"Teaching is a means to an end. Having a clear goal helps us educators to focus our planning and guide purposeful action toward the intended results." ~Wiggins and McTighe

Understanding by Design, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, offers a conceptual framework for designing courses through what they call "Backward Design." It seems "backward" because it starts from the opposite end of the planning process we typically use to design courses—starting by thinking about how to teach our content. Backward Design, in contrast, leaves teaching activities until the end and starts with the desired results of that teaching. They argue that you can’t start planning how you’re going to teach until you know exactly what you want your students to learn.

The Backward Design process proceeds in three phases:

I. Identify desired results.
First, establish learning goals for your course. What should students know, understand and be able to do? Prioritize and limit the content you want to teach so it fits within the constraints of the course.

Here are three questions they suggest asking:
- What should participants hear, read, view, explore or otherwise encounter? This knowledge is “worth being familiar with.”
- What knowledge and skills should they know and be able to do? These facts/concepts/principles/processes/strategies/methods are “important to know and do.”
- What big ideas and important understandings should learners retain long after they’ve forgotten the details of the courses? These choices are the “enduring understandings.”

Answering these questions will help determine the best content for your course and create concrete, specific learning goals, too.
Try figuring out your course goals using these circles of priority:

Establishing Curricular Priorities

- Worth being familiar with
- Important to know and do
- "Enduring" understanding

II. Determine acceptable WRITTEN evidence.
Next think about how to decide if students are learning the knowledge and skills you want them to gain. Questions to consider:
  Given your course dreams:
  - What kinds of written evidence could you collect that best shows the kind of learning you want?
  - What evidence of “familiar” learning could be in the form of writing?
  - What evidence of “important learning” could be in the form of writing?
  - What evidence of “enduring learning” could be in the form of writing?

Expectations
Which “Expectations for Student Writing at Western” (May 2006) match your course goals?
  - Rhetorical Knowledge
  - Critical Reasoning
  - Composing Process
  - Conventions
  - Other Expectations for Student Writing that you have:
III. Plan learning experiences & writing instruction.
After you have decided what results you want and how you will know you’ve achieved them, then plan how you’re going to teach:

Questions to consider:

Responses
  - What kinds of responses from the instructor would help student writers achieve these writing expectations?

  - What kinds of responses from classmates would help student writers achieve these writing expectations?

  - What kinds of responses from others would help student writers achieve these writing expectations?

Assignments

Low Stakes Writing  Medium Stakes Writing  High Stakes Writing

Low Stakes: Informal, usually ungraded or S/U or checkmarks
Medium Stakes: Semi-formal, graded, but comprises small portion of final mark
High Stakes: Formal, graded and comprises significant portion of final mark

  - What low stakes writing assignment(s) would help students realize these expectations?

  - What medium stakes writing assignment(s) would help students realize these expectations?

  - What high stakes writing assignment(s) would help students realize these expectations?
Activities

- What direct instruction could you provide students to succeed with these assignments?

- What in-class activities would help students succeed with these writing assignments?

- What out-of-class activities would help students succeed with these writing assignments?

- Which of these activities will include an individual component?

- Which of these activities will include a collective or group component?

- What activities, in addition to writing, will help students succeed with the writing assignments?

- What activities to celebrate student successes with the assignments might you include?

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