, and I have to follow the kids. Even though I have this backward design plan, and even though I can make sure every kid can find a pathway in and access it when they need to, I also need to follow their interests and their passions, and I also need to make sure I am really listening and really watching the classroom, I can't just let my grand plan run the day. That's the biggest struggle for me in any planning I do, is just giving myself permission to step back from the plan, or throw out the plan, or rework the plan when I need to. (T1, p. 4)

Charlotte's reference to a 'grand plan' was an important insight. For Charlotte, ELA teachers needed to find a balance between setting out the overall framework of ideas for the unit, and flexibly and responsively planning lessons. Perhaps this advice cautions teachers to attend to explicit planning at the unit level but keep the planning at the lesson level flexible to appropriately pace the learning.

Backward planning could carry with it a danger that teachers will create a conceptual idea and a giant summative assessment task, and by focusing on that task, will neglect student needs. Casey Jackson emphasized, "*You get a goal at the end and you get locked into it and you lose sight of the fact that you have to tweak and make adjustments as you go; you can't just motor along and leave students behind*" (T7, p. 6). Being flexible about complexity of the conceptual understanding students were developing and the pace at which exploration needed to happen was an emphasis for Casey Jackson, and he added that patience and persistence were needed attributes.

Ramona Salt cautioned that big ideas had become, in her context, somewhat rigid, that if backward planning was poorly implemented it might lead to designs that lacked integrity:

RS: You know, Warren, that should be a simple question, but I struggle a bit. I don't love the big idea concept. Maybe it's my own hang up, but I feel that sometimes even the big central questions, I don't always like having one overarching question. I think I tend to be a little bit less linear than that at times, and I like making connections between things that don't always fall under the same umbrella. I don't know if I've got it wrong in my head or not. I sometimes think that big ideas can be fantastic, but if they're implemented poorly it could really lead to some problematic things I think. Like our curriculum could lead to a lack of rigour. (T9, p. 7)

It seemed to Ramona that her jurisdiction's new curriculum, expressed in terms of big ideas, could end up narrowing the scope and rigour of curriculum and instruction. Her comments indicated a potential for backward design to be deterministic, wherein a teacher may pre-interpret a narrow range of ideas, and, therefore, limit the connections and the interpretive territory that students can explore. She also expressed a concern that concepts might be treated too superficially; as can be seen from an analysis of her planning artifacts, Ramona defined concepts broadly and focused more on skills, strategies, and habits of mind.

Insufficient time or support. The third potential issue with backward planning that study participants identified was that teachers and school leaders did not always recognize how much time and support a backward design initiative would take. Katniss advised that teachers needed to start small, to adapt something already in place, and to be willing to take risks:

KM: People need time. This is a time-consuming task. That would be one big piece of advice is that staff needs to be educated in it, and then they need support, and then they need the time to actually do it...I think the important thing is to be willing to do it imperfectly. (T8, p. 6)

Katniss identified that teachers needed two kinds of time, time to learn backward planning and time to do backward planning. Ramona Salt expressed skepticism when she characterized the typical implementation of education improvement initiatives:

RS: I think [backward planning] has huge potential. I've been teaching just long enough to have developed my cynical side. I think I've been at it for fifteen years. If it's implemented well and if there is support and there's training, I think it could be fabulous. I have yet to see something that rolls out that way in education. When changes are made, they're usually underfunded and under supported. There is a lack of understanding. (T9, p. 5)

Time, funding and leadership would be necessary for backward planning to make a difference. Insufficient time would clearly be an issue if leaders had unrealistic expectations of how quickly backward designed units can come together or how much know-how is required to plan well.

Resistance to change. The final problematic factor that might hinder backward planning was teachers' resistance to change. The process of backward planning represented a change from past practices, and, just like with any educational change, it had the potential to feel threatening to some teachers. Michelle Thermopolis, who had recently been sharing backward planning with her whole staff, indicated that backward planning can be put down by staff if they perceived it as yet another new-fangled idea:

MT: I think sometimes just a brand new idea is met with just discord or contempt sometimes just because it's new and it's different, 'It's not the way I've always done things.' Sometimes people will get upset because they think that it's some kind of indictment of them, as a teacher or as a professional, when really it's just a different way of doing things and one that at least, personally, for me, has a proven track record of helping students. (T11, p. 7)

The perception of backward planning by some staff as an ‘indictment’ of their planning practice was a significant issue; whatever merit backward planning might offer for school change, it cannot be framed as a threatening imposition on a teacher’s practice. Eloise Pevensie also commented on how some of her colleagues were resistant to change:

EP: I made the mistake of talking about inquiry one time, and I had a colleague get very upset because it looked too overwhelming. ...The young ones are the easy ones. It’s the ones that have been teaching for fifteen or twenty years that have that question that are the hard ones. (T5, p. 9)

Eloise’s comment revealed that many initiatives combine several changes in pedagogy (such as inquiry learning) and assessment (such as improved formative assessment) under the banner of backward planning. The order of magnitude of the change when someone suggests ‘backward planning’ might vary significantly depending on how much change was bundled together. Many of these participants had talked about backward planning evolving from earlier assessment reforms; it would have been much more overwhelming to adopt backward planning if that earlier work had not happened.

An anecdote about adopting backward planning that Casey Jackson shared revealed that workshops that only raise awareness were insufficient to effect a change in teacher practice:

CJ: Backward planning. I remember the concept was introduced to me at a workshop I had attended led by other consultants and doing some reading about it, but you know how it takes how repeated exposures to a new concept, to a new idea, before it really sinks in and takes hold with someone. The early exposure introduced me to the concept but I didn’t do such a great job of incorporating it into my practice at the time. It was something that I was made aware of, but I hadn’t fully grasped how it worked. (T7, p. 1)

Transmission-style, information workshops about backward planning did not have the effect on Casey the district likely had intended. Actually learning and implementing backward planning processes would have required a much more hands-on approach. Later, Casey acknowledged that other teachers struggled with making backward planning work now that Casey was leading some of the workshops:

CJ: I haven't met a teacher yet in the system, after workshops or after working with them, letting them go back to the classroom and implement and come back and tell me how it went. They'll come back and really got the idea that I need to start at the end and plan backward that well. They sort of do maybe a bit of a unit plan backward, but no one has looked at the whole course backward yet. I don't know, no one says, Wow I got it and they've done it successfully. (T7, p. 7)

Following Casey's insights, district leaders and consultants would do well to temper expectations of the impact that backward planning might have on school improvement, unless they recognized that such planning evolves with recursive episodes of trial and reflection, and unless they framed the initiative as a multi-year, intensive project.

Finally, sometimes teacher resistance was not rooted in unfamiliarity with backward planning, but because they did not necessarily have expertise in new and emerging forms of communication that were needed to develop the new online social media projects. Meg Granger described one teacher who felt inadequate in his understanding of social media, but became a co-learner alongside his students:

MG: And I really think that reflects what [teacher's name withheld]'s concept of digital citizenship was all about, in order for him to understand digital literacy, he had to do it with his kids in a lesson. He was putting himself in, like two-for-one learner style. It was like, "I don't understand how this works, so I am teaching myself and you're coming with me." He's honest to a fault – how many times would he use the word 'just', and I'd be like "Stop it, it's great, awesome!" It's great that he communicated the value of being a learner. (T4, p. 14)

All told, backward planning initiatives can be set back by complexity, inflexibility, insufficient time, and resistance to change. The next section will conclude the chapter by reviewing the potential backward planning may have for school improvement, according to the perspectives shared by study participants.

Catalyst for Change

Weighing the potential benefits, the potential enabling and inhibiting factors, the last part of this chapter analysing the experience of backwards planning will reflect participant views about the potential impact of backward planning to be a contributor for school improvement. Participants were cautiously optimistic that backward planning could result in improvements for schools, teacher practices, and student learning.

