

Professional Summary

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Through their work with *Understanding by Design* (2006), Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe have profoundly influenced the way that many teachers and school administrators around the world view and do the work of curriculum design. With the growing emphasis on standards based education, the need for a guiding principle of alignment between the standards, assessment, and instruction has rapidly increased. Backward Design provides that principle and a method of focusing instruction on the important “big ideas,” while ensuring inclusion of research proven effective instructional practices. The philosophy is so simple and elegant, it quickly becomes intuitive for many of the instructors who adopt it.

Highly Effective Teachers

Goodwin & Hubbell describe the 3 qualities of highly effective teachers in *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching* (2013); based on exhaustive research and peer-reviewed studies, they have concluded that being “Demanding, Supportive, and Intentional” are the aspects of teaching from which the most potent interventions to learning arise. Being demanding requires high but attainable standards; teachers are supportive by building strong and positive relationships with students and engaging them with effective feedback; while intentionality starts with a clear goal and ends with a comprehensive plan. The UbD model gives a powerful approach to that planning process which allows course design to proceed from any point without ever losing sight of the intended learning outcomes, objectives, and goals. UbD places the emphasis on preparing students to do real life tasks and offers a framework for scaffolding the knowledge and skills required for them to accomplish and master those tasks.

Strengths and Challenges

Having the goals and standards unpacked and elucidated, then focusing on authentic assessment in the manner prescribed by Wiggins and McTighe (2006), brings clarity to the learning process and solves

many typical planning problems by necessarily involving a variety of best teaching practices; like those outlined by Marzano (2001), in *Classroom Instruction that Works*, and John Hattie (2008), in his landmark study, *Visible Learning*. Using a UbD Lesson Plan Template and the many associated resources and accompanying tools which have grown out of the community of educators surrounding Backward Design, much of which can be easily located online, makes it a user friendly experience and easier for teachers to assimilate this logical, though demanding, design process into their practice. Challenges to implementing the method school-wide include time constraints and instructors having their own preferred plans or methods already set. UbD is certainly an exhaustive planning process, for a reason; the time spent designing an effective lesson, unit or course is not only critical for the success of students, it is also easily made up in the long run since the learning will be more efficient and it is possible to avoid a lot of wasted time and reteaching during instruction. The comprehensive nature of the UbD design process makes it well suited for creating whole curricula, courses, or units; it can, however, be overwhelming for simple lesson planning. This problem can be overcome by combining the UbD model with one of several simpler and more appropriate systems for lesson planning, such as the two-step framework or “The Hunter Decision-Making Model for Planning Instruction” from the Master Learning Model, can result in a complete platform for ensuring the critical “intentionality” for instruction.

Conclusion

All the various effective planning models have a common thread that has been “uncovered” by the UbD philosophy. Having this much clearer understanding of how “understanding happens”, is not only beneficial to the planning process, but also how lessons and units are framed and delivered to the students. Placing the emphasis on the goals, essential questions, and authentic assessment tasks all the way through the course of study, from the beginning, allows for a much more cohesive learning experience all around.

References

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