

Can you use the three stages of backward design to plan a lesson as well as a unit?

We recommend the unit as a focus for backward design because the key elements of the template—big idea understandings, essential questions, and performance assessments—are complex and require more time than is available within a single lesson. However, we have found that when lessons (Stage 3) are planned under an umbrella of desired results (Stage 1) and appropriate assessments (Stage 2), more purposeful teaching and improved learning follow.

Standards and Responsive Teaching: Planning for Content *and* Kids

In the previous section, we proposed a three-stage “backward design” process for planning units and courses. Now, we’ll examine that process more closely with differentiation in mind.

In Stage 1 of backward design, we identify desired results, including relevant content standards. If appropriately selected, these established goals (placed in Box G of the template) serve as a focal point for teaching *all* students. The “big ideas” that we want students to come to understand (Box U) and their companion essential questions (Box Q) provide intellectual richness and promote transfer of learning. Like the content standards, desired understandings and questions should remain a constant target, regardless of differences in students’ background knowledge, interests, and preferred learning modalities. In other words, the big ideas and essential questions provide the conceptual pillars that anchor the various disciplines. We do not arbitrarily amend these based on *whom* we are teaching.¹ Of course, the nature and needs of learners should certainly influence *how* we teach toward these targets.

The more specific knowledge and skill objectives (Boxes K and S) are linked to the desired standards and understandings, yet some differentiation may well be needed here. Because students typically vary in their prior knowledge and skill levels, responsive teachers target their instruction to address significant gaps in knowledge and skills. Such responsiveness follows from effective diagnostic assessments that reveal if such prerequisite knowledge and skills exist. There is a place for sensitivity to student needs in Stage

1 without compromising the established standards or the integrity of subject areas.

The logic of backward design dictates that evidence derives from goals. Thus, in Stage 2, teachers are asked to “think like assessors” to determine the assessments that will provide the evidence for the identified knowledge, skills, and understandings in Stage 1. To this end, we have found it fruitful to examine the verbs in the content standard and benchmark statements because these suggest the nature of the needed evidence. A standard that uses verbs such as “know” or “identify” implies that an objective test could provide an appropriate measure. For example, a standard that calls for students to “know the capitals of states (or provinces)” could be assessed through a matching or multiple-choice test format.

However, a standard that expects students to “apply,” “analyze,” or “explain”—to thoughtfully use their knowledge and skill—demands different methods for verifying achievement. For example, if the standard states, “students analyze factors that influence location of capital cities,” then an appropriate assessment would expect an explanation of the influence of various geographic, economic, and political factors.

Along these lines, when we consider the big ideas we want students to “understand,” we need to concurrently consider the evidence that will show that students truly understand them. In this regard, Wiggins and McTighe (1998) propose that understanding is best revealed through various facets—when learners can *explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, display empathy,* and *reflectively self-assess*. In other words, we need to match our assessment measures with our goals.

While the needed evidence, in general, is determined by the desired results, the *particulars* of an assessment can, nonetheless, be tailored to accommodate the uniqueness of students. Consider a science standard that calls for a basic understanding of “life cycles.” Evidence of this understanding could be obtained by having students explain the concept and offer an illustrative example. Such evidence could be collected in writing, but such a requirement would be inappropriate for an English language learner whose skills in written English are limited. Indeed, her difficulty expressing herself in writing could yield the incorrect inference that she does not understand life cycles. However, if she is offered flexibility in the response mode, such

as explaining orally or visually, we will obtain a more valid measure of her understanding.

It is important to note that although we may offer students options to show what they know and can do, we will use the *same* criteria in judging the response. In the previous example, a student's explanation of life cycles must be accurate, thorough, and include an appropriate illustrative example, *regardless* of whether the student responded orally, visually, or in writing. In other words, the criteria are derived primarily from the content goal, not the response mode. If we vary the criteria for different students, then we can no longer claim that our tests are standards based and criterion referenced.

Of course, feasibility must be considered. Teachers will need to find the practical balance point between completely individualized assessments and standardized, "one-size-fits-all" measures. Nonetheless, we believe that classroom assessments can indeed be responsive to students' differences while still providing reliable information about student learning.

