

BACKWARD DESIGN FOR AN OUTCOMES-CENTERED COURSE

The process of designing a course should be relatively the same regardless of class size. OTL recommends designing your course around what you want your students to be able to do by the end of your course. This approach is reflective of Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) backward design strategy and Biggs (2003) constructive alignment.

Backward Design to Plan Forward

What is Backward Design ?

Backward Design is a framework for course design that allows instructors to start course planning by:

- identifying desired learning outcomes with the articulation of course goals and learning objectives.
- determining what assessment tools and methods will evince that students have reached the required level of mastery of the intended learning outcomes
- planning and developing instructional content to help students construct the knowledge that will allow them meet the desired course outcomes.

Identify Desired Results

Determine Acceptable Evidence

Plan Learning experiences and activities

Why use backward design?

At its core, backward design is student centric. The focus is on students as it starts with the process of intentionally planning assessments and teaching activities that will help students achieve the course learning objectives. Backward design is especially important when developing a large enrollment course because it facilitates the process of determining what material is necessary for students to achieve learning outcomes and what material is optional.

How to identify learning outcomes?

In an outcomes-centered course, learning outcomes should direct and dictate all the other elements of your course. Think of your outcomes as the skeleton around which your whole course is built and structured. When fleshing up your course, limit the content to those elements that are essential to achieving your outcomes and eliminate any extraneous topics. The rationale for doing this is that when we cover too much material the result is usually opposite of what we want and aim for. Students end up absorbing less content and constructing knowledge at a more superficial level.

The crux of the matter is then to target both breadth and depth of knowledge and to use classroom time on activities that require high order thinking skills (HOTS). This is more beneficial than covering as much content as possible in a lecture where students are passive recipients.

To pare down content, use the steps below to help guide you in the process:

- List all the outcomes you want to cover in your course.
- Divide them into two groups: “essential” and “good to know”
- Move the outcomes under “good to know” to “suggested further readings”
- In your syllabus list all the required outcomes and all the “suggested further readings”

How to use backward Design ?



Step 1: Identify course learning Goals and Objectives (What do you want students to be able to do?)

- Craft learning objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART).
- Use Bloom's Taxonomy of Active verbs to write your course objectives



Step 2: Determine acceptable Evidence (How will you measure if students can achieve the learning outcomes?)

- At this stage, you are ensuring that your assessments align with your learning outcomes. In other words that your assessment are appropriate to the content and the level of the course. A good way to do this is to use Bloom's Taxonomy of knowledge.



Step 3: Plan learning activities and experiences (How will you prepare students for assessments?)

- The activities and instructional content need to help students meet the learning outcomes and demonstrate their learning. The content you cover as well as the activities you assign need to align with your course objectives and help students evidence their learning.



Step 4: Reflect and Revise

- As you develop your assessments and activities, it's worthwhile remembering that Backward Design can be an iterative process . It allows you to refine your objectives.

Last Words

Backward Design is a framework appropriate for various instructional formats (lectures, seminars, labs, discussion sessions, research or project-oriented courses). It's usability is not limited by variables such as class size and room arrangements and there is no limitations on the type of active learning strategies, such as clickers, think-pair-share activities, peer learning, authentic learning, case studies, team-based learning, community-based or project-based learning that can be implemented.

References

Biggs, J. (2003). Aligning teaching and assessing to course objectives. *Teaching and learning in higher education: New trends and innovations*, 2(April), 13-17.

Wiggins, G., Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. Ascd.

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