Getting Back to Backward Design

A Presentation on the Backward Design Curriculum Design Model from ***Understanding by Design*** by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

Facilitated by Philip Bonner

Objectives of *Getting Back to Backward Design*

Upon completion, participants will be able to:

1. define what backward design is and explain how it differs from other course design methods.

2. explain how backward design might improve courses they are currently teaching.

3. employ backward design in their future course preparations.

Backward Design: A Definition

"Backward Design is a framework for course design. With Backward Design an instructor starts course planning by identifying desired learning outcomes with an articulation of course goals and learning objectives. Assessment of those goals and objectives is determined, and finally, appropriate learning activities and instruction are developed."

The Innovative Instructor. (2018, July 30). Using backward design for course planning. [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://ii.library.jhu.edu/tag/backward-design/

So, what's backward about Backward Design?

"Our lessons, units, and courses should be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books, and activities with which we are most comfortable. Curriculum should lay out the most effective ways of achieving specific results. It is analogous to travel planning. Our frameworks should provide a set of itineraries deliberately designed to meet cultural goals rather than a purposeless tour of all the major sites in a foreign country. In short, the best designs derive backward from the learnings sought(Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 14)."

So, what's backward about Backward Design?

"But many teachers begin with and remain focused on textbooks, favored lessons, and time-honored activities – the inputs – rather than deriving those means from what is implied in the desired results – the output. To put it an odd way, too many teachers focus on the *teaching* and not the *learning*. They spend most of their time thinking, first, about what they will do, what materials they will use, and what they will ask students to do rather than first considering what the learner will need in order to accomplish the learning goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p.15)."

So, what's backward about Backward Design?

"We are advocating the reverse of common practice, then. We ask designers to start with a much more careful statement of the desired results – the priority *learnings* – and to derive the curriculum from the performances called for or implied in the goals. Then, contrary to much common practice, we ask designers to consider the following questions after framing these goals: What would count as evidence of such achievement? What does it look like to meet these goals? What, then, are the implied *performances* that should make up the assessment, toward which all teaching and learning should point (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 17)?"

The Twin Sins of Traditional Design

- **Activity-focused Teaching:** an approach to course design focusing on engaging activities but without clear understandings articulated from the beginning. To what ends are these engaging activities aimed? (more common in K-8 settings)
- **Coverage-focused Teaching:** an approach in which students move through a textbook or other materials in an effort to complete the prescribed checklist of topics. How deep will their understanding of the material be at the end of the course? (more common in high school and higher ed settings)

Let's take a quick look at the handout labeled The "Twin Sins" of Design.

The Twin Sins of Traditional Design

"No guiding intellectual purpose or clear priorities frame the learning experience. In neither case can students see and answer such questions as these: What's the point? What's the big idea here? What does this help us understand or be able to do? To what does this relate? Why should we learn this? Hence, the students try to engage and follow as best as they can, hoping that meaning will emerge (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 16)"

The Benefits of Backward Design

"As previously stated, backward design is beneficial to instructors because it innately encourages intentionality during the design process. It continually encourages the instructor to establish the purpose of doing something before implementing it into the curriculum. Therefore, backward design is an effective way of providing guidance for instruction and designing lessons, units, and courses. Once the learning goals, or desired results, have been identified, instructors will have an easier time developing assessments and instruction around grounded learning outcomes."

Bowen, Ryan S., (2017). Understanding by Design. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved March 18, 2019 from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/understanding-by-design/.

The Benefits of Backward Design

"The incorporation of backward design also lends itself to transparent and explicit instruction. If the teacher has explicitly defined the learning goals of the course, then [the instructors] have a better idea of what they want the students to get out of learning activities. Furthermore, if done thoroughly, it eliminates the possibility of doing certain activities and tasks for the sake of doing them. Every task and piece of instruction has a purpose that fits in with the overarching goals and goals of the course."

Bowen, Ryan S., (2017). Understanding by Design. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved March 18, 2019 from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/understanding-by-design/.

