Understanding By Design

Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe

Alexandria, VA 2005.

Summary by Emiliano Aguilar and Warren Rosenberg

Wiggins and McTighe present in their second edition of *Understanding by Design* ways to improve the understanding of students through designing courses around specific well-articulated goals. During points of the book, the authors take time to explore the meaning of several key words, such as "understanding," "assessment" and "curriculum," in order to fit with their purpose and suggestions. This is a book that has become the standard for course design in secondary and higher education over the past eight years, and is well worth exploring.

The first chapter, "Backward Design" introduces the profession of teaching as one similar to design or engineering. Like these fields teachers should be client-centered. A teacher's effectiveness through curriculum, assessment, and instruction is determined by what the desired learning is for that lesson. Wiggins and McTighe use the phrase "form follows function" to describe the idea that the course should be built around its intended purpose.

They describe "content-focused design" as too vague a process, as it does not clarify what understanding is sought or why reading and discussion help the students. They state the twin sins of traditional design are "activity focus" (often activities that have no intellectual purpose) and "coverage." The authors use side boxes called "Misconception Boxes" to explain, for example, that coverage in the course is not always negative, that when the word coverage is used there is a difference between it and "purposeful survey." The authors include templates of design questions for teachers to build a lesson, as well as examples of such lessons.

The second chapter, "Understanding Understanding" explores the definition of understanding and its significance in design of courses. Understanding is one of the main objectives in the classroom, but it is poorly defined. They state that understanding is a mental construct, quoting John Dewey that "understanding is facts acquiring meaning." Assessing understanding is difficult, as the authors state you cannot just see if something is done right but you also must determine if the student knows why it is done right. The authors state that understanding is proven by "transfer," which means applying what knowledge and skills are useful in specific situations. Wiggins and McTighe discuss assessing understanding by design, asking what type of student work is evidence and what is looked for in student performance. The authors note that interviews and discussions can reveal misunderstandings, which allow us to further assess understanding.

In the fourth chapter, "The Six Facets of Understanding," Wiggins and McTighe state that we should truly understand these "six facets" since they are prevalent in our process of understanding. The first facet is "explanation," that students should be able to explain the issues and develop their own answers to support ideas. The second facet is "interpretation" and asks that stories be used to dissecting meaning. The third facet is "application," which is using specific knowledge in certain situations. "Perspective" is the fourth facet and requires insight into various points of view, including confronting alternative ideas to broaden understanding. However, a huge factor in understanding perspective is "empathy," which requires the student to comprehend, or recognize, other people's feelings and perspective, and to in effect, "walk in their shoes." The final facet asks that the individual is aware of his/her own faults through the use of "self-knowledge".

The fifth chapter, "Essential Questions: Doorways to Understanding," states that using "essential questions" can allow for developing "purposeful survey" over "coverage" and "activity based learning" in favor of focus on the big ideas of a class. Wiggins and McTighe provide ways to use the essential questions in the chapter, such as organizing the lesson around those questions, or helping students find personalized meaning to the questions.

These chapters are the most important in the text and create the foundation for Wiggins and McTighe's concept of understanding through the design of the course. The third chapter, "Gaining Clarity on Our Goals," asks instructors to be more concise and clear in their goals for the classrooms. The sixth chapter, "Crafting Understanding," provides four guidelines for educators to use in designing understanding. The seventh chapter, "Thinking like an Assessor," focuses on the first question of "assessment." The question is raised, "what evidence can show that students have achieved the desired results?" The next chapter, chapter eight "Criteria and Validity," talks of what "criteria" should be used to judge student work and how to ensure that the standards used are credible. The ninth chapter, "Planning and Learning," focuses on forming a lesson around the "WHERETO" acronym. The acronym stands for seven essential principles in instructional planning. These principles include "ensure that students understand WHERE the unit is headed and Why" and "provide students with numerous opportunities to RETHINK big ideas, REFLECT on progress, and REVISE their work." The tenth chapter, "Teaching for Understanding," presents what can be done with "formative assessment" to check for understanding among students through ungraded work. The eleventh chapter, "The Design Process," details how to create a lesson, through three stages and six ideas to incorporate into those three stages. The twelfth chapter, "The Big Picture: UbD as

Curriculum Framework," seeks to provide examples and layouts for designing courses around "essential questions" and standards. The final chapter, "Yes, but..." provides arguments against some expected problems readers may have with the previous chapters, such as "we must teach to the textbook."

Overall, the book provides various templates and strategies for designing lessons in a backwards design. Wiggins and McTighe suggest beginning with what you want the students to have learned at the end of the lesson. The initial chapters focus on terminology like "understanding" and "assessment," with the book turning to methods and questions to form lessons in the later chapters. The authors present a user-friendly account of a learner-centered approach.