Portfolio Project: Professional Summary

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The Backward Design Model presented in Understanding by Design, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe has been found to be an effective curriculum, unit and lesson planning model. The method of “Backward Design” starts with the “end in mind”, focusing creation of lessons around the target learning goals. This means that when planning instruction, teachers need to look at what the students need to learn overall-or the big picture. When planning with the end in mind, one can start to build a lesson plan, unit of study or curriculum effectively.

When using UbD (as it informally called), teachers start off with an idea based on the standards. In today’s context, this means using the Common Core Standards which many states (including Colorado where I teach) have adapted. The Common Core Standards/State Standards provide students with the exact framework of what, exactly, will be expected of them within their grade level and content.

After picking the desired Content Standard in which to focus, teachers then move on to creating “Essential Questions” based on the standards. These “Essential Questions” are what the student must be able to know at the end of the unit of study/lesson plan. These are the “goals” and “understandings” of the lesson. If the student(s) cannot effectively answer the essential questions, then they have not completely retained the information and thus cannot claim to be proficient in the standard the essential questions are related to. When setting up a unit of study or lesson plan with UbD, after the teacher has chosen the Content Standard and worked out the Essential Question, the next step is to create student objectives. These can be as simple as “what will the student be able to do?” Objectives can be written out as “The student will be able to… (by the end of the lesson/unit).”

The UbD method then instructs to make sure that assessments align with objectives. The assessments can be informal or formal. Performance tasks called “GRASPS” (standing for Goal, Roal, Audience, Situation, Product, Standards [Criteria]) help guide those assessments. UbD suggests that not only that the teacher do the assessments (as modeling exemplars and expectations is known to have a positive effect on student understanding and performance), but students do them as well. After assessments have been laid out, the bulk of the teaching and learning is then represented in Stage 3 dubbed the “Learning Plan.”

The “Learning Plan” can be laid out using the “WHERE” method. The acronym is a clever way to show **W**here the students are going from the beginning to the end of the unit; **H**ook (engage) the students; **E**xplore the subject(s) and (properly) Equip the student for learning/retention; **R**ethink work and ideas; and **E**valuate results. This lays out the entire foundation of the lesson (from the pre-assessment, to using the essential question, direct instruction, guided practice, summary and assessments), giving the teacher a clear path to design each section carefully.

The last part is Stage 4: the Feedback Stage. Feedback should be given in a timely, specific and goal orientated matter. There are different ways to give and receive feedback that can be effective for all ages of students. These include: direct teacher to student, direct student to teacher and student to student feedback. Some of the methods of feedback used in the past include the use of Google Forms, exit slips and semester reflections. Feedback on all ends allows students and teachers to reflect on what went right, what went wrong and what to do better next time.

The Understanding by Design, Backwards Design planning method is an effective tool for teachers. It allows teachers to look at each facet of the lesson or unit of study to make sure the students are learning exactly what they need to be learning. It provides a clear framework that is not confusing and easy to use, to break down lesson/unit planning and pull it all together in a cohesive way.

Backward Design to plan this unit of study allowed me to be more cognizant of the how and the why of what I teach in order to ensure that instructional time is utilized in the most efficient and beneficial manner, which ensures that I am doing what is best for my students. While I will certainly be adapting the template to better fit my needs, I have learned a variety of methods to ensure that my focus remains on the learning targets that are expected for my students to know. This has allowed me to look at all parts of the learning to better scaffold my teaching.

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