The Backward Design Process

Stage 1: Identify the Desired Results

Stage 2: Determine What is Acceptable Evidence

Stage 3: Plan the Learning Experiences and Instruction

The Backward Design Process

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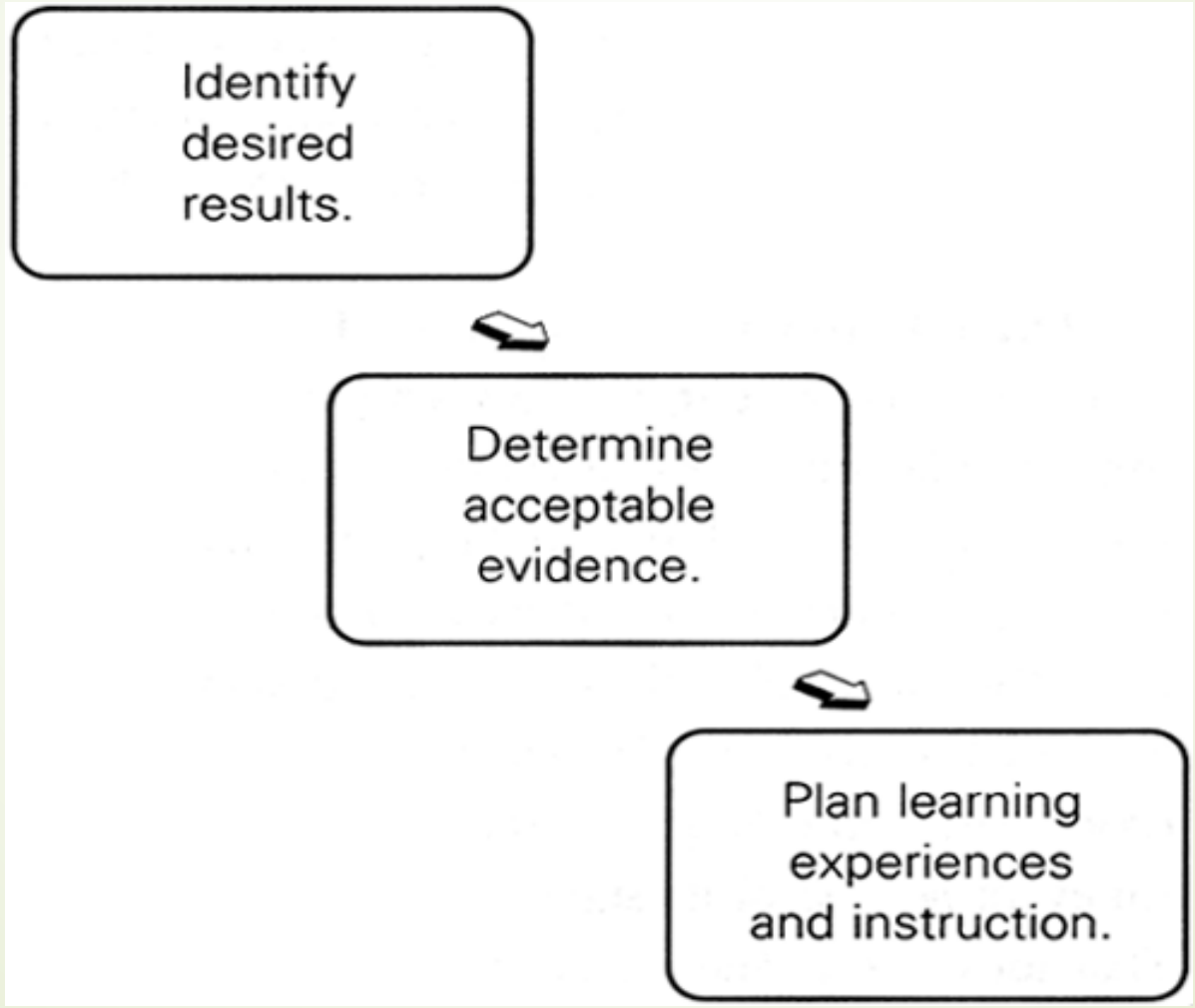
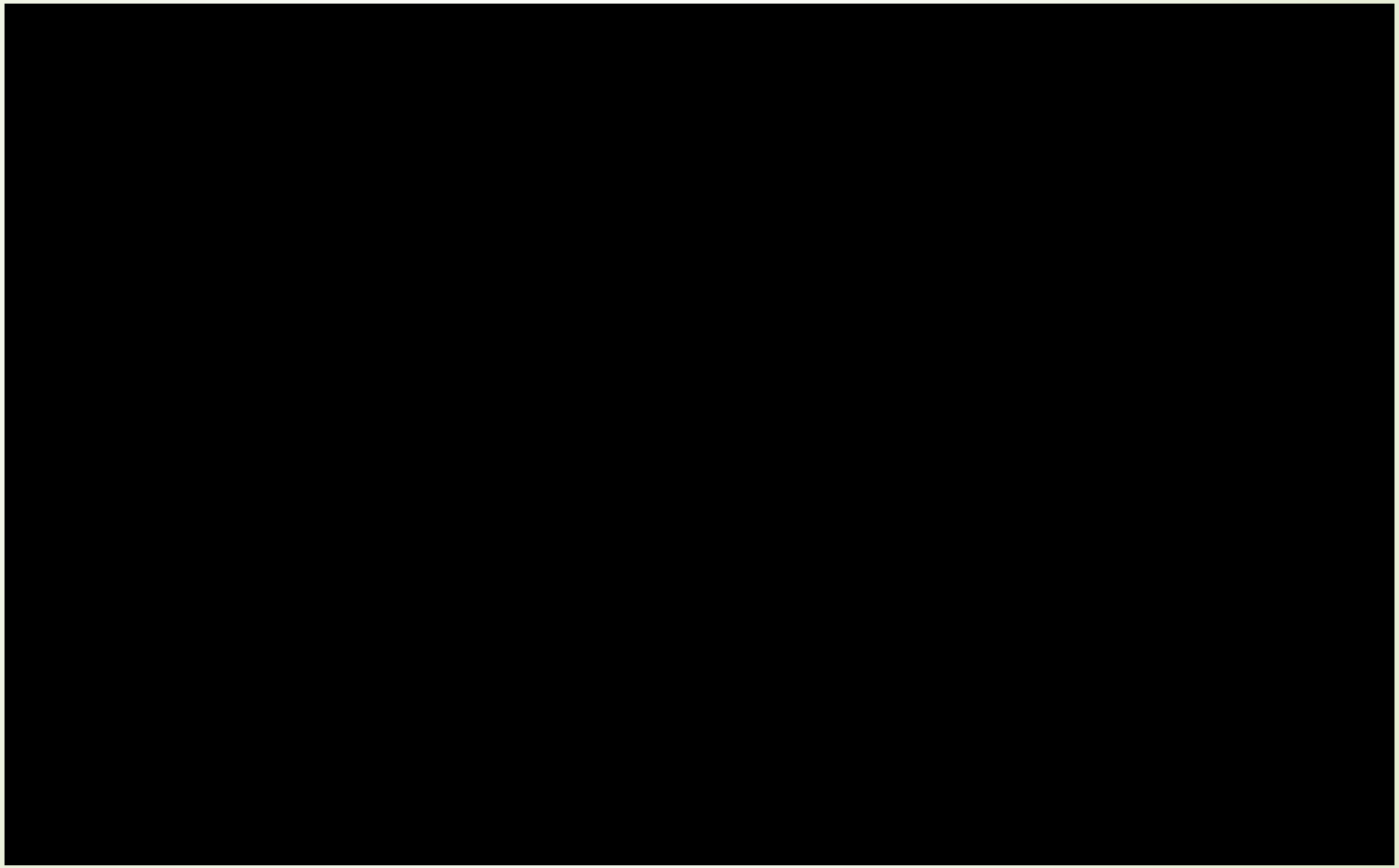


Dr. Erica Halverson, University of Wisconsin

retrieved at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cveyIXCpUmw on March 19, 2019



Think-Pair-Share # 1: Five Minutes

Consider the Following Question: Given that most professors and instructors here at Montgomery College need to follow pre-determined, departmental syllabi, can we still use Backward Design? If so, how?

