



# WIDE World

DEVELOPED AT THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Inspiring Great Teaching  
through Online and On-site Learning

By **Melanie Benitez**,  
Math Coach, Louisville, Kentucky

## *An Exciting Journey to Understanding*



“The results were phenomenal, with both classes of 5th grade students scoring 100% Proficient/Distinguished on the district math assessment!!

Their knowledge of the content extended way beyond the test.”

I knew I was about to embark on a new journey when my principal, Teresa Meyer, called me into her office last fall. She smiled and said, “Guess what? We are going to participate in an online course called, *Teaching for Understanding I*, offered through WIDE World at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.” Normally, I am very enthusiastic about learning new things that will help my students become deep thinkers, but I had just taken on the role as a full-time math coach for my building and I was somewhat overwhelmed with the responsibilities that it entailed. I reluctantly agreed and soon realized it was the best decision I had ever made as an educator! Here’s how the journey unfolds...

Our team was composed of Lynne Wheat-Director, Administrator Recruitment and Development, Fredericka Hargis-Coordinator, Administrator Recruitment and Development, my principal, Teresa Meyer, and me. From the first meeting, our team seemed to hit it off! Though we were from such different backgrounds, we all seemed to share the same vision that all children can be successful and felt the TFU course could guide us closer to it. It was amazing how a team with different leadership roles could work so well together, sharing the responsibilities of the course. We took turns taking notes from our discussions and posting them online and we discussed the encouraging feedback we received from our online coach and study group. The coach did a wonderful job asking us questions that would cause us to reflect and stretch our thinking in new ways about how to teach students to understanding and how to make our unit better.

We made the decision to create a unit centered around a topic that I teach, since I was the only one on our team still in the classroom. The topic we decided on was geometry. I have taught

geometry for nine years and felt very confident in the unit’s content, so off we went. We wanted our Generative Topic to “hook” the students, but still focus on content. After stewing over the idea for a while, we made the executive decision to put the Generative Topic to the side for the moment and look at our Understanding Goals to see if a common theme “popped up”. Boy did it! Everything we wanted our students to understand by the end of the unit related to the world around us, thus the Generative Topic was born... *Geometry Builds the World!*

As we began to clarify our Understanding Goals, we felt it was important to relate all parts of geometry to nature, architecture and art. We built our Performances of Understanding and Ongoing Assessments around this common theme and actively engaged our students in understanding why geometry is important in their own lives. We really enjoyed working together and bouncing ideas around that were central to the students’ understandings of the content.

**But the wonderful part about creating this unit was that our resources were endless. We had an online instructor, coach and a study group full of educators from around the world at our fingertips. All we had to do was log into the discussion area of our course to ask clarifying questions, get feedback or just feel supported through the whole process!**



**“Our journey doesn’t end here! We continue to teach others about the TFU framework and encourage them to take the online course. Speaking for one that has a million things on her plate, I’d push them all aside to participate in this wonderful course! It’s worth it when you see the excitement for learning in your students’ eyes and the true understanding that they show in the curriculum’s content.”**

## For More Information

### WIDE World

Harvard Graduate  
School of Education

[wideworld.gse.harvard.edu](http://wideworld.gse.harvard.edu)

50 Church Street, 4th Floor  
Cambridge, MA USA 02138

Toll-free: 1-888-759-8829  
Outside U.S.: 1-617-496-5832

Our team had the luxury of putting our unit into action when the geometry unit was next up on our 5th grade curriculum map. We decided to ask another 5th grade teacher to teach our unit as well, so that two classes of 5th graders could be immersed in the learning and we could ask her for feedback at the end. So, off we went! I began the unit posting our Understanding Goals in the classroom because it was important that the students know where they were headed. Then the big question was posed, “How does geometry build art, nature and architecture?” At the end of each performance, we reflected on the question and recorded what we had learned that would eventually help us answer the big question. Each day became an extension on the learning from the previous day. No longer was I teaching geometry in segments. Gone were the days of a cute activity for symmetry, which has no connection to the cute activity on congruent/similar shapes. Now, student participation in each day’s activities was essential to help guide understanding for the next day’s lesson. Finally, geometry concepts “built” on each other, rather than being seen as separate pieces. Students were allowed to “struggle” through guided inquiry performances where they were the teachers and I became the facilitator. They began to pose their own questions to each other and made their own incredible connections to the world around them.

The results were phenomenal, with both classes of 5th grade students scoring 100% Proficient/Distinguished on the district math assessment!! Their knowledge of the content extended way beyond the test. As a culminating activity, they were asked to build bridges that could withstand the weight of five Matchbox cars. The understanding they had of the geometric building blocks was so advanced, I was sent out in search of weights in the building just to get the bridges to fall over! Our final assessment was to answer the big question, “How does geometry build art, nature and architecture?” They nailed it! From line segments,

to 3D structures, they made the connections and showed a true understanding of the content. My students’ success in the geometry unit is unmeasurable. They have even made connections from geometry to their measurement unit! A teacher asked the students, “What would the world be like without measurement?” One student raised his hand and firmly stated, “I wouldn’t want to cross a bridge!”

It was so reassuring to our team to have such student success with our unit and it has also significantly changed the way we look at teaching our kids to a deeper understanding. The TFU framework was a wonderful guide throughout our journey and will continue to be as we begin on our next adventure in *Teaching For Understanding II*. The framework helps educators design units that are engaging to both students and teachers. It focuses us on what’s important for students to truly understand and to design performances of understanding that connect to these goals. It also stresses the importance of on-going assessment throughout the unit. After teaching the unit, we reflected as a team, with input from the other 5th grade teacher and revised a few things on our performances and assessments. We felt it was important to look back and revise while it was still fresh on our minds.

My role as a math coach has led me to work with other teachers in the building in designing their own TFU units. The excitement from teachers and success from students continues to grow. A kindergarten class studied a unit on graphing. The teacher and I designed a unit following the TFU framework that created an environment in which the students were able to determine the best types of graphs in different situations. They were able to generate their own questions about the graphs and find connections to their own lives. Success was evident again, as students scored 87% at the Proficient/Distinguished level on the District math assessment.