

A Book Study:

Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning

By Mike Schmoker

Synopsis

In this book, Mike Schmoker encourages teachers to zero in on what he calls the “three essential elements” of high-quality schooling: coherent curriculum, effective whole-class instruction, and purposeful reading and writing. Schmoker describes a coherent curriculum as a pared down but rich body of academic content knowledge that would allow teachers to delve deeply into essential subject-area topics and draw on a variety of source materials. Effective instruction includes guided practice, formative assessment, and ongoing adjustment to instruction. Schmoker emphasizes authentic literacy. He believes that students should be doing a great deal more close reading and analytical writing than they commonly do. He provides detailed chapters on how this literacy-intensive approach would work not only in language arts, but also in social studies, science, and math.

About the Author

Mike Schmoker is a former school administrator and teacher. He has written several books and dozens of articles for educational journals and newspapers. He lives in Tempe, Ariz.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Simplicity, Clarity, and Priority (9-24)

1. Discuss Schmoker’s statement: “A content-rich curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy would wholly redefine what public schools can accomplish with children of every socioeconomic stratum” (p. 11).
2. Do you think the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) support Schmoker’s view of “a decent, coherent curriculum” that “allows us to teach the essential standards in sufficient intellectual depth, with adequate time for deep reading, writing, and talking?” (p. 10).
3. What do you see as some components of structurally sound lessons?

Chapter 2: What We Teach (25-49)

1. This book was written before the CCSS were finalized and adopted. Discuss whether or not you think the CCSS meet Schmoker’s criteria for appropriate standards.
2. How do David Conley’s four habits of mind (p. 38) relate to the elements of Critical Thinking and Authentic Engagement?
3. Schmoker writes, “Our schools simply don’t require students to read texts of increasing length and complexity” (p. 35). How is your school working to increase text complexity and rigor in the classroom?

Chapter 3: How We Teach (50-89)

1. Choose one of the prominent researchers Schmoker summarizes (pp. 58-59). What connections do you see between their findings and elements of the LOI?
2. After reading this chapter, what is one way you will improve your checks for understanding in your lessons?
3. What are some questions you have about Schmoker’s Template for Authentic Literacy (p. 74)?

Focus Elevating The Essentials Study Guide Answers

Jackie A. Walsh



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