

# Three-Dimensional Instruction

## Using a new type of teaching in the science classroom

by Joe Krajcik



**S**cience teaching and learning in the United States are at a pivotal point. *A Framework for K–12 Science Education* (NRC 2012b) and the *Next Generation Science Standards* (NGSS; NGSS Lead States 2013) shift science educators’ focus from simply teaching science ideas to helping students figure out phenomena and design solutions to problems. This emphasis on figuring out is new, provocative, and exciting, and it represents a revolution in how we teach science at all grade levels.

In their learning, students must use all three dimensions of the new standards—crosscutting concepts (CCs), disciplinary core ideas (DCIs), and science and engineering practices (SEPs)—in an integrated fashion in order to make sense of phenomena or design solutions to problems (see Duncan and Cavera 2015). Classrooms incorporating three-dimensional learning will have students build models, design investigations, share ideas, develop explanations, and argue using evidence, all of which allow students to develop important 21st century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self management (NRC 2012a). Three-dimensional learning also helps students learn to apply new knowledge to other situations. Every student will benefit from this new instructional approach.

### What is different with three-dimensional learning?

When I started my teaching career, I frequently engaged students in labs or had them observe a demonstration so they could experience science first- or secondhand. My focus, however, was on students learning the content rather than on having them make sense of phenomena. Learning content is important and necessary; it gives students usable knowledge of the big ideas of science, which serve as tools for thinking about and figuring out phenomena. However, research clearly shows that learning content cannot be separated from the doing of science (NRC 2007). If we want students to learn content and

apply their knowledge, then they must use the SEPs and CCs with the DCIs together. None of the dimensions can be used in isolation; they work together so that students can build deeper understanding as they grapple with making sense of phenomena or finding solutions to problems. As a result, learners can figure out more complex phenomena or design solutions to more perplexing problems.

### How often should each dimension be used?

Teachers and administrators often ask how often each of the three dimensions should be used, but this is the wrong question to ask. Rather, you should ask yourself: Are my students engaged in making sense of phenomena or designing solutions to problems? Engaging students in three-dimensional learning isn’t an item on a checklist; it is an orientation one takes to science teaching, and it should be used every day. Three-dimensional learning involves establishing a culture of figuring out phenomena or designs to problems.

My friend and colleague Michael Novak expressed these ideas well while we participated in a workshop on designing curriculum aligned to the NGSS. To know whether three-dimensional learning is occurring in a classroom, Michael said that teachers should ask students to explain what they are doing. Ideally, students would say that they are trying to figure out how a phenomenon works or how to solve a problem, rather than saying that they are learning about balancing equations, adaptation, or the water cycle. Figuring out permeates classrooms that focus on three-dimensional learning.

### Scientists and engineers work in three dimensions

Scientists and engineers use the skills involved in three-dimensional learning throughout their careers. They talk about and engage in making sense of phenomena, and to do so, they simultaneously use SEPs, DCIs, and CCs to discover and make connections among the science ideas related to their current understanding.



For example, some scientists study the question, “Do decaying maple leaves add to the ecology of lakes?” Scientists once claimed that aquatic plants are essential to the food web of lakes. Some scientists, however, wondered and explored the question, “What role, if any, do trees along the shoreline play in the food web of lakes?” Scientists have now gathered evidence that a major component of organic matter needed for energy, growth, and repair of lake organisms is supplied by trees along the shoreline (NSF 2015). Leaves from trees and other organic matter enter lakes and are used by aquatic animals as a source of food. This new and radical way of thinking about lake food webs required scientists to change their models. To explore this question and gather evidence to support the claim, scientists needed to use concepts found in the NGSS DCIs related to the organization of matter and energy flow in organisms (LS1.C), the growth and development of organisms (LS1.B), energy in chemical processes and everyday life (PS3.D), and chemical reactions (PS1.B), along with various SEPs (e.g., Asking Questions, Analyzing and Interpreting Data, Revising and Constructing Models, Arguing from Evidence) and CCs (e.g., Structure and Function, Systems and System Models, Patterns, and Energy and Matter: Flows, Cycles, and Conservation) (NGSS Lead States 2013).

