
QAHS NEWS BULLETIN

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Understanding by Design

I had just wrapped up a unit on *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and was about to collect the work students had completed on the culminating assignment, a mock trial. Susan, a facilitator from *The American Social History Project* who had stopped by to observe the ending of the trial, and I were reflecting on the entire project. I had that day assigned the last assignment for the unit, to evaluate their performances and explain who they thought won the trial. Initially my plan was to collect the student work the next day and move on to my next unit. The work students had done was so rich that Susan wondered if students might not be better served by reflecting on it before moving on. So we brainstormed how we might structure a reflective task. We decided to use a strategy called *What? So What? Now What?* I would distribute a folder to each student with a letter explaining their task. They were to create a portfolio of the work they had done for the four-day trial and write a cover letter addressed to me in which they were to describe the work they had done, assess the meaning of that work and their efforts and explain how we could individually and collectively follow up on that work. That strategy worked so well, I later used it to have students create portfolios to reflect on the project-based work we did together. During our last faculty conference I distributed a copy of that assignment as an example of a GRASPS activity. I decided to use it to format this news bulletin, which will be dedicated to the UbD work we have done this year.

What?

We all know by now that UbD is an approach to instructional designing that begins with the end in mind. This backward design model requires that teachers identify their desired results, determine what constitutes acceptable evidence of learning and then plan a sequence of learning experiences that will help students uncover the knowledge, skills and understandings sought. But just as Wiggins indicates, knowledge is not synonymous with understanding. When we first decided to do this work, we came to the realization very quickly that a one-time workshop on UbD would not suffice. A single workshop might provide one with declarative knowledge about UbD, or information about it, but if we desired teachers to develop procedural knowledge, or to understand *how* to use the information, and to develop conditional knowledge, or to understand *when* and under what circumstance to use what was learned, then we needed to devise a long-term professional development plan. If we were to ask for coherence in the way teachers plan instruction in the classroom, then it would only be apt that we model that same coherence when it came to planning professional development for teachers. If we were to ask that teachers design instruction with student understanding in mind, then it

would only be appropriate for us to model professional development in the same manner. In fact, we often reminded ourselves that we needed to take a backwards approach to planning our UbD work. The ultimate goal, of course, is that you learn principles of good instructional design and apply them consciously, consistently and effectively to your own teaching. With that in mind, what would count as evidence that we have achieved our goal? In other words, how will we assess the level of our success? We would need to see evidence that the principles of effective instructional design are actually being used to “plan instructional units that deepen students’ understanding of important ideas and processes in the disciplines, equipping them to transfer their learning in meaningful and effective ways, and cultivating lifelong habits of mind” (Wiggins). We would notice the use of essential questions to uncover those ideas, the prioritization of instructional goals, the use of relevant, authentic assessments and the careful sequencing of activities that are aligned to those assessments. If we were to stop there, that would be a major achievement.

But why stop there? I think the concept of UbD as a teacher planning great units in isolation should be broadened to include what we as a community do together. Imagine our science department working together to prioritize the content to be taught in Living Environment or any of the other science courses we teach. Imagine the rich dialogue teachers in any subject area would have trying to determine the big ideas and core tasks that truly deserve our students’ attention. Imagine teachers working together to create authentic assessments or rubrics to better distinguish the different qualities of student response, or perhaps to sit down together to examine the resultant student work. This type of collaboration would create a positive symbiotic relationship. In scientific terms, we would move beyond neutralism and towards mutualism. Much research on effective school structures points to this type of collaboration, in the form of professional learning communities, as essential for school-wide progress.

Finally, I would like to put the work we are doing in the context of the Quality Review. According to indicator 1.2 the reviewers will be looking to see that what we do in the classroom is informed by “a coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best.” So, if we were asked what we believe about how students learn best, how would we respond? I would hope that we would say: students learn best when they are engaged, when we scaffold instruction, when they see relevance in the work we ask of them, when we prioritize

SIDEBAR

Week of January 4th – Learningwalk at Jamaica

January 4th – Final Exams Due to APs - submit a copy of your final exam to Bill or Derek

January 4th – Orientation Begins at Flushing

January 5th - Notebook Check

January 5th – Jamaica meeting with Inna and School Improvement Team

January 7th - Inquiry Team Meeting

January 9th (Saturday) – Regents Prep 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM

January 9th (Saturday) – PLATO training at Flushing 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM

January 9th (Saturday) – English Curriculum Planning 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM

January 11th – Department Meeting – sharing of GRASPS assessment and sample student work. Come prepared.

January 13th – LAP Team Meeting

January 14th - Inquiry Team Meeting

Please don't forget to check the [postings in the main office.](#)

instructional goals, when we teach for transfer, when we create authentic assessments, when we help them to uncover big ideas, when we ask them essential questions, when we make the criteria for quality work clear to them, when we differentiate instruction to meet each of their needs, when we help students self-assess and self-reflect, when we get students to work together and when we challenge students with meaningful work. I'm sure we could add more to the list, but this is a start. If our work together helps us to develop a more coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, then we will create a deeper sense of community, a community that shares in common core beliefs about teaching and learning that inform the work that we do individually and collectively. Though it has not been communicated directly, another goal of the work we are doing is community building.

So What?

