OVERVIEW

Backwards Design

Description

Backwards design is a three-stage approach to designing learning experiences:

1. Identify desired results, or what students should be able to know, understand and do. Examples: learning objectives, discipline-wide standards
2. Determine acceptable evidence, or how we will know when desired results have been attained. Examples: assessment, performance tasks
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction, or what content and methods will enable these desired results. Examples: texts, activities

Rather than content development occurring first, learning objectives should be the first stage of developing a class or learning experience. Assessments can be constructed to cover a specific objective, and content can be developed to support those assessments.

Why is this important?

Aligned objectives, assessment and content allows students to more easily reflect on their learning, construct new knowledge, and draw connections between knowledge and application of knowledge. Backwards design can reduce cognitive load on students by avoiding extraneous content. Beginning with learning objectives that account for learner variability paves the way for identifying what assessments, content, and methods are most appropriate for individual learner and makes learning more accessible and equitable.

Implementation Examples

Build courses based on learning objectives*	✓
Assessment and content alignment with learning objectives*	✓
Rubrics and scoring tools based on criterion identified in objectives*	✓
Student-facing learning objectives in learning experiences*	✓
Opportunities for self-reflection in learning experiences	✓

available in

✓ Achieve iClicker

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Practical Applications

- ✓ Identify desired learning objectives; these should be specific, concrete, independent of the means of assessment, attainable for all learners, and account for learner variability.
- ✓ Decide what authentic performance tasks would allow students to demonstrate the identified desired results, as well as what criteria by which this performance will be judged and how students can reflect and self-assess their learning.
- ✓ Use desired results and acceptable evidence to determine what learning experiences to design—what will allow students to understand expectations, hook and hold their interest, give opportunity to explore new topics, revise their work, and evaluate their learning
- ✓ Avoid adding material to a learning experience that does not support instructional goals outlined in the learning objectives to reduce cognitive load.

Sources: Anderson (2001), Biggs (2003), Burton et al. (1991), Clark & Mayer (2011), Cohen (1987), Dick et al. (2015), Hattie (2009), Mayer (2011), Meyer (2014), Wiggins & McTighe (2005), Ziegenfuss & LeMire (2020)

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