Change at the School Level

First, some participant comments related to the potential for change at the school level. Charlotte expressed the idea that backward design could be a catalyst for positive change in school reform efforts: *“I do believe that backward design if embedded within the school improvement plan would definitely see results for a school,”* mainly because *“there are so many things tied to backward design, especially the assessment piece”* (T1, p. 5). Charlotte’s idea of embedding backward planning with other reforms was exactly what Katniss Murry’s school was doing: *“assessment for/as and of learning and backward design are the two pedagogical focuses for the whole school. We’re pretty agile, because we’re a private school. We’re lucky because we get to move fast”* (T8, p. 5). Backward planning contributed to school improvement plans because it combined instructional and assessment innovations.

Change in Teacher Practices

In addition to its potential for overall school change, several participants talked about the degree to which their own practice improved as a result of professional collaboration around planning. In Charlotte Crane's case, learning about backward planning was part of a series of "teachers teaching teachers":

CC: the first time I heard about backward design ...I went with two of my colleagues where we got to watch [Leyton Schnellert] and [Faye Brownlie] both teach lessons to students and we fishbowed around as professionals and watched them teach, then debriefed afterwards. I was just blown away with how valuable that was to have teachers teaching teachers, and part of that planning and part of the way they built their lesson was with backward design, and talked about bigger picture and smaller picture as well. When we were sitting there with my colleagues, I was saying, "This is just so fabulous, we've got to get it to come to our district," so we worked with our literacy team to bring... [Leyton] to our district and do the same thing where he did teachers teaching teachers, and talked about backward design, and universal design for learning, and all those sorts of important things, like learning intentions, and all of those great things that really were able to bring our school and our district along. (T1, pp. 1-2)

The model of professional learning that Charlotte described included an emphasis on the facilitator modelling the thinking processes of how to plan. This professional learning episode formed an important method of bringing about teacher change.

Casey Jackson suggested that a change of this magnitude needed a lever. Casey's school district found opportunities to build in backward planning and assessment reform into the midst of an online learning project:

CJ: Teachers develop a way of teaching, delivering curriculum and they don't want to change, no one wants to change, change is hard for people. Change means, admitting maybe I wasn't doing it right, change means I've got to do some relearning and so we've kind of gone with the idea of Stephen Katz, the

“Intentional Disruption,” ... to cause them to want them to change... so what we’ve been doing with our digital learning projects... we’re hoping that is a way of disrupting their style of teaching, and disrupts them enough so they become learners again, and while they’ve been disrupted, we can slip in, we want you also to incorporate differentiated instruction and backward design and personalized learning. Trying to interrupt, you know, the traditional classroom. (T7, p. 7)

Because the blended learning context (online and face-to-face) was already unfamiliar, the initiative could include several innovations at once. The digital project became a lever for change for teacher practices. Casey believed that if schools stuck with backward planning, they would eventually have more successful, more effective teachers:

CJ: It’s not an easy concept to wrap your head around. It took me a long time, and it’s probably even a harder concept to make work, but once you see the value in it, I don’t think you could plan any other way. But it’s getting to that point where you say, Oh I’ve been much more successful as a teacher with my students if I made backward design work. (T7, p. 8)

Casey implied a relationship between student success and backward planning, but that success depended on a long-term commitment to learn and refine.

Change in Student Behaviour and Achievement

Finally, some participants offered evidence that the projects in which they used backward planning resulted in tangible change for students. For example, Eloise collected evidence of whether her skills approach was achieving transfer. Anecdotally, her grade 10 students who had gone on to grades 11 and 12 reported *“They used the same skills and improved their grades by ten per cent”* (T5, p. 4). She also examined her students’ provincial exam marks in the next semester in another subject area and found that her students had higher averages than other students. These anecdotal and

quantitative indicators gave Eloise confidence that her approach was paying off for her students. Meg Granger also indicated that the project her district team had planned resulted in some behaviour change. In other words, anecdotally, teachers and administrators noticed fewer issues with online interactions that resulted in those problems spilling over into the school:

MG: Several members of the admin team have said it seems that these conversations have decreased or at least slowed down the likeliness of these things happening. Maybe establishing a culture of talking about these things and discussing what is appropriate is translating into outside environments, and things are slowing down. (T3-4, p. 11)

With the right enabling factors in place, study participants supported the idea that backward planning could play an important role in changing teaching practices and improving student achievement.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined participant experiences with backward planning for ELA as captured in participant interviews. Included in this planning was a focus on pairing conceptual understanding and processes at the forefront of the planning process. As transcripts were examined, experiences seemed to cluster around three broad themes: the benefits of using backward planning, factors that either enabled or impeded backward planning, and personal judgements about its contribution to school change. Benefits included more purposeful teaching and more relevant learning, innovations to instruction, and reforms to summative assessment and grading practices. Some significant enabling factors included collaborating with colleagues, using time efficiently, facilitating effective professional dialogue, and employing positive leadership. The potential issues of backward planning included its propensity to be

overwhelming, the danger of it being too prescriptive, not finding sufficient time, and encountering significant resistance to change. Overall, teachers offered some evidence that backward planning initiatives could have a positive effect on school reform, teacher practice, and student learning.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this study I explored ideas and experiences as related by ELA teachers in order to develop a theory about the role of conceptual ideas in planning learning in secondary ELA. I analyzed data in relation to three related questions:

1. How did conceptual understanding fit into teacher-created planning for ELA in a variety of contexts?
2. What were the perspectives of ELA teachers regarding a backward planning process?
3. What do these experiences suggest about the relationship between conceptual understanding and teaching ELA?

In chapter 4 I presented an analysis of the nature of the ideas, processes, and resources as arranged within ELA teachers' plans to lend insight into the first research question.

In chapter 5 I presented the aspects of ELA teachers' planning experiences that emerged from close coding and analysis. In this chapter, I will explore the implications of participant ideas and experiences. First, I will summarize and discuss the implications of conceptual understanding for teacher-created ELA learning designs. In the next part of this concluding chapter, I will discuss the implications of how ELA teachers experienced the design work. I will then finish off the inquiry with final conclusions and implications for further research.

Planning ELA for Conceptual Understanding

When I coded the way participants in the study outlined conceptual understanding in ELA planning, I noted several important patterns. First, they planned three distinct kinds of concepts, often in combination. Second, they paired ideas and processes together, either in developing aims or in developing assessment tasks. A third insight

was the diverse ways that participants positioned resources to develop understanding. Fourth, participants developed plans for developing understanding and proficiency that had clear success criteria and better alignment between instruction and assessment tasks. Finally, the data reflected the ways that participants sought to bring about deeper understanding and more proficient literacy processes through instruction that featured discourse tools. The implications of each of these findings will be discussed in turn.

Outlining Three Types of Ideas for ELA

All three categories of ideas that had arisen in the literature review were confirmed by evidence from the participant interviews and artifacts. First, the themes conveyed by texts were prominent. Some themes featured an inward, psychological view, such as representation of identity, happiness, or first impressions. Other themes

Figure 8 Sources of conceptual ideas in ELA

Within Texts	About Texts	Beyond Texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inward, psychological lens on the human condition • e.g, Happiness, Judgement of others' character • Outward, societal lens on the human condition • e.g., Darker impulses, Attributes of a success civilization, Social justice • Environment, Tech, Science 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genre • e.g., Literary forms - tragedy, comedy, retrospective; Rhetoric and persuasion; Archetypes that define genre • Form • e.g., Relationship between form and medium, convention, style; Analysis of purpose and audience • Craft • e.g., Characterization; Logical and emotional appeals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking about how texts are used in culture • e.g., Digital citizenship, Feminist interpretations of experiences in the world • Making an impact on the world • e.g., Taking responsibility; Overcoming challenges; Taking action

extended more widely to society, including issues of social justice. The emphasis in this area was on reading and responding to authentic, real-world dimensions of the human experience, from representing identity, to accurately judging human character, to explaining acts of evil. A second category of themes focused upon form, genre, and language in a range of literary and functional texts. The ideas examined how form and genre work, and how language is used to create an overall impression. For example, participants developed ideas about characterization, archetypes, satire, and the use of figurative language. Elements of transactional communication included appeals in persuasion, synthesizing perspectives, communication variables, and the conventions of new, digital forms of communication. Rarely was this second category of concepts the central focus of planning, but often included an opportunity to create texts. The third set of concepts teachers included went beyond the themes or the craft of the texts, extending to critically examine how texts and language were used in culture. Examples of these concepts focused on the respectful use of language in digital spaces or critical thinking about portrayals of gender and culture. In *Figure 8* on page 263 I have created a table with these three categories of ideas, together with examples of the types of concepts that came from participants in the study.

