Backward Course Design

Backward Course Design is a term coined by Grant Wiggins[1] ; that describes a course planning process that starts by asking what students should know, be able to do, and think by the end of the course and then works backwards to determine how students will get there.

Step 1: Determine desired results/goals.

- What do I hope students will retain from this course a year (or more) from now? **OR**
- What do I want students to *know*, to *do* and to *value* at the end of the course?

These answers form the basis for your course *learning goals/objectives*.

Try to make your answers as specific as possible. The more specific your goals/objectives, the easier it will be to see if they have been met.

Framing the goals/objectives as knowledge/attitude/skills that *students* will do will also help to keep the course student-centered. You may have several learning goals/objectives, but if you have more than five or six, it will be difficult to accomplish them all. If you had to narrow your goals/objectives down to two or three, what would they be? Differentiate critical to know, important to know, and nice to know. As a faculty, what are the most critical knowledge/attitude/skills your student should learn?

Step 2: Determine how students will demonstrate their knowledge/attitude/skills.

Will students demonstrate knowledge/attitude/skills with exams? How many? Would formal or informal writing show knowledge more clearly? Or would a presentation or product (like a poster session or web page) be a better way to judge what students know? Would a simulation assessment be used?

Once you know how students will be demonstrating knowledge, determine how much each of these assessments will be worth. In general, the more important you consider the assessment, the more it should be worth of the student's overall grade. Consider culminating assessment tasks and a range of assessment methods (observations, tests, projects, etc.)

Step 3: Design activities that will enable students to learn and practice what they need to know.

What you teach and how you teach it should flow logically from and align with your learning goals. In planning for teaching each topic or big idea, consider how you will:

- Interest students into the topic and help them engage with and care about the content
- Support them to explore the ideas and practice the skills they need to master and provide relevance
- Give them opportunities to rehearse, revise, and refine their understandings and abilities before being assessed on them
- Repetition and retrieval are key components of brain based learning that facilitate long term memory and working memory.

[1]Wiggins, Grant and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design, Expanded 2nd Edition*. Pearson, 2005.