A Closer Look at the Backward Design Process

Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

- What are the ***Big Ideas*** and ***Core Tasks*** of the project, unit, or lesson?
- What ***key knowledge*** and ***skills*** will the students acquire as a result of this unit? What are ***the enduring understandings*** they should attain?
- Begin with ***the end in mind***.

Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence

- Think like ***an assessor*** and gather ***evidence*** in a variety of means. What constitutes ***evidence*** of mastery?
- Use authentic, complex, open-ended forms or assessment for the ***big ideas*** and ***core tasks***. Traditional quizzes and tests are acceptable for less important course elements.

Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

- Identify the facts, concepts, principles, and procedures the students will need in order to complete the performance task or project.
- Identify content for direct teaching, coaching, and teaching.
- Select activities, materials, and resources as appropriate.

Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

What learning experiences and instruction will enable students to achieve the desired results?

How will the design —

W = help the students know ***where*** the unit is going?

H = ***hook*** all the students and ***hold*** their interest ?

E = ***equip*** students, ***explore*** the issues, and ***experience*** the ideas?

R = provide opportunities to ***rethink*** and ***revise***?

E = allow students to ***exhibit*** their understanding and ***evaluate*** their work?

T = be ***tailored*** to the different needs, interests, and abilities of learners?

O = be ***organized*** to maximize initial and sustained engagement as well as effective learning?

(Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 22)

Dr. Michelle Ford, Empire State College

Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPtyqGih9Lo on March 19, 2019

Think-Pair-Share # 2: Five Minutes

- Let's take a look at the handouts.
- First, take a look at page 7 of the handout labeled Chapter 1. **What do we make of this diagram?**
- Next, look at the handout with the red print. This is a planning sheet for the three-step process of backward design. **How do this planning sheet and the diagram from page 11 align?**
- Finally, **can you think of something from your own teaching that might fit into this model?**

Enduring Understandings

- An understanding is an important inference, drawn from the experience of experts, stated as a specific and useful generalization.
- An understanding refers to transferable, big ideas having enduring value beyond a specific topic.
- An understanding involves abstract, counterintuitive, and easily misunderstood ideas.
- An understanding is best acquired by "uncovering" (i.e., it must be developed inductively, co-constructed by learners) and "doing" the subject (i.e., using the idea in realistic settings and with real-world problems).
- An understanding summarizes important strategic principles in skills areas.

(Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 128-129)

Enduring Understandings [image of content priorities]