Bioengineers also try to solve problems, and some are figuring out how to make artificial limbs using “smart skin” that mimics the sense of touch (Wu, Wen, and Wang 2013). To do so, they apply concepts from DCIs related to electrical forces (PS2.B), the structure of matter (PS1.A), optimizing design solutions (ETS1.C), and the structure and function of organisms (LS1.A). They also use SEPs to develop models and design and test solutions, and they apply various CCs such as Systems and System Models, Structure and Function, and Cause and Effect.

As the examples above illustrate, scientists and engineers consistently make use of the three dimensions to make sense of phenomena and design solutions to problems. It isn't a once-in-a-while activity; it is what they do every day.

## Where to start?

To start incorporating three-dimensional instruction into your classroom, look for engaging phenomena or problems that build toward performance expectations.

Take note of the questions students are asking, ones that students can explore over a sustained period of time, and ones for which students can ask and explore subquestions. In selecting phenomena, be sure

that the questions are related to the performance expectations (PEs) toward which you want students to build understanding. Therefore, you should be familiar with the PEs before you start thinking about phenomena that students can explore. Figure 1 (p. 52) presents a summary of key characteristics associated with the best types of phenomena and questions to explore in the classroom (Krajcik and Czerniak 2013).

Some potential sources of phenomena and their aligned PEs (NGSS Lead States 2013) include:

1. Your local environment. Students find phenomena and associated questions related to the local environment to be valuable and relevant. In trying to make sense of the phenomena, students can make use of DCIs related to biodiversity (LS4.D), social interaction and group behavior (LS2.D), the role of water in Earth's surface process (ESS2.C), human impacts on Earth systems (ESS3.C), the structure and properties of matter (PS1.A), and interdependent relationships in ecosystems (LS2.A).
2. Your hobbies. I love to scuba dive. Teaching students the ecology of reefs and the effects of rising temperatures of seawater present fruitful opportunities for exploration. If you like to ride bikes, you might explore why it is important to wear a bicycle helmet, which addresses force and motion (PS2.A) and types of interactions (PS2.B).
3. Current challenges facing our environment. How can we reduce our dependency on fossil fuels? How can we make use of wind and solar power to supply our energy needs? Exploring such questions allows students to delve deeply into several DCIs, including energy transfer (PS3.B), electromagnetic radiation (PS4.B), and human impacts on the environment (ESS3.C).
4. The internet, journals, and magazines. Magazines and journals, such as *Scientific American* and *Science News*, are filled with current ideas about phenomena that scientists are exploring. The National Science Foundation's Discoveries web page (see Resources) can also serve as a source of ideas.
5. Other science teachers and scientists. Your fellow science colleagues can be rich sources of ideas. Sharing your own ideas with other teachers will enrich the pool of phenomena you can use in your classroom.

## Conclusion

Developing a classroom culture that focuses on students using the three dimensions to make sense of



phenomena or find solutions to problems will initially be challenging. Many teachers haven't been prepared for this type of teaching, and there are not many resources that can give us direction. However, persisting in this endeavor has its advantages. First, all students will develop deeper knowledge of the three dimensions, which will allow them to apply their knowledge to new and more challenging areas. Second, as all students engage in figuring out phenomena or solutions to problems, they will also develop problem-solving, critical-thinking, communication, and self-management skills. Third, and perhaps most importantly, three-dimensional learning will help foster all students' sense of curiosity and wonder in science. "I wonder how ... ?" and "How might ... ?" are extremely important questions that have largely disappeared from science classrooms. Three-dimensional learning brings the focus back to curiosity and wonderment, and it can support all students in developing a deeper and more useable knowledge of science. ■

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## FIGURE 1

### Characteristics of phenomena and questions

#### Feasible

- Students can design and perform investigations to make sense of the phenomenon.

#### Worthwhile

- By making sense of the phenomenon, students are building understanding toward various performance expectations.

#### Contextualized

- The phenomenon is anchored in real-world issues or in the local environment of the learner.

#### Meaningful

- Learners will find making sense of the phenomena interesting and important.

#### Ethical

- By exploring the phenomenon, learners do not harm living organisms or the environment.

#### Sustainable

- Learners can pursue exploration of the phenomenon over time.

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### Resources

National Science Foundation: Discoveries: [www.nsf.gov/discoveries](http://www.nsf.gov/discoveries)

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