Backward Course Design

Backward design, also called *backward planning* or *backward mapping*, is a process that educators use to design learning experiences and instructional techniques to achieve specific learning goals. Backward design begins with the objectives of a unit or course—what students are expected to learn and be able to do—and then proceeds "backward" to create lessons that achieve those desired goals. In most public schools, the educational goals of a course or unit will be a given state's learning standards—i.e., concise, written descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific stage of their education.

The basic rationale motivating backward design is that starting with the end goal, rather than a starting with the first lesson chronologically delivered during a unit or course, helps teachers design a sequence of lessons, problems, projects, presentations, assignments, and assessments that result in students achieving the academic goals of a course or unit—that is, actually learning what they were expected to learn. (http://edglossary.org/backward-design/)

A "Forward-Looking" Approach to Effective Teaching

You've got your calendar in one hand and your content in the other... you are ready to design your course. "What will I cover?"

But wait...that is forward thinking... and the most successful courses are designed backward. "What should they learn?" Or even more boldly, what should they remember next quarter, or next year?

- Consider your own rationale for teaching this class. What is important to you about the material? About the way you plan to teach the material? About how the students interact with the content?
- Skip directly to the end of the course. Distill five (or fewer!) major learning outcomes. (If this number is too small for comfort, you can add more later if you really must... but stick with 5 or fewer now. This is the way to get to the underlying, often unifying, themes of your course.)
- Think broadly about these outcomes. Content or foundational knowledge is but one broad category in which you might have specific goals. For other ideas, see Writing Learning Goals.
- Work backwards. What skills will demonstrate achievement of the learning goals? What content is required to support those skills?

Why bother? Some of the best payoffs include:

- The outcome goals will be threaded throughout the course. They provide unifying themes and context for the material you cover.
- These choices define the skills embedded in homework, projects, exams, etc. Students who have met the learning goals will be able to do what? Student work becomes more obviously relevant to the topic, exam questions or projects become more authentic.
- This process helps distill the huge content "problem." Cutting content is always painful, but we know we have to do it... working backwards establishes priorities.

(https://d32ogoqmya1dw8.cloudfront.net/files/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep06/course_design_rwd.pdf)

Questions to ask as you work toward backward design:

- Identify desired results
- Determine Acceptable Evidence
- Plan Learning Experiences

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