Making the Most of UbD:
A Dozen Ideas for School Leaders

by Jay McTighe

Schools and districts adopt the Understanding by Design (UbD)® framework to help teachers focus the curriculum around "big ideas" and essential questions, employ authentic performance-based assessments, and actively engage their students for deeper learning. Just as gardeners realize that their gardens must be nurtured following planting, school leaders can, and should, nurture UbD following initial training and implementation in order to realize its "fruits."

The following ideas offer school leaders a set of practical actions that will support and sustain the effective use of the UbD in their school. You will notice that most of the ideas are accompanied by a URL hot link containing additional resources to support the suggested action.

1. Teachers make use of essential questions in UbD to engage learners in exploring and discussing important academic concepts. School leaders can also make use of such questions to stimulate faculty reflections and conversations related to their craft. Here are a few examples of essential questions that can be posed during meetings and as a part of professional learning sessions:

- *How can we teach to standards in authentic and effective ways?*
- *What content is most worth understanding?*
- *How do we know that students really understandwhat we teach?*
- *When are students most engaged in their learning?*

Click on this link to access additional essential questions to promote professional discussions and reflections.
https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.29/4ba.49d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Essential-Questions-for-Educators.pdf

2. Distribute examples of well-designed UbD units for staff to analyze. Discuss noteworthy features of the units based on UbD Design Standards. The state of Massachusetts offers a wonderful collection of model curriculum units for various grades in E/LA, Science, Mathematics and Vocational/ Technical areas. All of these units were developed using the Understanding by Design framework.
https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/mcu/

3. Research from diverse fields confirms the value of feedback to improve performance, and this understanding applies to curriculum design as well. Invite teachers to act as "peer reviewers" for each other as they share draft UbD units within, and across, grades/subject areas. Ask them to use the UbD Design Standards to offer feedback and suggest edits to improve the unit designs. This weblink presents the UbD Design Standards and describes a process for conducting peer review and feedback sessions.
https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.29/4ba.49d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Peer-Review-Process-2.0..pdf

4. Set up collegial learning walks for teachers and coaches to visit the classrooms of their colleagues (who volunteer to be visited). These non-evaluative classroom walk-throughs target specific aspects of UbD for observation. Visitors can use the *Indicators of Teaching and Assessing for Understanding* (T4U) to focus their observations and guide follow-up discussions with the teachers whose classrooms were visited.
https://www.jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Observable- indicators-Teaching-for-Understanding.pdf
In preparation for the learning walks, I recommend that you read this paper and view the associated video.
Paper: https://www.jaymctighe.com/wp- content/uploads/2013/04/Collegial-Learning-Walks-Powerful-Tools-for- Instructional-Leadership.pdf
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnU7sJt5ZbI&feature=youtu.be
The following website offers a practical protocol for organizing such earning walks in your school: https://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/learning

5. Send a short, UbD-related article to staff in advance of a meeting or professional day. Provide prompting questions to guide the subsequent discussion. You can download many articles by Jay McTighe, Grant Wiggins and other thought leaders at the following link:
http://jaymctighe.com/resources/articles/

As an alternative to readings, you can show and discuss short videos that explore key UbD ideas; (e.g., *Teaching for Understanding, Using Essential Questions, Deeper Learning, Formative Assessment*). Provide prompting questions to guide the discussions. Here is a link to access a collection of short videos:
http://jaymctighe.com/resources/videos/

6. Invite knowledgeable faculty members and district resource staff to offer workshops on various UbD topics (e.g., *Using Essential Questions; Designing Authentic Performance Tasks; Building a Better Rubric; Involving Students in Self and Peer Assessment*) during a faculty meeting or on a professional-learning day. Allow teachers to sign up for the workshop of

their choosing given by their colleagues.

7. Collect major assessments from different grades/departments. Analyze the assessments against Depth of Knowledge (DOK) or Bloom's Taxonomy to determine their levels of rigor. Here is a description of one school district's action research project involving analyzing classroom assessments in this way. Pose the question: *Are we assessing everything we value or only those things that are easiest to test and grade?*
https://www.jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Donegal-Study.pdf

8. Invite teachers in grade level and department teams to develop and implement common performance tasks and scoring rubrics. Then, have faculty work in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in grade-level or department teams to analyze student work on these tasks. During the process, teams evaluate student work using established criteria/rubrics, note areas of performance strengths and weaknesses, and share teaching ideas and resources for addressing areas of need. This website presents a practical protocol for teams to use in examining student work. https://www.weteachnyc.org/resources/collection/protocols-looking-student-work/
This article describes productive uses of Professional Learning Communities. https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.29/4ba.49d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Making-the-Most-of-PLCs.pdf

9. Here is an excellent exercise to use at the start of a new school year. Present a set of Learning Principles and have faculty discuss:
- *What would we see in a classroom if a given principle were effectively enacted?*
- *How could <u>you</u> apply this principle in <u>your</u> classroom?*

Ask teachers to select one or two of the principles and commit to acting on them for the first six weeks of school. Then, invite volunteers to report on their actions and the effects at a faculty or team meeting. This weblink presents a collection of learning principles from which you can select.
https://www.jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Learning-Principles-handouts-6.23.18.pdf

10. Administer a student survey to check on students' perceptions of learning (e.g., To what extent do they find their classroom experiences: ... *engaging?, ... relevant?, ... challenging?, ... personalized?, etc.* Discuss the results and their implications. Then, identify specific actions that can make student learning more relevant, engaging, personalized and effective. The following weblink takes you to a student survey for secondary schools developed by Grant Wiggins.
http://www.authenticeducation.org/images/article_files/MS%20Student%20S

urvey%20Blank.pdf

11. School leaders who expect their teachers to use "backward design" to develop their curriculum units can "walk their talk" by applying this *same* UbD process to planning major school initiatives. Click this link to download a backward design template with several examples:
https://www.jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/SbD-Template-w-Directions.pdf

12. Try the following "quickies" at staff or team meetings to keep the focus on UbD:
- Begin faculty, grade-level, department and committee meetings with an essential question.
- Invite teachers, teams (e.g., 4th grade) or departments (e.g., Science) to briefly describe a UbD "success" that they have experienced since the last meeting.
- Highlight one element of UbD (e.g., Essential Questions, Authentic Performance Tasks, Facets of Understanding) at each meeting.
- Invite individual teachers to bring and present examples of (impressive) student work on an authentic performance task that they recently used.