To Begin With the End
Backward Design in Leisure Studies

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Abstract

As a professionally based field, leisure studies programs are perpetually in a position to produce the future managers, supervisors, and directors of the various subfields that comprise our areas of studies. Based on this reality and the need to adequately fulfill accreditation standards, insulate programs to the changing school/university priorities, and raise the caliber and abilities of our graduates, the aim of this learning activity discussion is to highlight *Backward Design* as a useful approach that could address the demands of each of those needs. *Backward Design* emphasizes a three-stage process to tackle, reshape, and implement learning outcomes in a curriculum or a course. Thinking of our students as graduates at the onset offers an effective way to produce quality students for the culmination of a program or course.

KEYWORDS: Backward design, learning outcomes, outcome-based curriculum, career preparation, assessment strategies

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Introduction

Beginning with the end in mind in (re)designing a curriculum or (re)developing a course seems like "common sense." Teaching to achieve learning outcomes is an expectation of our academic duty although our performance may in fact be perfunctory. We create syllabi and then input bulleted learning priorities or we may begin with a course topic followed by a group of readings and assignments only to finally conceive the learning objectives students are expected to achieve. These examples are not necessarily perpetrated by incompetent faculty that care little for the students in their courses but in fact may be a result of faculty overly excited to explore a topic in imaginative ways or faculty overloaded with other aspects of their duty or simply the reality that the intricacies of college teaching were hardly an expected component in our past graduate work. The aim of this brief learning activity discussion is to highlight a *Backward Design* approach to strengthening teaching and learning in an entire curriculum or solely in a course (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This discussion will: 1) emphasize the importance and needs of learning outcomes; 2) conceptually explain *Backward Design*; and, 3) provide hypothetical examples for its implementation in leisure studies related subfields.

Expectations and Learning Outcomes

The Council on Accreditation's (COA) compliance standards for 2013 compels programs to achieve learning outcomes for a foundational understanding of the field by graduating students with 1) an entry-level knowledge base of practice in the profession; 2) an entry-level knowledge base of the intellectual foundations (historical, theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical) of the field; 3) an ability to appropriately integrate and apply the intellectual foundations into practice settings; 4) an ability to design, implement, and evaluate programming and services for diverse populations; and lastly, 5) an entry-level ability to understand the intricacies of management, and operate effectively in all facets of a position with that understanding (Council on Accreditation, 2008).

These standards stand, as guideposts even for programs that are not accredited, for the types of students those programs should aim to graduate and send out unto the field. Specifically in agreement to the COA learning outcomes on management, Msengi, Farland, Pedescleaux, McGloster, and Yang (2007) reported that the vast majority of the 206 individuals (a combination of leisure studies alumni and current professionals) that were interviewed overwhelmingly pointed to the need for graduates to have preparatory management skills. For the sake of preparation, Norling, Kim, Compton, and Silverberg (2006) and Young and Myllykangas (2006) both touched on the inclusion of in-class techniques and activities to prepare and engage the student in "real-life" situations with project-based learning and reality-based learning, respectively. However, these are effective applications within a course but are not a part of the entire design of the course(s). Hemingway and Parr (2000) posited that leisure research and leisure practice are not fundamentally linked. With this critical perspective in mind, programs with faculty operating as an integral component in the production of research that is used as course content for preparing students to perform the practice, the need for a clear

approach of developing, assessing, and implementing achievable learning outcomes is abundantly necessary.

Backward Design: An Understanding and Strategy

Countering the use of knowledge by the COA and many of us in our use of "to know" as a course objective, Bloom (1965) stressed the need for deep understanding as a true indicator of learning. With this, *Backward Design* enforces the notion to picture the end results first and structure a course from there backward, think from the learner's perspective (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). For any curricula, the types of questions this approaches asks such as, what type of students do we wish to graduate? What are they capable of doing? For a course, at the end of a semester, what are the students capable of doing or articulating? This approach is more than simply implementing an outcome-based learning model to empirically measure student performance which may be culturally inappropriate and ineffective as well as over reliant on standards that may be set too low or too high (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Castleberry, 2006).