I will preface this section by pointing to another evaluative tool: the Progress Report. The progress report mostly measures how well our students are moving along the path to graduation and, by extension, how well we are doing getting them there. It also measures our progress as a community of professionals who have been entrusted with the responsibility of educating the nation's young—and, personally, I can't think of a more important job. On their website, the DoE makes clear the consequences for schools that don't make progress:

Schools that receive an overall grade of D or F will be subject to school improvement measures and target setting and, if no progress is made over time, possible leadership change (subject to contractual obligations), restructuring, or closure. The same is true for schools receiving a C for three years in a row (<http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/SchoolReports/ProgressReports/Consequences/default.htm>).

I remember the very first department meeting I chaired as an Assistant Principal. My message to the department was quite simple: We need to begin immediately to develop a strong academic program that meets the needs of our students while achieving the results required of us. If we fail, I told them, then someone else will determine for us what to teach, when to teach it and how to teach it. If we can't do it for ourselves, I said, they will do it for us. I didn't realize at the time how prophetic those words would be. Just a few weeks ago I learned that the DoE will be closing down a number of large schools, including Christopher Columbus High School. I want to make it clear that I am not blaming the faculty of Columbus for the school's outcome. I merely share this story to make the point that, as a deputy chancellor once told a group of educators, accountability is here to stay.

How, then, do we avoid a similar fate? I think the answer has to do with being honest about what we do well, and what we don't do so well, and working as a community to assure continuous improvement. And how does one achieve continuous improvement? It starts with identifying and clarifying a set of core beliefs and creating a shared vision of what these core beliefs will look like in practice. If engaging students is vital, for example, then how will we know if we are, in fact, engaging students? What does it look like? How

Questions, Answers, and Suggestions

Are we getting so caught up in the process of planning that we are losing time sharing ideas about what works and why?

I believe not. I think we can and are doing both. UbD is based on research about what works and why, and draws on the works of major leaders in the field of education. For example, in chapter 13 Wiggins cites the research base that supports the core principles of UbD. He writes, for instance, that empirical research “provides strong evidence that authentic pedagogy and assessments pay off in improved academic achievement for all students, but especially for low-performing students,” “that the nature of the instructional approach teachers use influences how much students learn in reading and mathematics,” that “more specifically . . . interactive teaching methods were associated with more learning in both subjects” and that “assignments calling for more authentic intellectual work actually improve student scores on conventional tests (306-308). And that is just a sample of the research on what works.

Furthermore, UbD connects “planning” with “what works and why” and draws our attention to the fact that how well we plan outside the classroom is oftentimes directly related to the results we get inside the classroom. Because the results we get are oftentimes directly related to the planning we do, one way to improve the results is to focus on the planning. There is a common saying that you get out of life what you put into it. UbD reminds us that this is also true of teaching and learning.

I’ve never heard Wiggins talk about how he came up with UbD, but I believe he would have had a problem with the premise itself. He would have pointed out that he didn’t invent backwards planning just as surely Stephen Covey who wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* didn’t invent success. Wiggins merely abstracted the principles that make instruction effective, just as Covey was able to deduce the principles that lead to personal success. By studying UbD, then, we will better be able to demystify the many things we do share. A wise person once said that if you give a man a fish, you have fed him for today, but teach a man to fish and you have fed him for a lifetime. What we should strive to develop ourselves is an understanding of those underlying principles that will shed light on what works and why.

If we realize that connection, then we can safely conclude that rather than supplanting our work, UbD merely complements it.

will we gather the evidence for it? What new strategies will we implement to close the gap between our vision and the reality in the classroom? Who will provide training or support to implement these strategies in the classroom? How will we know if it is working and what is everyone’s role in getting it to work? These are the types of questions one must ask. But continuous improvement takes an entire community. Our UbD work is only as effective as our willingness to apply in the classroom what we learn at our PD sessions, to take the risk to try something new, to change our practices when better ones are presented, to come prepared to share our successes with one another and to even have the courage to share the failures. Finally, the idea of continuous improvement begins with the individual, when we as individuals reflect on our experience, take risks by trying out new ideas, form a support network for ourselves and make the time to continue to learn, we are more likely to be successful as a group. So if someone were to ask why we should care about developing a more coherent set of beliefs about how students learn best, I would respond by saying that without those beliefs we wouldn’t be able to make progress, for how would we measure our progress if we didn’t have a clear idea what progress we were seeking in the first place?

Now What?

So let us survey the road ahead.

On Monday, January 11th, we will share our GRASPS activity and bring in some student work that resulted from it. If using performance tasks is something new to you, then survey students to see what they think of these authentic assessments. We are looking forward to sharing these assessments, looking at the student work and sharing our experiences and questions.

We have purchased copies of Tomlinson and McTighe’s *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design* and plan to read and discuss this text together in the form of a study group. Some of us have been asking what role DI plays in UbD. I am sure that our question will be answered by these two outstanding authors.

We are considering purchasing a site license to the *UbD Exchange*. This is a web-based program that allows participants to create unit plans using the UbD framework. In addition, participants will be able to collaborate with their fellow teachers and with other *UbD Exchange* subscribers. They will have access to completed UbD units to peruse online. Finally, they will be able to peer-review their work in progress and submit one completed unit a year to a UbD expert for review.

We hope to end the year with a celebration of the work we have done. How that work will be celebrated is still to be determined since we would like to have your input first.