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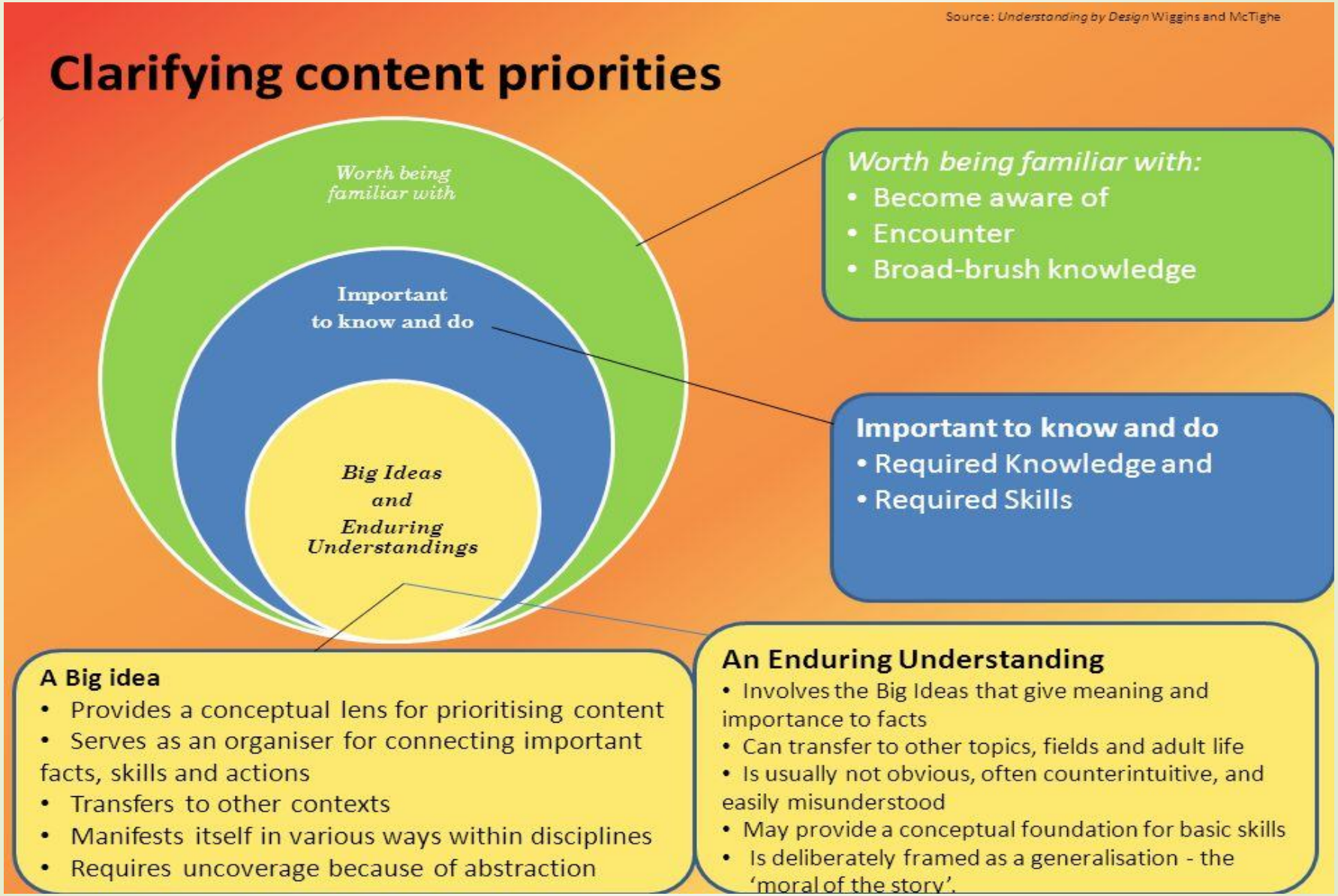

Think-Pair Share # 3: Five Minutes

With your partner, consider the following two scenarios.

1. A political science professor is presenting a short unit on the Bill of Rights. She normally just gives a quiz and asks her students to identify the first ten amendments of the Constitution. What might be a more meaningful way to assess this knowledge to ensure that the Bill of Rights becomes "an enduring understanding" for them?
2. In a public health course, the professor wants to discuss the history of vaccinations in America and the eradication of polio and smallpox. He wants to make this topic relevant to his students. How might he create "an enduring understanding" of this topic for his students?

A Final Thought

"If I see an ending, I can work backward."

- Arthur Miller, 1915 – 2005, American playwright

from *The New York Times* (9 Feb 1986)

References

[Access Mooc]. (2016, January 30). *Backward design: example* [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPtyqGih9Lo

Bowen, Ryan S., (2017). Understanding by Design. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved March 18, 2019 from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/understanding-by-design

[image of content priorities] retrieved from https://slideplayer.com/slide/8376202/

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[UWLSS Video]. (2012, April 20). *Educational innovation at UW-Madison: the "backward design"* [Video File] retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cveyIXCpUmw

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.