

Introduction to “BACKWARD DESIGN” Lesson Planning (also known as *Understanding by Design*)



Introduction

- One of the most important aspects of teaching is designing curriculum and lesson plans because if you don't know where you are going, then neither will your students. Over the years, a variety of styles and approaches to planning lessons have been developed and implemented in classrooms and ultimately it is up to you and your school to decide which approach fits you best.
- An important aspect of planning is that it should be viewed as part of your teaching rather than as an inconvenient task or something you are forced to do. A good plan doesn't have to be time-intensive and overwhelming, but rather, it should just outline a clear path for learning. It also serves as a critical memory tool to record changes to the lesson from year to year, because if you don't write it down, you will find yourself recreating the lesson each time. How detailed and extensive the instruction is really up to your own personal preference.
- The Alternative Certification Program uses a lesson planning model known as [Backward Design](#) or [Understanding by Design](#) as its default approach. [Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe \(1998\)](#) developed this model in the late 1990s in an effort to rethink and challenge how teachers' traditionally approach the construction of a lesson. This approach ensures that your lesson is focused upon exactly what you want to teach and that nothing is wasted in that endeavor. It really is a powerful strategy for all teachers to have in their teacher toolbox!

Prior Knowledge Check

- What do you think a **traditional teacher** might do first when planning a lesson?
 1. Decide the lesson activities the students should do?
 2. Decide the lesson objectives?
 3. Decide on how to assess the students on the lesson? (post-assessment only)
- If you answered, “Decide the activities the students should do,” then you are correct. For those who answered, “Decide the lesson objectives,” you should be correct, but in reality teachers don't always do this step first. Consider the following example of a typical teacher (true story):
 - Gary is a high school English teacher who is trying to find a way to present the story of Romeo and Juliet to his class of juniors. A fellow teacher suggests that Gary use a great video on a modern day version of Romeo and Juliet that will really engage the students. Gary thinks that this is a great idea and plans to show the video to his students.
 - On the day of the lesson, Gary tells the class that they are going to watch a video on Romeo and Juliet (**lesson activity**). He then tells the class that they should pay attention and take notes because they are going to be tested on the video later that week. The night before the test, Gary makes up some multiple-choice questions that should be long

enough to take up the whole class period. (**lesson assessment**)

- A few days after the test, the school's Principal visits Gary. The Principal tells Gary that a parent called to complain about why Gary was not teaching Romeo and Juliet from a book and only showing a modern day version of Romeo and Juliet. The Principal then asks Gary for the reason for showing the movie and Gary pauses for a moment (he is trying to think of why he showed the video) and replies that he thought that the students would be able to relate more to the movie than just reading Romeo and Juliet from a text. Gary tells the Principal that his students hate to read and he thought that the video would benefit the students' analysis of Romeo and Juliet much better. (**lesson objective**)
- Believe it or not, many teachers do approach their lesson planning in this way and unfortunately it occurs much too often (not really know why s/he is doing the lesson). Here is the order that Gary took for the planning of his lesson.
 1. Decide the lesson activities the students should do.
 2. Decide on how to assess the students on the lesson.
 3. Decide the lesson objectives.

Not quite convinced that teachers tend to choose activities first when planning a lesson?

Consider the following questions:

- What do teachers look for when they visit other teacher's classes?
- What do teachers look for when they attend conferences or seminars?
- What do teachers look for when they need to teach a lesson?
 - The answer is that teachers are always looking for fun and exciting activities to get their students engaged and interested in the lesson. Teachers rarely create new lessons completely on their own and look to other resources for their ideas (especially other teachers!). Nothing wrong with that; however, the problem lies in that the teacher does not know whether or not the exciting activity they are looking for serves any real purpose in providing evidence or helping the students' reach the lesson's objectives.

Backward Design Approach: Defined

- Backward Design is named "Backward" because it approaches lesson planning in the exact opposite of traditional lesson planning. In Backward Design, the teacher first thinks of the most important objectives that need to be taught in the lesson, then figures out what assessment is best to measure those objectives, and then develops activities that are most appropriate to reach those objectives.
- The order of lesson planning in Backward Design is listed below (Backward Design terminology is indicated inside the parenthesis and bolded); however, we will use the terms – objective, assessment, and instruction – to simplify our conversation.
 1. Decide the lesson objectives (**Identify desired results**).
 2. Decide on how to assess the students on the lesson (**Determine acceptable evidence**).
 3. Decide the lesson instruction the students should do (**Plan learning experiences and instruction**).
- Backward Design ensures that the lesson's objectives, assessment, and instruction are all aligned

or “matched” with each other and that everything that the teacher includes in the lesson is valuable and important for the student. Nothing is ever wasted in a Backward Design classroom! If the Romeo and Juliet video that Gary uses in the above example does not help him reach his objectives, then regardless of how exciting the video is he should not use it.

- Let us examine the first step used in Backward Design– [deciding lesson objectives](#)