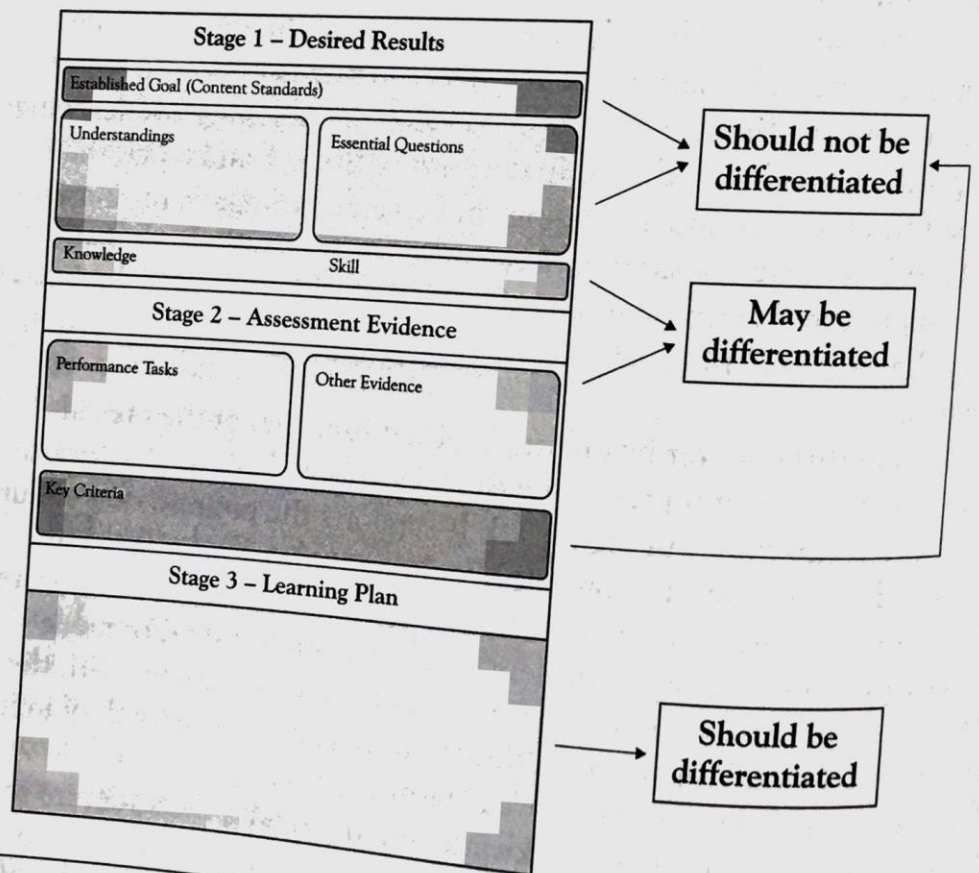
Finally, we come to Stage 3, where we develop our teaching and learning plan to help students achieve the desired results of Stage 1 and equip them for their "performances of understanding" in Stage 2. In Stage 3, responsive teaching flourishes as we consider variety in the background knowledge, interests, and preferred learning modalities of our students. A variety of specific approaches and techniques for responsive teaching will be discussed in later chapters.

We conclude this chapter by offering a visual summary of the preceding narrative—one way of representing the relationship between backward design and differentiation—in Figure 3.3. It supports the premise that enduring understandings, essential knowledge, and essential skills should be a steady focus for the vast majority of learners, that *how* students demonstrate proficiency can be responsive to student readiness, interest, and/or mode of learning, and that the steps leading students toward proficiency with the essentials should be differentiated in ways that maximize the growth of individual learners in regard to the essential learning goals.

A river needs banks to flow. Backward design provides the structure to support flexibility in teaching and assessing in order to honor the integrity of content while respecting the individuality of learners. The blending of UbD and DI provides stability of focus on essential knowledge, understanding,

FIGURE 3.3
Applying Differentiation to the UbD Framework

This organizer provides a general framework for thinking about where differentiation may apply in the Understanding by Design framework. There will be exceptions to the general rule of adhering to the same essential knowledge, understanding, and skill in the case of students who have extreme needs. For example, a student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a student who is very new to the English language may need work with skills that are precursors to the ones specified in the framework. Similarly, an advanced learner who demonstrates proficiency with the essential knowledge and skill specified in the framework needs to work with more advanced knowledge and skill in order to continue developing as a learner. In regard to Assessment Evidence, although content goals assessed will remain constant for most learners, varying the mode of assessment will benefit many learners.



and skill and flexibility in guiding learners to the desired ends. The chapter that follows explores ways in which differentiation flows from and is shaped by quality curriculum.

Note

1. In cases where Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have been developed for exceptional students, then the particular goals of their plan are added to, or substituted for, the content standards as indicated by the IEP.