

grant wiggins and jay mctighe understanding by design

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design: A Paradigm Shift in Curriculum Development

In the realm of education, the pursuit of genuine learning and lasting understanding is paramount. For decades, educators have sought frameworks that move beyond rote memorization towards deeper cognitive engagement. This is precisely where the groundbreaking work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, particularly their influential book "Understanding by Design" (UbD), has revolutionized curriculum planning. Understanding by Design offers a robust and practical approach to designing effective learning experiences that prioritize what students should truly know, understand, and be able to do. This article will delve deeply into the core principles of UbD, exploring its backward design methodology, the essential elements of an effective UbD unit, and the profound impact it has had on educational practice worldwide. We will examine how Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's framework fosters meaningful learning, enhances student achievement, and equips educators with a powerful toolset for creating engaging and purposeful instruction, ultimately aiming to demystify the process of designing curricula that truly cultivates understanding.

- The Core Philosophy of Understanding by Design
- Backward Design: The Foundation of UbD
- Essential Elements of an Understanding by Design Unit
- Key Understandings and Essential Questions
- Evidence of Learning: Performance Tasks and Assessments
- Learning Plan and Instructional Strategies
- Benefits of Implementing Understanding by Design
- Common Misconceptions About UbD
- Applying Understanding by Design in Different Educational Settings
- The Enduring Legacy of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe
- Conclusion: Embracing Understanding by Design for Deeper Learning

The Core Philosophy of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design

At the heart of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's "Understanding by Design" lies a fundamental belief: effective teaching and learning begin with a clear understanding of the desired results. This means educators must first identify what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do by the end of a unit or course. This contrasts with traditional approaches that often start with a list of content to be covered. The UbD philosophy emphasizes that true understanding is not merely about recalling facts but about the ability to apply knowledge, interpret information, and make connections in meaningful ways. Wiggins and McTighe advocate for a design process that is intentional, purposeful, and focused on fostering long-term retention and transfer of learning.

The emphasis on "understanding" is crucial. It goes beyond superficial knowledge to encompass the ability to explain, synthesize, analyze, and evaluate. This deeper level of cognition is what allows students to grapple with complex ideas and apply their learning to new and unfamiliar situations. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's framework encourages educators to think like assessors from the outset, ensuring that assessments are aligned with the intended learning outcomes and are designed to reveal genuine understanding rather than simply the ability to memorize. This student-centered approach to curriculum design ensures that all instructional decisions are driven by the ultimate goal of fostering deep and enduring student comprehension.

Backward Design: The Foundation of UbD

The cornerstone of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's "Understanding by Design" is its backward design methodology. This approach flips the traditional curriculum development process on its head, prompting educators to start with the end in mind. Instead of beginning with resources or activities, UbD mandates a focus on the desired learning outcomes. This ensures that all subsequent planning—from assessment to instruction—is directly aligned with achieving these specific, high-level goals.

Backward design, as conceptualized by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, is typically broken down into three distinct stages:

- **Stage 1: Identify Desired Results.** This initial stage involves clearly defining what students should know, understand, and be able to do by the end of the unit. This includes identifying enduring understandings and essential questions that will guide the learning process.
- **Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence.** Once the desired results are established, educators must then determine how they will assess whether students

have achieved these outcomes. This involves designing performance tasks that require students to demonstrate their understanding and developing clear criteria for evaluating their work.

- **Stage 3: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction.** With the desired results and assessments in place, educators can then plan the learning activities and instructional strategies that will best equip students to meet the identified goals and perform successfully on the assessments. This stage ensures that the learning journey is purposeful and directly supports the achievement of understanding.

By employing this backward design process, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe ensure that curriculum is not a random collection of topics but a carefully constructed pathway to deep, transferable knowledge. This systematic approach helps prevent a "mile wide, inch deep" curriculum, ensuring that students are truly mastering key concepts and skills.

Essential Elements of an Understanding by Design Unit

A well-designed UbD unit, guided by the principles of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, is characterized by several key components that work in concert to foster genuine understanding. These elements are not merely add-ons but are integral to the entire design process, ensuring alignment and purposefulness from the outset. The framework encourages educators to think critically about what truly matters in a given subject area and how to best facilitate student mastery of those critical elements.

Key Understandings and Essential Questions

The foundation of any UbD unit lies in identifying the "big ideas" or enduring understandings. These are the core concepts and principles that students should grasp long after the specific details of a unit have faded. Enduring understandings are often framed as statements that capture the essence of the learning objective. Complementing these are essential questions, which are provocative, open-ended queries that guide inquiry and encourage deeper thinking. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe emphasize that these questions should spark curiosity and prompt students to explore complex issues, rather than having simple, factual answers.