What was most important to notice is the way that participants included ideas from all three categories. For example, one participant, Michelle Thermopolis, formulated four essential questions for her unit, two that centered around themes in texts, one on craft and language, and another on texts and culture:

MT: I had four questions for that unit. The first two are thematic about the past and about physical surroundings. That fourth one was the language question, and my third one is “Why should we and how should we be courageous and treat others with love, even when they’re not valued by the society we live in.” I would

consider that a culture question, at least by relating it to modern culture. (T11, p. 9)

The way that Michelle represented all three categories in her unit plan holds significant potential as a structure for ELA teachers to think about planning a set of conceptual statements. This same pattern of coordinating various kinds of concepts appeared in the interview with Katniss Murry. When Katniss discussed the ideas of her education department’s new draft curriculum, she stated “*They’ve created big ideas. They are about things like identity, bigger questions about what makes good writing, why do we tell stories....*” (T8, p. 7). In the first case, “identity” is very much a theme reflected in texts, one that is relevant to students’ lives. The question of “good writing” puts attention on language and craft, while the third idea, “why do we tell stories” fits nicely in the third category – the interaction of language and texts in culture. This three-part structure seems like a natural set of perspectives to take on language and literature—within texts, about texts, and beyond texts. *Table 10* on page 265 offers definitions of the three categories of conceptual ideas outlined above.

Table 10. Defining three kinds of conceptual ideas in ELA

Categories of Conceptual Ideas in ELA	
Ideas in texts	Students understand perspectives, values, and ideas conveyed in a wide range in aesthetic and pragmatic texts.
Ideas about texts	Students understand how authors develop ideas in texts with clarity and artistry, suited to genre and rhetorical situation.
Ideas beyond texts	Students understand the ways that language and texts play important roles in shaping and mediating experiences and power relationships in social and cultural settings.

This pattern of combining three kinds of ideas does not imply that teachers need to design units with all three; however, the pattern might offer a greater awareness of what

types of concepts are emphasized and which are more subordinate. The strategy might give ELA teachers practical frame for planning. Since this three-part structure is significant finding in the study, I will extend the discussion of each category.

Ideas within texts. In *Table 10*, the “ideas in texts” category includes themes that focus on individual human values and behaviours, or ones that may broaden that view to a lens that includes social justice, equity, or conflict. Students understand identity, perspectives, values, and ideas conveyed in a wide range in aesthetic and pragmatic texts. Whether we think of students developing or enriching an understanding of a theme, or developing an “envisionment” (Langer, 2011), this category of ideas suggests that one purpose of ELA is to value the exploration of ideas expressed in relation to our responses to a wide range of texts. Such exploration can help students develop reasoning related to human emotions, values, beliefs interests, and attitudes, whether they are reading or writing in an aesthetic or efferent mode (Rosenblatt, 1978).

This category of themes in texts was positioned first in the typology because that was how it was given priority by most teachers in the study. It reflects a stance that the priority in ELA is the quest for a depth of meaning about the human experience. The category does imply necessarily that the teacher predetermines a theme; it is entirely possible to define a wide enough conceptual territory to invite students to explore different concepts in the same class. For example, a class could delve into the concept of the American dream, the idea that society should offer an opportunity for individuals to freely strive towards and achieve their goals, as a broad conceptual territory to explore. Related ideas could encompass individual aspirations and family stories, immigrant experiences, or indigenous views. The first conceptual category involves imaginatively

experiencing a range of ideas in texts, engaging emotion and cognition, empathizing and connecting with people, events, and ideas, and building on own understanding through reflection and revision.

Ideas about texts. Moving beyond themes in texts, the second category of conceptual ideas helps students appreciate the complex ways that texts communicate meaning. It includes the choices and conventions in texts that vary. Katniss Murry suggested her jurisdiction will focus on what makes good writing. For example, when people write feature articles in magazines, they understand that certain structures are important, such as an informative and engaging title, a lead that engages the reader and gives essential background information, and body sections that develop ideas with facts, quotes from experts, and the writer's opinions; often feature articles contain photographs and other visuals, accompanied by captions. Understanding that forms of texts have conventions suited to the purpose and audience helps students navigate meaning across different texts and communicate their own ideas.

Understanding how genre works helps students understand the purpose. For instance, when a student understands that mystery texts will include multiple suspects, various motives, helpful clues, and misdirections, they can enjoy the game of the genre and use the model to write their own mysteries. The patterns featured in Michelle Thermopolis' thinking about archetypal patterns. This second category of conceptual ideas lends itself well to the study of how readers respond to the rhetorical appeals – rationale, emotional, and appeals to character – as Michelle Thermopolis had her AP students study. The category is focused on developing understanding of the way readers engage with the conventions of various texts. Students might apply their understanding to demonstrate an appreciation for new / emerging genre. For instance, a considerable

number of online videos on social media sites feature competitive slam poetry performed in front of a live audience— students might investigate the tropes, conventions, and style of such a subgenre.

Ideas beyond texts. If the first conceptual category reflected themes in texts and the second focused on the craft of texts, the third category of conceptual ideas takes a critical and appreciative stance on the role of language and texts in culture. This category was inconsistently addressed in the learning designs of participants in the study. Teachers design ideas that attend to the way that social roles and institutions may influence interpretations of text and experiment with alternative lenses and perspectives (Appleman, 2009). This critical reflecting and perspective-taking stance may give students insight into why interpretations vary. For example, take the case of where two values or human rights counter one another, such as when the right to free speech collided with religious freedom when satirical cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* lampooned the Islamic prophet. Interpretations of these ethical conflicts are difficult and require examination from multiple perspectives.

As Beach (1993) noted, limiting literacy to interacting with themes in texts (category 1) or appreciating conventions of texts that signify meaning (category 2) glosses over the way that understanding goes beyond texts themselves. In order for students to think critically about and challenge the taken-for-granted practices in various discourse communities, they need to understand how such ideas are conditioned to mean by social and cultural discourses evident in institutions such as schools, corporations, social media, or political parties (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2004). Students can interrogate the role that language and texts play in the shaping the identity of various roles people enact in family, school, or community (e.g., dutiful daughter,

anti-social punk, scout leader...). Furthermore, students can examine how ideas are shaped by the lenses of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class, and appraise perspectives that are represented or absent. For example, students might challenge the cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, investigate political agendas that benefit one economic class over another, or explore the experiences of immigrants from newcomer to second generation to citizen. This third category represents ideas that go beyond texts and have students think critically and reflexively about language and texts.

Pairing ideas and processes

Beyond the three-part array of conceptual ideas, a second important pattern that I interpreted from coding the data from participants was the way that conceptual ideas and literacy processes were inseparable. Throughout the analysis of participant interviews and artifacts, I got the sense that “knowing that” and “knowing how” (Ryle, 1945) were conjoined in the minds of these ELA designers. When participants planned, they paired ideas and processes simultaneously. In other words, as participants developed conceptual themes, they were also planning the thinking skills and strategies students needed for comprehending and responding to those themes. As they engaged planning ideas about genre and craft, they devised aims for composing processes where students could appreciate particular elements and conventions and subsequently use them in their own writing. Sometimes participants were explicit about pairing ideas and processes, while others made the concepts clear and expressed the processes as a level of cognitive complexity in the assessment task. I believe that developing a planning process where ELA teachers would explicitly pair aims for ‘understanding’ and ‘doing’ would be a natural fit.

