Transcript: Using Backward Design to Develop Unit and Lesson Plans

Hello, and thank you so much for joining us for this brief introduction to backward design, which can be used at every level of instructional planning: the curriculum level, the unit level, and the lesson plan level.

While backward design strategies go back at least as far as the Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction by Ralph W. Tyler, published in 1947, the educators and authors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe are widely considered to have popularized backward design for the modern era in their book Understanding by Design, published in 1998. Many of you may be familiar with this book.

They have worked with thousands of K-16 educators on implementing backward design and have published multiple books and other publications about using backward design. The quote from their book reads: "Backward design involves thinking a great deal first about specific learning sought and the evidence of such learning before thinking about what we as the teacher will do or provide in teaching and learning activities."

With this in mind, we move forward. Backward design asks us to consider our approach to designing instruction a bit differently. In backward design, we are planning our learning experiences with the final goals in mind.

The basic rationale motivating backward design is that starting with the end goal helps teachers to design assessments and lessons that result in students achieving the academic goals of a course or unit.

Looking at backward design in another way: in traditional approaches, many teachers begin with textbooks and other content resources, favored lessons, and time-honored activities—more focused on the teaching aspects, "What do I need to teach?" Then they plan their activities and then decide how they will measure student learning.

With backward design, a teacher starts with the end—the desired result, goals, and standards—more focused on student learning: what the students need to learn and be able to do. They then determine the evidence of learning and then the instruction and activities needed to equip students to perform.

So as a teacher, backward design sounds interesting, but what are the real benefits of backward design, you may wonder? Let me tell you those that come to mind.

The chief benefit of backward design is that it helps us to meet our students' needs and the limited time we have with them by forcing us to ask these crucial questions before we begin our instructional design: What do I want the students to understand and know and be able

to do? How do I check that they have learned? And which learning activities will lead students to the desired results?

Backward design also assists with creating cohesiveness in instructional units. The more clearly the desired results are stated, the more clearly success can be measured, and the more clearly instructional activities can be planned. Without backward design, we would teach skills and build upon them until the end of the term. However, it does not guarantee reaching a specific level of skill or achievement. This may create a gap in the ability between one level's end and the beginning expectations of the next level, making one question whether the learner is then ready to move to the next level confidently.

Backward design helps us to build in those activities, skill builders, and assessments to help us feel confident in successful student outcomes and preparation for the next level. By having the desired end results in mind, we teach and scaffold up to that skill, ensuring that we end our teaching at a point that connects with the entrance needs at the following level. We hold our students and our teaching to higher standards with our end goal in mind.

Another benefit is that the process of backward design helps us to avoid the common problems of treating the textbook as the curriculum rather than one of many resources, and allows for planful teaching rather than activity-oriented teaching in which no clear priorities or purposes are evident.

It is helpful to tease these three stages of backward design apart to examine them a bit more closely: identify the desired results, determine assessment evidence, and plan learning experiences and instruction. We will begin with identifying the desired results.

Take a moment to think about your students as you begin to plan your instruction. There are many questions to consider. These questions are essential as you proceed. What do we want our students to hear, read, explain, research, or write? What important knowledge and skills do we want our students to have? And what will students do to demonstrate their learning?

Be mindful of how this unit will help them to meet their needs and increase their communication skills in English. How do you know they need to learn about this topic? What is the rationale or purpose for including this unit or lesson? How can you put language in a context that connects language skills and content knowledge?

The bottom line goal of education is transfer. Your goals and outcomes, your desired results, should go beyond discrete facts or skills to learning that can be applied in other situations within or beyond the classroom and the topic itself. Authentic learning experiences move learners from passive knowledge receivers into a more active role as a constructor of meaning. Language development should be put in a context, connecting language skills and content knowledge that are relevant, inclusive, and culturally responsive.

So all planning begins with your central goal. What is the central goal of your unit? What language skills will students be learning and in what content areas? What will they do with

their learning? What are the outcomes? And what communicative tasks will students be able to do in English by the end of the lesson plan?

As you can see, there is a lot that goes into thinking about your units and lessons long before you put pen to paper. Using backward design helps you to think through those elements of your lessons and units that must exist to allow for desired authentic learning outcomes for your students.

Important to step one, identifying the desired results of your instruction, is consulting the Massachusetts English Language Proficiency Standards, or Mass ALPs. You'll want to be sure to carefully look at the standards and the benchmarks within the Mass ALPs that will help you with your planning process.

The Massachusetts English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education were developed in 2019 and are an essential tool when planning instruction. The Mass ALPs help inform educators by defining the skills and knowledge to prepare students for further education, work, and life, and are arranged by standards and benchmarks for reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These standards will help you tie your planning to goals and outcomes for instruction and refine the language skills you want to emphasize in your unit or lesson plan.