For example, in a history unit on the American Revolution, an enduring understanding might be: "The success of a revolution depends on a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors." An essential question could be: "To what extent is rebellion ever justified?" These elements ensure that the learning journey is focused on conceptual depth rather than mere factual recall.

Evidence of Learning: Performance Tasks and Assessments

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe strongly advocate for performance-based assessments as the primary means of gauging student understanding. Unlike traditional tests that often measure recall, performance tasks require students to apply their knowledge and skills in authentic, meaningful contexts. These tasks are designed to be engaging and challenging, requiring students to think critically, solve problems, and demonstrate their learning in tangible ways. Examples include creating presentations, writing essays, conducting experiments, or designing projects.

Equally important are the clear criteria, or rubrics, used to evaluate these performance tasks. These rubrics, developed in Stage 2 of backward design, explicitly outline what constitutes successful performance, providing students with a clear understanding of expectations and enabling consistent and fair evaluation. This focus on observable evidence ensures that assessments are not only summative but also formative, providing valuable feedback to students and guiding further instruction.

Learning Plan and Instructional Strategies

The final stage of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's backward design involves planning the learning experiences and instructional strategies. This stage is about carefully sequencing activities and employing pedagogical approaches that will effectively lead students to achieve the desired results and perform well on the assessments. The learning plan should be a roadmap for student learning, providing a clear path from where students are to where they need to be.

Instructional strategies should be varied and engaging, catering to different learning styles and needs. This might include direct instruction, collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, or the use of technology. The key is to select and sequence these strategies in a way that builds knowledge progressively, supports the development of understanding, and prepares students for the demands of the performance tasks. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe stress the importance of providing students with opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and revise their work throughout the learning process.

Benefits of Implementing Understanding by Design

The adoption of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design framework offers a multitude of benefits for students, educators, and the overall educational system. By shifting the focus from content coverage to genuine comprehension and application, UbD fosters a more meaningful and effective learning environment. The intentional design process ensures that learning is purposeful and that instructional decisions are driven by

clear learning goals.

Some of the key benefits include:

- **Enhanced Student Learning:** UbD promotes deeper, more transferable learning by focusing on enduring understandings and requiring students to apply knowledge in authentic contexts.
- **Improved Alignment:** The backward design process ensures that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are all tightly aligned, creating a coherent and purposeful learning experience.
- **Increased Student Engagement:** Performance tasks and essential questions often make learning more relevant and engaging for students, motivating them to take ownership of their learning.
- **Clearer Expectations:** Well-defined performance criteria and rubrics provide students with a clear understanding of what is expected of them, leading to more focused effort.
- **More Effective Teaching:** Educators are prompted to be more strategic and intentional in their planning, leading to more impactful instruction and better use of classroom time.
- **Facilitates Differentiation:** The focus on understanding allows for more flexible approaches to instruction and assessment, making it easier to differentiate for diverse learners.

The structured yet flexible nature of the UbD model empowers educators to design curricula that are not only rigorous but also responsive to the needs of their students, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and a more profound appreciation for learning.

Common Misconceptions About UbD

Despite its widespread influence, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design framework is sometimes subject to misconceptions that can hinder its effective implementation. It's important to address these common misunderstandings to ensure educators can leverage UbD to its full potential. One prevalent misconception is that UbD is overly rigid or prescriptive. In reality, UbD provides a flexible framework that allows for significant teacher creativity and autonomy in designing the learning experiences.

Another misconception is that UbD is solely focused on summative assessment. While performance tasks are central, they are designed to provide evidence of ongoing learning, making assessment an integral part of the instructional process rather than an end-of-unit

event. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe emphasize that assessment should inform instruction and guide student progress.

Furthermore, some may believe that UbD is only applicable to certain subjects or grade levels. However, the principles of backward design and the focus on understanding are universally applicable across all disciplines and educational settings, from early childhood to higher education and professional development.

Finally, there's a misunderstanding that UbD requires extensive, time-consuming planning for every single lesson. While thoughtful design is crucial, UbD is about designing units and the overall curriculum, not necessarily hyper-detailed daily lesson plans for every minute. The framework provides a structure for making purposeful decisions about instruction and assessment, which can ultimately make planning more efficient and effective in the long run.

