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What is Depth of Knowledge (DOK)?

The premise of standards-based education is that setting high expectations for all students can effect positive change through systemic coherence. One of many aspects of systemic coherence is the need for sufficient consistency between the complexity of cognitive engagement specified by the standards and the extent to which that complexity plays out in all parts of the system – including curriculum, learning opportunities, and assessments. The expectations within academic standards vary in their complexity. Coherence relies on a common interpretation of the cognitive demands of the standards through careful content analyses. In this way, standards can inform instructional design and content development to elicit thinking that is as cognitively demanding as the expectations in the corresponding learning targets.

DOK is a tool that can promote coherence by facilitating interpretation, evaluation, and communication about the cognitive demands of the standards and other system components in ways that are compatible with the intent of the standards and the underlying ideas about the nature of learning. Content developers, educators, evaluators, and others use DOK to work with greater efficiency and intentionality to promote content alignment in support of a coherent system.

Dr. Norman Webb originally developed the DOK language system for the purpose of evaluating the relationship between the complexity (often referred to as "cognitive complexity") of academic standards and the complexity of corresponding assessment items. Over time, the use of DOK has extended far beyond this original context. Now used extensively throughout school districts, by State Departments of Education, assessment developers, educational publishers, and others, DOK is a valuable tool used to inform alignment between and among all types of educational content. DOK helps stakeholders to communicate effectively, consistently, and efficiently about the complexity of standards, learning objectives, tasks, prompts, questions, and other components of educational materials. The DOK framework supports purposeful work toward existing goals of system coherence.

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What are some examples of how DOK is used?

- By individual K-12 educators and within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
  - to ensure shared understanding of the meaning of academic standards–by clarifying divergent interpretations and coming to consensus on the complexity of student engagement required by each learning expectation.
  - to inform development of lesson plans, unit designs, formative/summative classroom and district assessments, and other materials.
  - to evaluate and to inform selection of curricular components and assessment items from products for which a district has purchased access.
- To communicate expectations to content developers, including target DOK levels for items and tasks and the expected distribution of DOK levels of items on an assessment.
- In specifications for assessments via state RFPs.
- By State Departments of Education large-scale efforts to provide educators with tools for goals related to school improvement, strengthening instructional practice, curriculum and assessment development, and other endeavors.
- As one component of content alignment analyses of statewide summative assessments with corresponding standards.

What DOK is:

- DOK is an evaluative tool used for content analysis. Specifically, DOK is a language system that can be used to differentiate between and among different levels of complexity of student engagement required by components of educational materials.
- DOK can be used to interpret standards, learning objectives, tasks, prompts, questions, etc.
- DOK is a reflective lens used to foster intentionality in teachers' practices, to help ensure that the complexity of learning expectations are clearly understood, that assessments (of all types) provide opportunities to make reasonable inferences about attainment of learning expectations, and that educational opportunities allow students to engage at the level(s) of complexity intended.
- DOK differentiates complexity from difficulty.

What DOK is NOT:

- DOK is **not** used to evaluate the complexity of a text, phenomenon, or topic complexity (e.g. how complex is photosynthesis.).
- DOK is **not** a grading rubric.
- DOK is **not** a protocol or a prescriptive approach.
- DOK is **not** a measurement of "how deeply" an individual is engaging with a particular expectation.
- DOK is **not** hierarchical or progressive (i.e., it does not reflect or suggest any sort of teaching or learning progression.).
- DOK is **not** a value judgment and does not reflect importance. (In other words, no level of DOK is "better" than any other. Academic standards or other learning objectives, by definition, specify what is important.)

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