The standards guide teachers in determining and articulating achievable goals for their students. Each level of the Mass ALPs is organized into three strands: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, aligning with the four language domains. The standards focus on meaning, organization, and style; components of English; use of effective strategies; and use of diverse media, which comprise the five standards in each strand. You also want to familiarize yourself with the threads and benchmarks for your particular standards as well.

The Mass ALPs are a critical tool with which to be familiar. When appropriate, include the standards from the Civics and Navigating Systems strands. These strands are found in Appendix A of the Mass ALPs and include helpful suggestions that can add more depth and rigor to your units. The Civics strand includes examples related to culture, civil rights, and community issues, while the Navigating Systems strand includes examples related to locating community systems and accessing and acting effectively within those systems.

Once you have identified your desired results, it is time to move on to the second stage: determining assessment evidence. You have now set the goal and objectives; you now need to determine how you will measure the extent to which they have been met. This is step two in the backward design process.

If you remember back to our discussion of creating a comprehensive curriculum, you will note that the unit title, rationale, goals and outcomes, and standards and benchmarks comprise the basic elements of stages 1 and 2 of the backward design framework: identifying the desired results and determining assessment evidence.

So how will you and your students assess the extent to which students have met the learning outcomes? With assessment, you'll want to ensure that the assessment strategies you employ are based directly on the goals and objectives, measure the extent to which the goals and objectives have been met, and are designed prior to developing lessons. Your assessment will serve as teaching targets because you know in specific terms what you want students to be able to do at the conclusion of the instruction, and they will guide your decision-making about what content needs to be emphasized versus content that is not essential. The criteria for assessing must be clear and included in the unit plan.

Assessments can come in many forms. For example, authentic performance tasks ask students to apply their learning in a new, authentic situation that will show the extent to which the objectives and standards listed have been met. For example: role-playing a conversation between a student and their doctor or child's teacher using targeted vocabulary and structures; completing an online job application, resume, or cover letter; writing a letter to a legislator or community leader regarding an issue; or conducting a cooking demonstration of a favorite traditional dish. Others could include completing a graphic organizer, analysis of text, oral presentation, informal checks for understanding, or a quiz or a test. This type of assessment will assess their understanding and ability to transfer their learning. Be sure to include language such as “By the end of the unit, students will demonstrate their learning by…” or “Students and the teacher will evaluate learning by…” in your planning document.

In addition, assessments will be included throughout a unit for these objectives that address the enabling skills necessary to meet larger objectives. You will want to chunk your materials to allow for reasonable amounts of content to be learned and assessed on the way to final goals and objectives for the unit. The criteria for assessing must be explicit and able to be understood by both teacher and student. For example, oral presentations must be assessed using a rubric based on the stated objectives. Teachers and students should discuss the rubric prior to the presentation so students are clear on expectations.

You are now two-thirds of the way through the planning process using backward design. You have identified your desired results and determined how you will assess learning, and now you will plan your learning experiences and instruction.

There is so much to think about when planning instruction. Here are some key elements to be sure to consider in your planning: think about what students need to do in a communicative setting—what tasks will they need to perform; design instruction that will engage students and keep them interested yet still support their learning objectives. For example, don’t include games because they’re fun; be sure they connect to the desired result of effective learning.

Remember to focus on skill and knowledge development as included in the objectives and sequence the learning. For example, language objectives: reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills with related grammar and vocabulary; and content objectives that show a

context for how and for what purpose the language will be used. Differentiate the activities, resources, and materials to meet the needs of all of your students.

The process of backward design helps us as teachers to ensure that all components of our instruction are carefully aligned: the goals, objectives, standards, assessments, activities, and resources. Backward design was designed for general instructional planning; it was designed for K-16, not just for K-12. For ESOL, of course, we need to emphasize our learners' communicative goals and objectives, how we know when they've met those communicative goals and objectives, and the ways we get there using sound SLA principles, primarily communicative language teaching.

We also need to take into account the limited amount of time our ESOL students have with us in our classes, and we need to make sure our English learners learn skills that will help them succeed in their next steps in future education or careers.

As a recap, to effectively utilize the backward design framework in our instructional planning with English learners, focus on identifying the desired results: What communicative tasks should my students be able to do in English by the end of this unit? Determine acceptable assessment evidence: How will I know that students can and are able to use English effectively for this communicative purpose? And plan learning experiences and instruction: What individual and group activities will provide students with enough information, modeling, and practice to be able to eventually complete these tasks? In what order should these activities occur, and what materials will help to support their learning?

Thank you so much for joining us for this discussion and introduction to the backward design framework.

https://www.sabes.org/

info@sabes.org