Applying Understanding by Design in Different Educational Settings

The adaptability of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design framework makes it a valuable tool across a wide spectrum of educational environments. Whether in a K-12 classroom, a university setting, or a corporate training program, the core principles of backward design remain consistent, allowing for effective curriculum development and improved learning outcomes.

In K-12 education, UbD has been instrumental in helping teachers design units that align with state and national standards while fostering deeper student comprehension. Educators use the framework to translate standards into clear learning goals, design authentic performance tasks, and select appropriate instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs. The emphasis on enduring understandings helps teachers prioritize content and skills that have lasting relevance for students.

At the higher education level, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's UbD provides a rigorous approach to course design. University professors can use the framework to clearly define learning objectives for their courses, develop assessments that accurately measure higher-order thinking skills, and structure lectures and activities to facilitate deep engagement with complex subject matter. This is particularly valuable in professional programs where the application of knowledge is critical.

In professional development and corporate training, UbD is utilized to create targeted learning experiences that equip employees with the specific skills and knowledge needed to perform their jobs effectively. By identifying the desired outcomes for a training program and designing assessments that measure proficiency, organizations can ensure that their training investments lead to measurable improvements in performance and productivity. The focus on transfer of learning ensures that participants can apply what they've learned in real-world scenarios.

The flexibility of UbD allows educators and trainers to tailor the framework to the specific context, audience, and goals of their particular setting, ensuring that the principles of deep understanding and purposeful design are effectively implemented.

The Enduring Legacy of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

The work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, particularly their seminal text "Understanding by Design," has left an indelible mark on the field of education. Their framework has provided a much-needed paradigm shift, moving educators away from a teacher-centered, content-delivery model towards a student-centered, understanding-focused approach to curriculum and instruction. The enduring legacy of Wiggins and McTighe lies in their ability to provide a practical, research-based, and conceptually sound methodology for designing effective learning experiences.

Their emphasis on backward design has become a widely adopted practice, influencing how curriculum is planned and how teaching is approached in countless schools and districts worldwide. The clarity of their concepts, such as enduring understandings and essential questions, has empowered educators to think more critically about what truly matters in their teaching and to design assessments that genuinely measure learning. The continuous refinement and evolution of the UbD model, as seen in subsequent editions of their book and their ongoing work, demonstrate their commitment to advancing the practice of education.

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's legacy is not just in the framework itself, but in the countless educators they have inspired to re-imagine their classrooms and to prioritize the cultivation of deep, transferable understanding in their students. Their work continues to shape conversations about effective pedagogy and curriculum design, ensuring that the pursuit of meaningful learning remains at the forefront of educational reform.

Conclusion: Embracing Understanding by Design for Deeper Learning

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's "Understanding by Design" offers a powerful and transformative approach to curriculum development that prioritizes genuine understanding and transferable skills. By embracing the principles of backward design, educators can move beyond superficial coverage of content to create learning experiences that are purposeful, engaging, and ultimately more effective. The framework's emphasis on identifying desired results, determining acceptable evidence, and planning appropriate learning experiences provides a clear roadmap for educators seeking to cultivate deep comprehension in their students.

The benefits of implementing Understanding by Design are far-reaching, impacting student

achievement, teacher effectiveness, and the overall quality of education. By focusing on what students should truly know, understand, and be able to do, educators can design curricula that not only meet standards but also foster lifelong learning and critical thinking. The legacy of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe lies in their ability to provide a practical and profound vision for education, one that consistently champions the pursuit of meaningful understanding in every learner.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core principle of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's 'Understanding by Design' (UbD)?

The core principle of UbD is 'backward design,' which means starting with the desired learning outcomes or goals, determining acceptable evidence of learning, and then planning the learning experiences and instruction that will achieve those outcomes.

What are the three key stages of the Understanding by Design framework?

The three key stages are: 1. Identify desired results (what should students know, understand, and be able to do?). 2. Determine acceptable evidence (how will we know if they have achieved the desired results?). 3. Plan learning experiences and instruction (what learning activities and resources will help students achieve the desired results and demonstrate their understanding?).

What does Wiggins and McTighe mean by 'backward design' and why is it important?

'Backward design' means planning instruction from the end goal backward. It's important because it ensures that learning activities and assessments are directly aligned with clearly defined, meaningful learning goals, preventing 'teaching to the test' and promoting genuine understanding rather than rote memorization.

How does UbD address the concept of 'deep understanding' versus surface-level knowledge?