Conceptual and procedural understanding in this way are co-dependent and co-occurring in the learning design, much in the way that Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) described know-understand-do (KUD). Interestingly, the province of British Columbia has recently issued a new curriculum diagram that has ‘know’, ‘do’, and ‘understand’ represented as equal contributors to a concept. The point here is that know, understand, and do are fused together to represent equal and inseparable components of student understanding. A similar observation concepts simultaneously being both an idea (a structural component) and a process (a functional component) has been theorized in the field of mathematics (Sfard, 1991).

The practical implication is that by pairing understanding and process at the forefront of planning, neither conceptual nor procedural understanding would get lost. It does not become an either-or proposition. In *Table 11* on page 271, I apply this pairing principle, matching the three categories of conceptual knowledge with procedural knowledge. In the table, I have imagined a literature-based inquiry unit plan in which students would explore a variety of mentor and choice texts to understand that everyone has the right to freedom of expression (within limits). That conceptual idea would be paired with the procedural knowledge of how to understand and interpret texts, explore and extend own perspectives, and demonstrate empathy for others’ experiences. Students would also explore an understanding that narrative and visual elements can portray human experience, and simultaneously learn strategies for inquiry and composing processes. They understand conceptually the genre and craft of text while at the same time developing the procedural understanding of how to create their own texts. Finally, the third pairing puts together an idea about the way that texts can be used in culture in the service of oppression or emancipation with the process of

reflecting on learning. As a thought experiment, I found pairing concept and process a creative and logical process for developing aims for a unit plan. Marzano et al (1988) noted that each discipline represents a body of ideas that form a conceptual core, and these ideas are accompanied by a set of discipline-specific processes for investigating and analyzing these ideas (p. 116). While these ideas grow and change over time (as any complex system does), students can be guided to see how the thinking processes of

Table 11. Pairing concepts with processes in a unit overview.

Grade 9 ELA: Human Rights Pedagogy: literature-based inquiry Lens: social justice		Resources: Multi-genre thematic Sample inquiry question: When does free speech become hate speech?
The students will understand that...		The student will be able to...
Ideas in texts: Themes	Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; the governments put limits on such freedom where warranted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience, understand, and interpret novels, short fiction, and non-fiction to explore and extend own perspectives. • Demonstrate empathy for others' experiences through discussion and written reflection.
Ideas about texts: Genre, Craft, and Language	Combining visuals and narrative text can powerfully portray human experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate understanding by combining textual and visual representation. • Access, record and synthesize information.
Ideas Beyond Texts: Language and Texts in Culture	Language and texts can be used to oppress and to free.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on initial and new understanding by considering multiple perspectives. • Metacognitively reflect on own capacity to read, think, research, and work collaboratively.

artists, authors, and communicators have also evolved. If at one time teachers designed the thinking processes to mirror those of a literary critic, now they are expanding their horizons to include the thinking processes of such roles as informed citizen, artist, digital content producer, and competent communicator.

Positioning Resources

In addition to a typology of concepts and a pairing of concepts and processes, a third theme about conceptual learning designs for ELA that I discerned from the shape of teacher planning was the way that each participant positioned texts in their unit plans. At times, ideas were constrained to one text, while at others, participants had their students explore an idea across multiple texts. This pattern revealed that participants varied significantly in their interpretation of the role of text in learning in the discipline. This finding reminded me of the explanation by Beach (1993) that “Teachers’ own theories of *how texts mean* [emphasis added] influence their daily practice” (p. 3). Teachers in this study had a working theory about where conceptual ideas were derived from, and that theory shaped their unit designs. Beach asserted that perspectives on how texts mean varied according to how teachers understand the relationship among text, reader, and context:

[Reader response theories] could be conceived of as moving from the specific to the global, from the textual to the experiential theorist’s focus on the immediate text/reader transaction, to the psychologist’s concern with cognitive and subconscious forces shaping the reader’s transaction, to the social and cultural theorist’s interest in how social and cultural phenomena shape meaning. (Beach, 1993, p.9)

These positions varied among the small number of teachers in the study. Most varied in the way they chose and positioned texts, varied in how they designed activities Among Eisner’s (1985) orientations to curriculum, a concern for competence, personal relevance, or cultural heritage were most prominent, while developing critical consciousness was somewhat rarer. Poststructuralist approaches, such as Appleman’s (2009) or Mellor’s (2000) critical literacy approaches which invite students to engage in

multiple rereadings of text, deconstruct popular and high culture, expand the definition of text, and find meaning reading between texts (intertextuality), may take more time to find their way in to teacher planning.

The first point regarding the designer zooming in on a specific text or broadening the concept across a range of texts was an important distinction. These latter participants conceived of ideas spanning across a wide range of available texts in various genres. This pattern allowed students to develop and discuss a range of connected experiences and ideas offered in poetry, novels, feature films, documentaries, short fiction, and articles. This choice to develop meaning across a range of texts reflects Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model the idea that the text is not meaningful in and of itself. As Goodman (1994) explained,

The text has a potential to evoke meaning but has no meaning in itself; meaning is not a characteristic of texts. This does not mean the characteristics of the text are unimportant or that either writer or reader are independent of them. How well the writer constructs the text and how well the reader reconstructs it and constructs meaning will influence comprehension. But meaning does not pass between writer and reader. It is represented by a writer in a text and constructed from a text by a reader. Characteristics of writer, text, and reader will all influence the resultant meaning. (p. 1103)

The observation seemed significant that teachers located conceptual understanding on different planes: constrained to a text, constrained to a set of teacher-selected texts, or open to the possibility of text discovered by students. If ELA teachers design learning with a belief in a transactional theory of literacy, they will emphasize the process of constructing ideas, and employ a broad range of text choices to build upon and broaden understanding. In the past, schema theory was framed as an individual, psychological phenomenon wherein people acquired understanding from experiences in

the world. McVee, Dunsmore, and Gavelek (2013) are now re-examining schema theory to explore how both cognitive and socio-cultural models fit together, postulating that in-the-head schema can be conceived of as created and shared collectively in social and cultural contexts. Another implication of this revised schema theory is that designers of ELA learning experiences might also widen the range of social and cultural contexts from which texts are selected. Teachers could open inquiry to trends in culture and communication, such as the emerging nature of digital citizenship and the ethical implications of global connectedness.

Designing Assessment Tasks and Success Criteria

Beyond concepts, processes, and resources, the fourth insight into planning concept-based units of instruction in ELA arising from this inquiry focused upon the need for new assessment capacities, both from a formative and a summative stance. A challenge for including a focus on conceptual understanding is whether teachers can describe growth in student understanding. If teachers accept students enter the classroom with prior knowledge (schema), then they employ strategies and tools for uncovering prior knowledge, monitoring the exploration of ideas, and assessing the growth in the complexity and depth of understanding. These strategies were evident in participants' learning designs. The stand out example from the study was the inquiry design for a Theory of Happiness wherein students several days constructing a theoretical model from prior knowledge before exploring texts.

Summative assessment strategies. Where ELA teachers are aiming for growth in higher order conceptual and procedural goals, their assessment practices need special attention. It was clear that participants in this study had been thoughtful about designing rich performance tasks for students to develop and demonstrate

understanding and skills. It is important when teaching for higher order aims that the designer align the summative assessment tasks with the main aims outlined in the plan. Otherwise, it is possible that students could participate in the learning experience without gaining any more depth of understanding than they had at the start. In the design phase of planning the teachers developed the culminating tasks that required explanation, interpretation, self-knowledge, or an exploration of perspectives. Several examples of the design of evaluation reflected an orientation towards literacy to develop citizens in a peaceful democracy. Several examples in this study – of examining humanity’s darker impulses through literature, for example – revealed a firm focus on developing understanding through aesthetics. There were also several examples in this study of teachers whose work was constrained by standardized tests – the Scholastic Aptitude Test or Advanced Placement tests, where teachers shaped their plans to suit the demands of these external tests. More emphasis on developing rich tasks within classroom assessment would reflect a profound shift in the field, as Shepard (2001) explained:

A reconceptualization of assessment follows from changes in learning theory and concomitant changes in epistemology and what it means to know in the disciplines.... The new paradigm is characterized as emergent because it is not yet fully developed theoretically, and, surely, not adopted in practice (p.1073).