Backward Design functions the same for an entire curriculum or a sole course with a three-stage process (see Figure 1.1): 1) identifying clear and desired results; 2) determining acceptable forms of assessment as evidence of effectiveness; and 3) planning
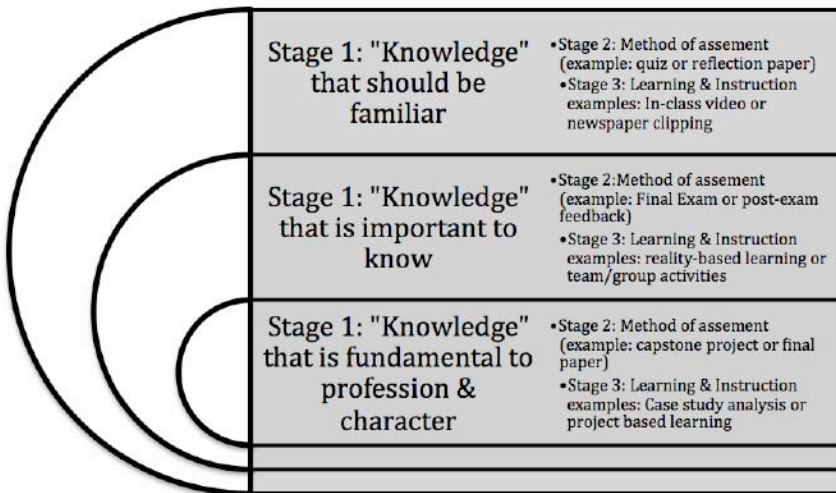

FIGURE 1.1: Three Stages of Backward Design

and implementing connected teaching practices and learning experiences (McTighe & Thomas, 2003).

Identification of Desired Results. The scope of the students' understanding should be visualized. What are the specifics of what they should know? Why is that important? Are there aspects of this understanding that are specific to the entry level or to them as a complete person? For curricula, this may begin with articulating priorities that would

"construct" or "develop" the intended graduate of a program. This may contribute to coalescing courses into a core curriculum framework due (Newbie, Stark, Bax, & Lawson, 2005). For a course, this would begin with pinpointing the learning outcomes at the end of the semester. In both cases, honesty is necessary in examining these ends, as there may be a need to separate "knowledge" that is crucial from "knowledge" that should be familiar (remember: understanding = thorough knowledge). Distinguishing should be based on "knowledge" that has enduring values, lies at the "heart of the discipline," that may not be obvious without an emphasis, and engages students at the greatest level possible (i.e., coverage courses may be counterproductive to learning).

Determining and Adhering to Acceptable Evidence of Assessment. After priorities or learning outcomes have been produced, there is a need to develop effective indicators or classroom-assessment techniques (CATS). In this process, faculty must think as an auditor or assessor before thinking of the range of courses that comprise a curriculum or a range of topics that comprise a course. A collection of evidence is far more important than a snapshot. Methods of assessment as evidence need to be various such as formal and informal feedback, tests, projects, and papers (Walvoord, 2004). The wide range of evidence assists faculty in assessing the applicable scope of learning (a one-page reflection paper and a final paper), time frame for completion (an in-class activity and a capstone project), the degree of structure (memorization or critical thinking), and settings of performance (in class and field study).

Planning and Implementation of Instruction and Learning Experiences. At this stage, faculty may find themselves in familiar territory as specific topics are formulated, lesson points are sequenced and outlined, and activities are created. However, in this case, the process is an outgrowth of the previous two. The priorities and learning outcomes alongside the collection of evidence informs which topics and activities achieve the pre-conceived end. For curricula and courses, School-wide general education requirements, University-level units on teaching and learning, community partners or stakeholders should be factors for consultation or direct contribution (O'Neill & Holland, 2005).

Conclusion: Building a New Beginning

Conceptually beginning with the end in mind may be a timely and strategic approach to teaching and learning to insulate the field in these changing times. As statewide budgets on higher educations are cut, schools are transitioning to entirely new fields or disciplines, and a new profile and demographic of student sits in our classrooms, learning outcomes will need to be readjusted, assessed, and presented. In addition, the fundamental academic duty of teaching can always use the occasional deconstruction and reconstruction to empower students to be the most effective deliverers of services, programs, and activities that improve the quality of life of so many.

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