UbD emphasizes developing deep understanding by focusing on big ideas, essential questions, and transferable skills. It encourages educators to design tasks that require students to explain, interpret, apply, empathize, and self-assess, moving beyond mere recall of facts.

What are 'essential questions' in the context of UbD, and why are they crucial?

Essential questions are open-ended, provocative questions that cannot be answered with a

simple 'yes' or 'no' or a factual recall. They are crucial because they spark curiosity, guide inquiry, and prompt deeper thinking about the core concepts of a unit.

How does UbD's emphasis on 'evidence of learning' differ from traditional assessment?

UbD's 'evidence of learning' goes beyond traditional tests by including a variety of performance tasks, projects, and demonstrations that show students can apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. It focuses on authentic assessment that reveals genuine understanding and ability.

What is the role of 'transfer' in Understanding by Design?

Transfer is a central goal of UbD. It refers to students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills effectively in new contexts, situations, and problems. UbD aims to design instruction that cultivates this capacity for transfer, enabling students to use what they learn beyond the classroom.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's Understanding by Design, with descriptions:

1. Understanding by Design: Expanded Second Edition

This foundational text, authored by Wiggins and McTighe themselves, elaborates on their framework for backward design in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It provides a detailed guide to identifying desired results, determining acceptable evidence of learning, and planning learning experiences and instruction. The book emphasizes the importance of a clear vision for student learning and how to align all instructional components to achieve it.

2. Educational Leadership: Leading Clear Goals, Authentic Work, and Real Results

While not solely focused on UbD, this book by Charles M. Dorn often references and builds upon the principles of backward design. It explores how effective leadership can create environments where clear learning goals are established and achieved through engaging, authentic tasks. The text highlights the interconnectedness of leadership, curriculum, and student success, resonating with the core tenets of UbD.

3. Mapping the Big Picture: Ideas to Institutions

This work by Carol Ann Tomlinson and others, while not exclusively about UbD, shares a similar philosophy of aligning educational practices towards clear, overarching goals. It focuses on creating coherent and effective educational systems by understanding the "big picture" of learning and how different elements connect. The book's emphasis on coherence and purpose aligns well with the structured approach of backward design.

4. The Power of our Words: Teacher Language that Helps Students Learn

Paula Denton's book, though focused on teacher language, is deeply aligned with the

instructional planning aspects of Understanding by Design. It emphasizes how intentional and strategic language can guide students towards understanding and achieve learning objectives. The focus on purposeful communication directly supports the goal of ensuring students meet desired results, a key component of UbD.

5. Differentiation in Action: A Practical Guide for All Teachers

Authored by Carol Ann Tomlinson, this book provides practical strategies for tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners, a crucial element of effective UbD implementation. It explains how to differentiate content, process, and product to ensure all students can access and engage with the curriculum. This directly supports the "planning learning experiences and instruction" phase of backward design.

6. Authentic Assessment: Designing Tasks and Portfolios

This book by Grant Wiggins, along with J.D. McTighe, delves deeper into the assessment component of backward design. It provides detailed guidance on creating meaningful, performance-based assessments that truly measure student understanding rather than just recall. The book stresses the importance of assessment as a tool to inform instruction and gauge the attainment of desired results.

7. School Improvement: The Challenge of Effective Management

Authors like Michael Fullan, who discuss systemic change and effective school improvement, often touch upon frameworks like UbD. While broader in scope, their work underscores the necessity of clear goals, strategic planning, and consistent implementation across an educational institution to achieve meaningful results. This aligns with the structured, comprehensive approach advocated by Wiggins and McTighe.

8. Curriculum Management: A Practical Approach to Learning Organizations

This title suggests a focus on the systematic planning and execution of curriculum, a core area addressed by Understanding by Design. Books with this focus often explore how to create coherent, aligned, and effective learning programs. The emphasis on management and effectiveness mirrors the goal of UbD to create well-structured and purposeful educational experiences.

9. Teaching for Meaning and Engagement: How to Connect with Students and Teachers

This book, by authors like John Hattie or others focusing on student engagement and deep learning, complements UbD by emphasizing the "how" of instruction. While UbD provides the "what" and "why" of curriculum, these books offer strategies for making learning engaging and meaningful for students. This supports the effective delivery of learning experiences that lead to genuine understanding.

[Grant Wiggins And Jay Mctighe Understanding By Design](#)

Grant Wiggins And Jay Mctighe Understanding By Design

Related Articles

- [gizmo plate tectonics answer key](#)
- [graphic organizer for opinion writing](#)

- [graphing periodic trends answer key](#)

[Back to Home](#)