Shepard articulated a reformed vision of curriculum, social constructivist learning theories, and classroom assessment practices as a set of converging principles that are leading educators to a new paradigm of learning (p.1072). This convergence of ideas was evident in many of the conversations I had with participants in this study. More conscious attention to humanistic and progressive learning designs, greater teacher creativity and independence, and

more thoughtful and engaged forms of student assessment were emerging in the planning of participants.

Many of the tasks participants developed reflected one or more of the six facets of understanding outlined by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). As Henderson (2015, p. 12) noted, the first three facets reflect the development of subject-matter understanding (explanation, interpretation, and application), and these are deepened by personal and social dimensions of understanding (perspective-taking, empathizing, and reflecting). For instance, in the Darkness in Humanity unit plan (A2-1), students were asked to develop a literary essay on the book they read (explanation and interpretation), as well as to develop multimedia presentation in which they reflect their understanding of evil / darkness (perspective-taking and reflecting). The thoughtful design of varied performance tasks was an important reflection of the teacher’s design for conceptual understanding.

Since the intent of a constructivist grounded theory approach is to find pragmatic applications from theorizing, I developed a set of summative assessment tasks, depicted in *Table 12.* , to imagine the pairing of conceptual ideas and processes for a grade 9 ELA unit plan. The summative tasks represent a balance of assessment evidence from different sources: observation and conversation (e.g., literature circles, exit interview), written reflections (e.g., letters to characters, research log) and compositions

Table 12. Planning interactive assessment opportunities.

Summative Assessment Tasks: Grade 9 Human Rights	
Ideas in texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Task 1: <i>Placemat dialogue</i>: Record prior knowledge about the topic on the edges of poster paper. Engage in a dialogue about the thinking each group member has in common and move these ideas to the middle of the placemat. Discuss shared and unique perspectives in whole group.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task 2: <i>Read</i>: choose, read, and respond to texts to explore ideas about human dignity. Participate in literature circles to expand perspectives. • Task 3: <i>Letters to Characters</i>: write a series of letters in which students empathize with characters encountered in texts (three samples to submit for summative assessment)
Ideas about texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task 4: <i>Museum Display</i>: research, design, and present a physical or virtual display for the Canadian Museum of Human Rights on a topic arising from reading and response (e.g., when does freedom of speech become hate speech?); explore ways text and visuals can be used together to communicate meaning.
Ideas beyond the texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task 5: <i>Thinking log</i>: document their understanding in a log, including devising a set of focusing questions, planning and conducting an inquiry, collaborating with others, and revising understanding • Task 6: <i>Final learning reflection</i>: new understanding and processes, in terms of reflect on strengths and areas to strengthen (format can vary: interview, vlog, written reflective essay...)

(e.g., museum display). The purpose was to develop a triangulation of sources of data (Frey & Hiebert, 2003; Davies, 2011) to give a fuller, richer documentation of growing understanding. I attempted to emphasize diverse performance assessment (Shepard, 2006) that aligned naturally with the pairing of concepts and processes (see *Table 12*).

The assessment tasks in the first row of *Table 12* for exploring ideas in texts about the broad human rights theme required students to read a range of texts and participate in literature circle discussions. The assessment strategy would focus mainly on observation and conversation (Daniels, 2002), much like the strategies outlined in the *Darkness in Humanity* unit. Casey Jackson related that such small group literature discussion can also be moderated in digital spaces. The third task, letters to characters, would be designed to reveal empathy and perspective-taking with characters and events encountered in texts in relation to the ‘big idea’.

The second row of performance tasks in *Table 12* focused on artistry and craft. The creation of a museum display could reflect students' application of their understanding of how texts and visual representation combine to communicate meaning. In order to assess understanding, the teacher would need to access to students' design rationale, in addition to the display itself. Since my home city is in Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba, Canada, and locally we have a newly-opened national museum of human rights, the local context has rich examples of displays as "texts". For example, one exhibit entitled the "Four Freedoms" highlights objects associated with freedom of speech. The task design in this case included a local context and audience, so students could practice decision-making considering a particular rhetorical situation. In addition, the task is designed to be multi-modal (Kalantzis & Cope, 2011), with the possibility of combining text, photographs, audio, video, objects and artifacts.

The third row of summative assessment tasks in *Table 6* focus on metacognitive reflections that enable students to monitor their own understanding, respond to texts and discussions, and think critically through the inquiry. Students can draw upon this log to self-assess their own growing understanding and learning in a final learning reflection that summarizes growth in understanding. The task was designed for students to gain self-knowledge (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 100-103). This application of insights from the participants in the study and the available research literature by creating a conceptual set seemed a natural and inherently logical process. After I developed the conceptual territory using the three-part structure (ideas in texts, about texts, beyond texts), then paired these ideas with procedural understanding, aligning the assessment tasks seemed straightforward. My emphasis was to represent the assessment process as a discursive, interactive, social process (Johnston & Costello, 2010),

gathering triangulated data and opening up the process to reflection and self-assessment.

Formative assessment strategies. When participants aimed at developing student understanding, they planned dialogue and writing strategies that enabled them to monitor growth in understanding. As Krista Kurtz put it, these strategies enabled her to “see their thinking” (T2, pp.4-5). In order to make thinking visible, teachers needed to develop student dialogue protocols (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995), representing a greater commitment to authentic dialogic learning. Emma Hardy used classroom discussion more often when she started planning backward with such protocols as Socratic Seminar. When teachers used dialogue protocols, they had opportunities to listen in to assess the development of understanding and systematically take notes to track progress. For example, Krista Kurtz’ listened in on her students’ thinking, recorded notes during conversation, and made her students more reflexively aware of the development of thinking processes. These teachers understood assessment as process of noticing and responding to literate behaviours, as Johnston and Costello (2010) described it. An important insight from the study was that moving towards designs for conceptual understanding requires a new set of formative assessment strategies that offer opportunities for students to engage in ongoing dialogue and reflection. One important structure was building an opportunity for students to think and talk before they encountered new ideas and perspectives, so they could reflect on ways that their understanding deepened and their perspectives widened.

Looking back on the array of summative assessment tasks, I would develop a parallel set of formative strategies to monitor student learning, give feedback, and adjust

teaching strategies. What I noticed from the participants' strategies is how they engineered opportunities for feedback from multiple sources – teacher, peer, and self. Charlotte Crane's strategy to break the complex process into stages in order to generate feedback and chart students progress along the way (T1, p.4) reflected this important view. So, too, was Krista Kurtz' use of checklists, listening to small group discussions, and giving whole class feedback. She also had students track their evolving understanding, revisiting and reconsidering their initial thinking in a reflective journal (T2, p.4). Other teachers emphasized self- and peer-feedback, such as Katniss Murry's revision stations (T8, p.5) or Claudia Hopkins' partner conversations and self-assessment criteria for group discussion (T6, p.4). These designs for formative assessment emphasized monitoring growth in understanding and skills using information from teacher and peer feedback, as well as self-assessment. See *Table 13* for application of these ideas for generating feedback based on the tasks devised earlier.

Success criteria. Another design element of some significance was the development and use of assessment criteria for understanding. If teachers want to design learning experiences to promote understanding they need useful criteria to describe it. These criteria described comprehension and written ideas much like Biggs' Structured Organization of Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy (2016) did (see *Figure 3* on page 94). The SOLO levels moved from surface knowledge where students could list only some isolated elements, to deeper understanding wherein student could show the relationships between ideas. In a similar way, the performance criteria used in the essays moved from *simplistic and clear with some relevant detail to fully developed with some insightful reasoning and powerful details in support (A2-2)*. These descriptions capture what it means to understand.

