



# Understanding By Design

*Paradigm for course development*

Understanding by Design (UBD) provides a flexible framework for the pragmatic and thoughtful development of courses. The process utilizes a “reverse engineering” approach, where the one or two big ideas guide the development of activities through asking essential questions and determining the evidence of conceptual understanding and critical thinking.

## RESULTS, EVIDENCE, EXPERIENCE

In broad terms, UBD is a three stage process:

- 1. Identify desired results and essential concepts of enduring understanding.** This stage is guided by your experience, expertise, and focus, plus any pre-defined outcomes, objectives, and curricular alignment.
- 2. Determine acceptable evidence.** This stage is guided by the Six Facets of Understanding, which helps make sense of what is “acceptable” evidence of learning.
- 3. Plan learning experiences and instruction.** This is the stage that educators are most familiar with, and includes activities.

## BIG IDEAS

Curriculum design begins with “Big Ideas,” from which we derive everything else.

As Grant Wiggins puts it in the book *Understanding by Design*, a big idea “offers a conceptual framework allowing the learner to explore answers to the essential questions involving a unit of study.” Big ideas inform your whole course. Big ideas:

- Provide a “conceptual lens” for prioritizing content
- Serve as organizers for connecting important facts, skills, and actions
- Transfer to other contexts
- Manifest in various ways within disciplines
- Require “uncoverage” due to their abstraction

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

“Big ideas lead to “essential questions,” characterized by Wiggins and McTighe as “important, vital, at the heart of the matter – the essence of the issue.” Essential questions are important because they are the point of inquiry from which you create actual instructional material and experiences for your students.

A question is essential when it:

- Causes genuine INQUIRY into the big ideas and core content
- Is ARGUABLE; provokes deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions
- Requires students to CONSIDER alternatives, WEIGH evidence, SUPPORT their ideas, and JUSTIFY their answers
- Stimulates vital, on-going RETHINKING of big ideas and assumptions
- Sparks meaningful CONNECTIONS with prior learning and personal experiences

## THE “UBD TREE”

The “UBD Tree” is a form with space to capture notes about each specific stage of curriculum development using the Understanding by Design process. The sequence begins with the Big ideas and Essential Questions and then branches to the elements that students will directly interact with: Unit Questions, Evidence, Assessments and Activities.

## RESOURCE & REFERENCE

More information on UBD, outcomes assessment, and the UBD Tree can be found at:

<http://iteachu.community.uaf.edu/develop-courses/>

*Understanding by Design* by G. Wiggins, J. McTighe 2nd ed. 2006 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Alexandria, VA 0-13-195084-3



For more information on this topic, please see: <http://distance.uaf.edu/go/ubd>  
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