

Tips for Moving UbD Forward in your Classroom or School¹

Understanding by Design (UbD) offers a robust curriculum-planning framework. However, UbD is not an easy planning process. When expanding the use of UbD for your classroom or school, we offer the following tips to ensure quality while avoiding “overload” to yourself or your staff.

Start Small – As with any other skill, practice in designing units will improve your ability and efficiency. In fact, if you keep at it, we predict that your experience will parallel that of thousands of other teachers who have found that UbD unit design becomes a way of thinking. However, we caution against trying to plan *everything* you teach using UbD, at least right away. Since this design process is demanding, we recommend planning two or three units a year as a start. Then, expand to additional units in future years.

Work Collaboratively – If possible, work with a colleague or two when planning UbD units. Most designers find it valuable to bounce ideas around during design, give each other feedback along the way, and examine student work together. Once you and your teammates get the hang of it, you can “work smarter” by dividing up the planning work among department or grade level teams; e.g., you take the lead in developing unit 1 and 3, while your teammate plans unit 2 and 4. Then, you share.

Think Big – As you become familiar with the Understanding by Design framework for unit planning, you may have wondered: if we truly apply Backward Design, wouldn’t it make sense to design the overall curriculum and courses *before* units and lessons? Well, yes. In an ideal world, unit designers would be able to draw upon overarching elements (transfer goals, understandings, essential questions, cornerstone assessments and multi-grade rubrics) that had already been established at the programmatic, departmental and course levels. Indeed, that is the very approach to district and school curriculum planning that we advocate and describe in *Schooling by Design*.² However, our experience in introducing the

¹ Excerpted from Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. *The Understanding by Design Guide to Advanced Concepts in Creating and Reviewing Units* (2012). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

² Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. *Schooling by Design* (2007). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Understanding by Design framework to teacher-designers favors the Goldilocks approach; i.e., begin in a design space that is bigger than a daily lesson but smaller than a year-long curriculum.

Once you become comfortable planning at the unit level, it makes sense to think “bigger” and map the entire year using UbD elements. Indeed, this is a natural evolution for school teams as well as district curriculum committees.

Plan to Adjust Based on Results – Unit design is a means to an end; i.e., engaging and effective learning. Consequently, the most effective teachers constantly monitor the effects of their designs – “along the way” through formative assessments and at the conclusion by analyzing student performance. We recommend that you get in the habit of planning adjustments to your design (during and after) in “real time.” Working with electronic design Templates (for example with the Edutect Planner) makes on-going revision a natural part of the overall process.

How Not to ‘Kill’ UbD

We end on a cautionary note, suggested by the section title. Alas, too many well-meaning administrators and enthusiastic teachers have unwittingly “killed” UbD instead of helping it flourish and grow. Here are six potential problems with corresponding recommendations for avoiding them, presented in chart form:

Ways to Kill UbD from the Start	Actions for Starting UbD on the Right Foot
<p>1. Mandate that every teacher must use UbD for <i>all</i> of their planning immediately (without sufficient training, on-going support, or structured planning time).</p>	<p><i>Think big, but start <u>small</u>:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Work with volunteers at first.</i> • <i>Ask all teachers to plan ONE unit per semester for starters.</i> • <i>Encourage teachers to work w/ a colleague or team, and begin w/ a familiar unit topic.</i> • <i>Provide some designated planning time.</i>
<p>2. Introduce UbD as <i>this year’s</i> focus (suggesting that UbD can be fully implemented in a year; and that last year’s initiative bears no</p>	<p><i>Develop and publish a multi-year plan that show how UbD will be slowly implemented as part of a strategic plan.</i></p>

<p>relation to it). This approach fosters a “This too shall pass” attitude among staff.</p>	
<p>3. Attempt to implement too many initiatives <i>simultaneously</i> (e.g., UbD, Differentiated Instruction, Curriculum Mapping, Professional Learning Communities, etc.)</p>	<p><i>Develop a multi-stage, multi-year plan to improve a <u>current</u> initiative via UbD; e.g.,</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>curriculum mapping</i> • <i>differentiation via Essential Questions and Authentic Tasks</i> • <i>unpacking Standards via “big ideas”</i> <p><i>Develop a 1-page graphic showing how all local initiatives are really inter-connected parts of an overall effort (e.g. limbs of a tree, pieces of a puzzle, supports of a building, etc.).</i></p>
<p>4. Assume that staff members understand the need for UbD and/or will naturally welcome it.</p>	<p><i>Establish the need for a change (the diagnosis) <u>before</u> proposing UbD as the prescription. Make sure that staff see UbD as an appropriate response to a need they recognize and own.</i></p>
<p>5. Provide one introductory presentation on UbD and assume that teachers now have the ability to implement UbD well.</p>	<p><i>Design professional development backward from your goals. Build a year composed of design workshops, study groups, and action research, during which staff go through <u>many</u> cycles of learn/try/get feedback/adjust.</i></p>
<p>6. Offer UbD training for teachers, but not for administrators. Give administrators and supervisors the same training as teachers.</p>	<p><i>Establish parallel tracks of training for administrators in which they learn how to supervise and support UbD; e.g., how to conduct in-class “look-fors,” establish peer reviews of units, form PLC teams to analyze assessment results, etc.</i></p>