Table 13. Formative assessment strategies: teacher, peer, and self

	Teacher	Peer	Self
Task 1. Develop a clear sense of prior understanding of ideas.	Listen in during placemat dialogue to determine breadth and depth of understanding and assess misconceptions.	Using criteria, reflect on peer contributions to group discussions and give objective feedback.	Using criteria, reflect on own contribution to group discussion and set goals.
Task 2. Confer with students regarding book club selection	Confer with each student regarding the suitability of book choice.	Explain choices to peers and give / get feedback about your rationale for the choice.	Using a checklist, self-assess whether book is of interest, readable, and fits with small group.
Task 3. Listen in, record observational notes, and give feedback to literature circle discussions	Listen in to early lit circle discussion and develop whole-class feedback.	Group members assess lit circle participation according to pre-established criteria (preparedness, participation)	Prepare for and reflect on lit circle discussions in thinking log; reconsider, re-examine, reflect.
Task 4. Collect draft letters to characters and give feedback	Give whole class feedback and model effective ways of expressing empathy.	Peer feedback stations on one criterion at a time.	Self-assess letters to character against a checklist in thinking log.
Task 5. Negotiate research proposals with choice of topic and form	Confer with student partnerships or negotiate individual assignment options	Peers negotiate topic and format according to assignment outline.	Reflect on rationale for each choice in thinking log
Tasks 6 and 7. Final learning reflection from Thinking Log.	Provide models, criteria, and expectations regarding final reflection.	Peer feedback regarding outline of ideas for final reflection.	(this final reflection is a self-assessment).

Eloise Pevensie’s success criteria described ‘meaning’ in one artifact (A5-6), adapted from grade-level performance standards. Her criteria described categories of strategy use, comprehension and interpretation, and response and analysis. Each category was described in three levels representing increasing complexity and proficiency. Complexity of understanding was described in terms of the clarity of focus

and degree of support and development. It is significant that Eloise and her students made student-friendly versions of these criteria – to use in formative assessment conversations. Eloise structured feedback and self-assessment opportunities from these descriptors in a conferring log in which she recorded strengths, area of focus, plan for improvement, and resources (A5-7).

For ELA teachers who design learning plans with understanding in mind, it is essential that they have descriptive performance criteria and models to demonstrate to students what basic and more complex understanding looks like. For example, say students were attempting to show understanding about when people should have the right to free speech and when it is appropriate to limit that freedom (e.g., hate speech). At the lowest level of the criteria students would only be able to list a few facts about freedom of speech. At the highest level of the criteria for describing understanding, students might explore a contextualized example such as *Charlie Hebdo*, and explain ways that freedoms are limited to the extent they impinge on the freedoms of others. Teachers can use success criteria to give feedback on the growth of understanding, from listing isolated elements, to showing relationships, to more complex and nuanced understanding of an idea in context.

Planning Instruction

The last aspect of planning ELA for conceptual understanding in secondary ELA that I wanted to comment on in the conclusion was what instructional strategies participants planned to use to expand and deepen understanding and literate processes. Several salient design features of instruction stood out, such as a mix of pedagogies, personalized learning, embedded thinking routines, a concern for transfer, and the capacity for interdisciplinary study.

Differentiated and personalized instruction. Although planning for student understanding was recursive, non-linear, and subject to revision on-the-fly, participants were convinced planning concepts and processes up front subsequently enabled them to be flexible and responsive to students' needs and interests. In the research literature, several curriculum design models now advocate planning for conceptual understanding in order to provide more universal access to a range of students (e.g., Katz J. , 2012; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Vantassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). At several points in the study, participants mentioned how planning with broad concepts and processes enabled them to give choices in reading selections so they could accommodate students who were learning English as an additional language, who were struggling in school, or who were advanced for their grade.

Casey Jackson's emphasis in planning was to personalize education for students. His district's vision was to negotiate choice of texts and topics, but also to set out high expectations for literacy skills. By offering choices and engaging students with an online learning community across the district, teachers could accommodate a broader range of student interests using digital tools that students found more engaging. According to Fullan, Hill, and Crévola (2006), the tradition of differentiated learning focused upon meeting student needs; personalized learning differentiates to meet needs, but also focuses on high levels of student engagement by offering choice, enhancing learning relationships, and providing the right degree of challenge.

Powerful pedagogies. When planning pedagogy for conceptual understanding, participants employed strategies for developing deeper understanding. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) noted the importance of pedagogical strategies to help students develop deep understanding and transfer that understanding. For example, strategies that

research meta-analyses have shown to have high effect sizes include leveraging prior knowledge (E.S.=0.67), concept mapping (E.S.=0.60), discussion and questioning (E.S.=0.82), and metacognition (E.S.=0.69). These kinds of strategies were evident throughout the planning of participants in the study. For example, the unit plan that helped students develop a theory of happiness (A2-5) began with several days of discussion in which students articulated their existing theory of happiness before entering the exploration of others' perspectives on happiness. To aim at helping students transfer their understanding, Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) explained that students need opportunities to *practice* transferring ideas. They can trace ideas across text types, various times, and different academic disciplines. Highly effective pedagogical strategies included formal discussion and debate (E.S.=0.82), problem-solving, and extended writing. The participants in the study harnessed a number of these very strategies, such as Socratic Seminar, revision and editing stations, writing persuasive essays, and reflection and reader response journals.

In several of the cases in this study, teachers had planned approaches that featured significant modelling, practice, and feedback. For instance, Eloise Pevensie designed inquiry learning experiences stretching from the beginning to the end of the course, with extensive modelling, practice, and feedback at the beginning leading to independent inquiry at the end of the course. The instructional pattern gave increasing responsibility to students for understanding and doing as they became more proficient, moving from modelling to guided practice to independence. This pattern means there is room in instructional practice for modelling and direct instruction up front, but also in structured and independent practice of strategies, and getting feedback along the way. Cope and Kalantzis (2015) name this willingness to engage both traditional, direct

instruction *didactic* and the learning by doing approach as *authentic* and propose a pedagogy that balances both approaches *reflexively*. Reflexive means moving back and forth between situated experiential learning and abstract academic learning to benefit student learning (p.16). Designs that include a gradual release of responsibility (Palinscar, 1998), such as the optimal learning model (Routman, 2012) or the Framework for Intentional and Targeted teaching (Fisher & Frey, 2013) offer a structure for reflecting on phases of a pedagogy that slowly increases student responsibility for learning.

Teaching for transfer. In addition to personalization and powerful pedagogy, participants in the study were concerned about whether the understanding and skills they taught would last and be transferable to students' future literacy needs. Claudia Hopkins and Krista Kurtz asked students to transfer ideas across a range of texts and text types. Eloise Pevensie made it a professional action research project to find out whether the knowledge, strategies and skills helped her students succeed in later grades. One of the main design factors for Emma Hardy and Michelle Thermopolis was whether the conceptual ideas would still be relevant in the lives of their students ten years in the future. A number of projects in the study featured interdisciplinary designs where the concern was for whether students could see ideas as they transferred between and among subject areas.

Interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary design highlighted that clarifying ELA ideas may be especially important when teachers integrate ELA with other curricula. In some curriculum integration projects, the knowledge and understanding mainly came from Social Sciences, while the ELA curriculum was seen solely as a set of procedural outcomes (such as reading or presenting). Other participants managed to blend of the

two. For instance, Charlotte Crane's ELA and Social Studies unit plan asked an overarching essential question for the entire course, "What makes a successful civilization?" (A1-1, p.13). She included ideas from mythology, the meaning people assign to artifacts, and an historical lens on the arts in culture. In other unit plans, while students did practice strategies of reading and writing, much of the conceptual base of the course was more about social studies, career studies, or technology. Charlotte preserved the conceptual territory of ELA when curricula were integrated, rather than letting the content from Social Studies completely take over. By envisioning the importance of text in culture, Charlotte had her students develop an understanding of signifying practices for representing identity and featuring personal and historic artifacts as 'texts'. This thinking aligns with Morgan (1995) who concluded that students in ELA can interrogate the role of texts in the cultural practices wherein they are located, examining the role of these texts in various social spheres (e.g., school, family, media, state) where social differences are enacted (p. 28).

