Understanding by Design: The “Big Ideas” of UbD
by Denise Rice

“To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.”
—STEPHEN R. COVEY, THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE, 1989

The mission of Lutheran schools is simple. They exist to equip children to be disciples of Jesus Christ while providing a quality academic education using best practices. Providing quality academic education means helping learners to become thoughtful about and productive with content. Our goal is to help students acquire information and skills and transfer that learning to situations in and out of school. In other words, a core goal of schooling is to educate for meaning and understanding. The question becomes “What is the best way to do this?”

One model that is gaining ground in education is Understanding by Design: The Backward Design Model (UbD) developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. UbD is an embodiment of common sense and best practice in curriculum design and what teachers know about learning. It is not a “new” model, but in recent years it has become widespread. It is currently used in over 400 school districts, the textbook is used in over 225 education courses, and it is supported by ASCD.

What is Understanding by Design?
The word “understanding” forms the basis of the UbD model and its meaning is complex. By definition understanding means anything from a knowledge of or familiarity with a particular thing, skill in dealing with something, comprehension, personal interpretation, or superior power of discernment. As educators, we know that knowledge and skills do not automatically bring full understanding of content. Instead we need to provide meaningful learning experiences for our students and determine their needs to guide our teaching. We must also determine whether our goals for our students have been achieved. While many would like to believe that traditional testing is the best way to assess goals, oftentimes it isn’t. There is also the opportunity for misunderstanding in new learning situations and the need to correct that. As designers of curriculum and assessments, we must do our best to provide understanding for our students.

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In other words, we need to go below the surface of information to uncover the big ideas. According to the UbD model, to do this, there are three stages of backward design:

1. Identify desired results
2. Determine acceptable evidence
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction

This is considered backward because it goes against the grain of teacher guides and methods taught in colleges across the nation. Teachers are used to planning lessons and activities and then testing. In UbD by thinking about and planning the assessment first (before teaching), we ensure alignment of our goals and means and that teaching is focused on desired results.

**STAGE ONE**

In stage one of UbD, teachers must know the expectations outlined by the school curriculum guide. What content standards are addressed explicitly by the unit? From there the teacher establishes the priorities for the unit. This set of concentric circles shows how it works.

- The outer circle is what the students should be familiar with in order to complete the unit of study. Students study this material and use it during the unit, but often it is not used outside this unit.
- The middle circle represents the facts, concepts, principles, and skills students should be able to know and do when the unit is complete. These are the skills students must have for mastery.
- The inner circle represents the enduring understandings of the unit. Why is this topic worth studying? What are the big ideas, abstract concepts, and essential questions that students will revisit throughout their life? These questions often have no one obvious right answer; instead, they raise other important questions, address the philosophical or conceptual foundations of a discipline, recur naturally throughout education, and are framed to provoke and sustain student interest.

**STAGE TWO**

Stage two is all about determining acceptable evidence. How do we know if students met expectations? What shows understanding? How do we assess our students? Evidence of understanding is a greater challenge than evidence that students know a correct answer. Therefore we need to think like an assessor from the start and to consider how we will determine if students have attained desired understandings.

In assessment we need a photo album not a snapshot. In other words, we need multiple evidence over time to show if students understand the big ideas. Going back to our three concentric circles, traditional quizzes and tests are used to show if students understand items worth being familiar with, constructed or selected responses are used with information that is important to know, and authentic performance tasks and projects help students demonstrate enduring understanding.

Thinking like an assessor is a key component of UbD. What would be sufficient and revealing evidence of understanding? What is the task that will anchor the unit? How do I distinguish between those who really understand and those who do not? What misunderstandings are likely? How will I check for those?

To plan performance tasks, Wiggins and McTighe recommend that GRASPS are used.

- **G**: What is the **Goal** of the task? What is it designed to assess?
- **R**: What real-world **Role** will the student assume as she is performing the task?
- **A**: Who is the **Audience** for the task?
- **S**: What is the **Situation** that provides the context for the task?
- **P**: What is the **Product/Performance** that is required by the task and what is its **Purpose**?
- **S**: What are the **Standards for criteria and success**?

After results and evidence are considered and planned, instruction and lessons are written. UbD does not give specific guidelines on how to teach, instead it gives guidelines for planning. Once again an acronym WHERE TO is used for planning steps to help meet the requirements of the unit.

- **W**: **Where** are we going? What is expected?
- **H**: How will we **Hook** students?
- **E**: How will we **Equip** students to experience and explore key ideas?
- **R**: How will we **Rethink** or **Revise**?
- **E**: How will students self-**Evaluate** and reflect their learning?
- **T**: How will we **Tailor** learning to varied needs, interests, and learning styles?
How will we **Organize** the sequence of events?

This acronym does not represent the order to be followed, just the items to consider in planning a unit.

In schools, acquisition of content for its own sake often dominates teachers' and students' experience. The approach suggested here suggests that we reform our teaching in a meaningful way. Instead of the common teaching practice of teaching knowledge and skill, we would teach for meaning first and then for transfer. The purposeful use of content is the ever-present goal, and we must design all instruction with that goal in mind. Then we fulfill a portion of our mission; to provide a quality education using best practices.

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References:

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