To make the strategies for developing understanding clear and transferable, teachers might consider trying the thinking routines developed by Ritchart, Church, and Morrison (2011). For example, the see-think-wonder routine provided a frame for sense-making, helping students document what they notice, what connections and inferences they make, and what questions occur to them. These routines, when explicitly taught, modelled, and practiced, can support the development of understanding.

Luke (2004) believed a rethinking and redesigning of English curriculum could serve more diverse cultural communities in this century, that the course could become a "...trans-disciplinary response to new contexts and conditions" (2004, p. 86). Luke suggested borrowing big ideas from linguistics, literature (English and World Lit),

sociology, cultural studies, and media and communication studies, in order to develop a range of ideas about communication, power, and understanding. There were many examples where this positioning of digital texts in culture seemed relevant, current, worthy of critical attention in ELA: the examination of corporate ownership and bias in news media, how search engines influence consumers and generate income for corporations, or the influence of social media on modern social movements, such as the Occupy movement, the Arab spring, or Je Suis Charlie to name a few.

How Teachers Experienced Design Work

The second area of investigation explored how teachers experienced design work. In particular, I wanted to know more about the perspectives of ELA teachers regarding a backward planning process. This study's exploration of the lived experiences of planning backward led to several observations, including the need for flexibility, the possibility of collaboration, and the sense that backward planning was purposeful and holistic.

Flexibility in the design process.

Participants in the study repeatedly expressed that planning was a personal journey, and that teachers needed to find their own natural starting place. Some teachers put skills and strategies in the foreground, while others put ideas up front. Some focused upon the skills students needed and then found content that acted as a vehicle for skill acquisition. Other teachers started with the ideas and then layered in the processes. Still others mentioned that a starting consideration was a mandated work of literature or a final exam task, and these constraints acted powerfully on the kinds of ideas or skills that they designed. This variety in contexts and in conceptualizing planning calls for flexibility in curriculum design processes. Teachers simply need to find their own natural entry point and to work from there.

While participants appreciated a template, it needed to be loose enough to accommodate a range of somewhat idiosyncratic planning preferences. The UBD work of Wiggins and McTighe (2005) to several teachers seemed too fussy and overcomplicated, but simpler versions of backward design from authors like Cooper (2010) seemed practical and appealing to many teachers. While generic backward planning templates were helpful, ELA-specific resources like ones by Wilhelm (2009), Lanning (2013), Schnellert and his colleagues (2009), Smagorinsky (2008), or Burke (2010) might be even more helpful. A Dutch study of teacher-created interdisciplinary curriculum made this same observation, noting that “the use of templates fostered their design thinking” (Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2014, p. 47). I think it would be more accurate to suggest the templates were not useful by themselves, but reflected an heuristic set of strategies that were useful in collaborative dialogues, whether that was beginning teacher mentoring, practice teaching, or collaborative curriculum design. The discourse helped facilitate the design; the template helped participants organize discussion and record their designs.

Professional learning through collaborative curriculum design

Along with a flexible approach to planning, another key theme that I interpreted from interviewing participants was the way that backward planning acted as form of collaborative professional learning. ELA teachers in the study asserted that, as they worked with others developing unit plans, they had extended their command of content, assessment, and teaching practices, and gradually refined their backward planning processes over several years. When teachers mapped out big ideas and formulated essential questions by working collaboratively at a local level such a school, and when they struggled with and had extensive dialogue about tasks and criteria, they engaged in

the creative art of teaching and developed craft knowledge. Since official curricula have become so open-ended and process-oriented, teachers have become more responsible for curriculum design (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). In collaboration with other teaching professionals in a local community, the classroom teacher determines the purposes and designs learning experiences for students.

When participants in this study engaged curriculum expertise from the district or the university, it was in a collegial spirit of mutual learning, not in search of a top-down curriculum implementation mandate from technical experts. Noddings (2003) put forward the idea that teachers need to collaboratively engage in a reflective dialogue about education aims. Noddings' process for "aims-talking" urged teachers to consider developing goals for the pursuit of happiness, for caring, community, and citizenship. In aims-talking, teachers reflect collaboratively on what they intend their students will accomplish, examine who benefits, and evaluate whether the plan will engender happiness and justice. Collaboratively invoking this inquiry process within a school allows teachers to reflect on whether their teaching practices contribute to making the community a better place.

Co-constructed journeys. As part of the idea that teachers learned collaboratively as part of a localized community, they expressed the idea that they learned much from their shared experiences with students. As they embarked on journeys exploring conceptual ideas with students, they revealed a strong sense of engagement in teaching and a high level of commitment to their students. In my experience, it is generally true that an ELA teacher's identity and understanding is revealed by their text choices, teaching preferences, and own engagement with learning. As I interviewed teachers in this project, I was struck by the joy they took in the

moments where they had given their students choice or where they had co-constructed ideas with their students. Casey Jackson opened up text choices and topics to increase students' engagement across a broader range of the student body. Eloise Pevensie gave her students free reign to choose a final inquiry question and to decide how to answer it. Katniss Murry co-developed the essential questions with her students. These learning designs aiming at higher order ideas and processes allowed teachers to negotiate meaning and purpose. In other words, it was not the ideas that were most important in the study, but the collaborative construction of those ideas, both in the faculty room and in the classroom.

Parameters for successful curriculum collaboration. Several factors were essential for the success of such professional collaboration. Two key elements were adequate time and effective facilitation. All the participants talked about it taking years for the concepts of planning for conceptual understanding to become more coherent and practical, and several participants had had mentoring, release time, Master's degrees, and opportunities to teach the same course several times.

A two-day workshop on backward planning would likely do little; the data indicate that professional learning designs for backward planning collaborations need to be ongoing, job-embedded, employ high quality mentoring by expert teachers, have clear and tested models of the process and the product, and last for several years. These insights are congruent with the research on effective teacher professional learning that named such attributes as job-embedded and ongoing as important for success (cf., Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). This finding also echoes the review of research commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education that found sustained time for teacher learning may be an important factor linking professional learning to student

achievement (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). While the reviewers cautioned that only nine out of 1300 studies they reviewed met the criteria for rigorous research, including the need for randomized control groups, these nine studies revealed a moderate positive effect for sustaining professional learning over time on student numeracy and literacy, equivalent to 21 percentile points; short-term professional development (<14 hours) had no appreciable effect. Importantly, what was needed for the development of understanding among teachers to learn thoughtful design (e.g., good mentoring, time to explore ideas and perspectives, support to stretch thinking, thinking critically and creatively) were the same sustained processes *students* needed to develop understanding in ELA class.

Purposeful and contextualized. If collaborative ELA curriculum design were to be used as a form of professional learning, it might best take the form of ongoing school-based department design teams engaged in professional learning cycles (collaborative inquiry). A study of a statewide professional learning grant to Australian mid-career secondary school teachers revealed that the impact on the program did not directly depend on how activities extended in time (span of time and contact hours), unless such time allowed teachers to strengthen interaction and collaboration *in the school* (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). This finding emphasizes how important it is to apply what is learned in professional development workshops. Contextualized learning emphasizes a direct relationship to a common curriculum, standards, and resources used by a group of teachers (Resnick, 2005).

Participants in this study reported significant professional learning as a result of collaborating in the design and implementation of ELA units of study. Sometimes they learned to develop units together, but designed independently. Other times, they

developed a unit together. By actively collaborating, curriculum work acted as a dialogic form of professional learning. Renshaw (2004) defined such work as collaborative inquiry, as it “focused on a specific question or dilemma that requires the attention of the participants, and although none of the participants may be an expert, the process of inquiry guides them to a solution” (p. 9). The amount of learning that takes place in such collaborations depends on the quality of the dialogue, so skilled facilitation or dialogue protocols can contribute positively to the outcome. Through discussion, teachers defined concepts, formulated goals, and overcame challenges. They read theory and designed opportunities to collect data in a range of forms, from focused observations to formal achievement tests. Such collaborative inquiry can integrate both curriculum theory and practical pedagogy, a combination Freire (1970) termed *praxis*.

The experiences teachers communicated in the study characterized backward planning as logical, purposeful, and engaging. Participants felt more confident and more innovative. Collaborative design, if conducted in a dialogic manner and supported, may be a powerful form of professional learning for ELA teachers. Several participants spoke about the sense of holism they felt, where the learning design was no longer shallow and fragmented, but instead had a sense of depth and connectedness.

Implications for Further Research

As a final segment of this concluding chapter, I will end with a discussion of the ways the findings of this study may have implications for further research into several matters of philosophy and practice. First, further philosophical exploration (epistemological study) needs to be undertaken to explore the concepts that are at the core of English language arts. What is the ‘architecture’ of conceptual ideas in ELA, the

foundations, cornerstones, and pillars? The exploration needs a broader range of participants across different jurisdictions.

Factual Knowledge

An area neglected by this inquiry by omission is that I did not consider ways that teachers consider factual or surface knowledge in design process. In this study I have posited that a focus on conceptual understanding and procedural understanding would help teachers balance their design efforts. However, I have omitted any discussion of factual knowledge. Several voices have called for more attention to detail. For instance, Christodoulou (2014) pointed out that, while attitudes in education and society view facts as unimportant, that if you can ‘Google’ the information, it is not worth knowing, such thinking is a myth. In truth, knowing facts, such as historical events or the spelling of words is an important part of developing understanding.

In future, I need to examine the role of factual knowledge in supporting ELA conceptual understanding and vice versa. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) suggested that once teachers establish conceptual understanding in the form of big ideas and essential questions, “more specific facts and skills are then taught in the context of the larger ideas and questions” (p. 27). Research needs to substantiate that teachers fully develop such factual knowledge. My own assumption is that factual knowledge is best included in lesson level design rather than at the unit level. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) expressed the belief that students need to know how to use facts to make inferences and predictions, handle specialized and technical vocabulary, and remember details to summarize what they read. Can a person say that she understands something that she knows very little about factually? Teacher planning in ELA about factual or surface knowledge was simply not addressed in this study.

Collaborative Curriculum Design as a Form of School Improvement

A second area for further policy and practice research is the potential for collaborative teacher design work as a part of school improvement efforts. It seemed like the logical companion of efforts to invoke more dialogic, social constructivist instruction and assessment practices. Some research grounded perhaps in program evaluation designs could explore the contribution of backward planning to innovation. Casey Jackson invoked the concept of “intentional interruption” (Katz & Ain Dack, 2012) as a way of breaking up the status quo practices, removing change barriers, and ensuring that professional development deepens conceptual change and expands capacity. The possibility of real change seemed especially possible when barriers to creative work of ELA were minimized – standard texts, anthologies and teacher guides or prescribed forms of summative assessment, including state / district / dual-credit examinations.

The Complexities of Time and Leadership

Third, the complexity of some more subtle issues that arose in some school- and district-wide initiatives call for greater exploration. First, there was the role of time. Meg Granger and Liesel Quimby asserted that teachers needed time, but also a sense of urgency, that too much time might have inhibited progress. To what degree do teachers need space and to what degree do they need some pressure in order to succeed with efforts to coordinate learning designs? Additionally, there was conflicting advice about the role of the principal, who must be present but not overbearing; involved, but not in the way. These contextualized subtleties might be the focus of program evaluation research or educational ethnography into the inner workings of curriculum design teams.

Regional Networks

Further research is also called for in the way that regional networks might support local school improvement efforts through facilitating professional learning about curriculum design. There were several examples of an outside agent being the inspiration behind teacher change:

- a local university's Faculty of Education and their institutes or other professional learning service, enhanced by their willingness to disseminate plans;
- a district office coordinator or consultant, sometimes with collaborative action grants or professional learning communities;
- a school-based lead teacher, department chair or PLC leader, invoking change from the inside;
- a private consultant hired to inspire local change;
- a regional support agency aimed at supporting school improvement.

These outside agents could play a key role as a catalyst for change and could double as research projects for school improvement.

In this research endeavor, constructivist grounded theory offered the opportunity to closely read and code the ideas and perspectives of a range of educators. Their ELA design approaches were complex and subtle. Henderson and his colleagues, in their book *Reconceptualizing Curriculum Development* (2015, p. 18), advocated for curriculum development as a matter of practical wisdom, developed by practitioners who plan but who also improvise; who are logical but also intuitive; who value experience and seek new learning. In the end, teachers can design learning experiences that develop holistic understanding, the kind of knowledge that enhances human flourishing (Henderson, 2015, p. 41). When ELA teachers are viewed as professional

designers, as public intellectuals, and are given the time and space to reflect on the needs of diverse students for multiple, possible futures, they can develop thoughtful aims, rich and authentic assessment tasks, and dialogue-rich instruction.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Context:

Date:

Time:

Place / Media:

Interviewee:

Name:

Position:

Criteria for Sample:

Experience in ELA:

Experience

- ✓ Briefly description of the project and intentions
 - This interview is part of a research project I have undertaken in the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Education at the University of Manitoba, and it has been approved by its ethics committee.
 - The study explores the experiences and ideas of secondary ELA teachers who have mapped out 'big ideas' or 'enduring understanding' for their courses. You may know this process as Understanding by Design, Teaching for Understanding, Universal Design (three block model), or simply backward planning.
 - The questions are intended will ask you to describe your experiences and your context in coming up with these ideas, as well as ask about the ideas themselves.
 - Reaffirm confidentiality and other conditions of ethics application
 - I will use pseudonyms to protect your confidentiality and your identity, including your name, school, and school district affiliation.
 - All data, including audio recordings, notes, transcriptions, and artifacts you share will be stored securely and erased or shredded five years after the conclusion of the study.
 - You can ask question about the research, the interview, or any other matter at any time.
 - You can withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time during or after this interview.
- ✓ I will now begin the recording

Interview Protocol (continued)

Interview Questions:

1. *Structural Description* (ask some of the following, as appropriate; modify as required.)
 - Tell me about your context. What do you teach and who are your students?
 - How did you learn about conceptual understanding in ELA?
 - Do other teachers in your school use backward design?
 - What sustains or curbs your use of UBD? How do you find time?
 - Are other teachers in your school or district planning this way?
 - Have assessment reforms had an impact?
2. *Textural Description*: (ask some of the following, as appropriate; modify as req.)
 - **Part 1: Experiences**
 - Tell me about the experience of mapping out the big ideas for your English course.
 - What are the steps or strategies that you followed?
 - How was it different from what you did previously?
 - Have teachers found the experience of UBD useful? Easy? Clear?
 - Did the methods help them differentiate instruction, identify resources, and design formative and summative assessment?
 - Did the planning help them diversify ways to monitor student growth and scaffold for student success?
 - What could you have improved?
 - **Part 2: Ideas**
 - What were the ideas that you set out in your plan?
 - Which ideas do you think constitute enduring, transferable understanding?
 - What ideas did you devise for your English course?
 - Why did you choose this concept / these concepts? (contemporary? engaging?)
 - Could you share documents or artifacts that show the results of your planning?

Closing Comments:

- ✓ Additional Comments?
- ✓ Following up
- ✓ Thank you

Post-interview Reflections:

[Hunches, connected experiences, learnings, personal observations, insights, ideas, questions, breakthroughs...]

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