

Backward Design for Language Instruction

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Introduction

“Backward Design” (BD) is an instructional design process that begins with the end in mind. Whereas educators traditionally define content, curriculum, and activities before designing assessments, BD requires educators to first determine desired learning outcomes, align assessments to those outcomes, and then design instructional activities that align to the assessments and desired results. While the process may still be unfamiliar to university professors, lecturers, and instructors, it is a process that can be used universally (K-16) to ensure that classroom activities meet the level of rigor that is required by the identified learning outcomes or standards. Whereas the process is typically driven by prescribed national or state standards at the K-12 level, it can be used with any set of standards or learning outcomes as determined by the course instructor.

We propose to review how K-12 applies standards-based instruction with BD, discuss how the process can be applied to post-secondary language teaching, reflecting on how a greater commonality in approaches could lead to a more seamless K-16 continuum. We also suggest which are the more appropriate technologies to use at each step of the process.

Valerie Braimah is a K-12 BD professional development provider, and Françoise Sorgen-Goldschmidt is a post-secondary language instructor who integrates technology into her classes. We will combine our respective expertise and experience to ask (and answer) essential questions about how to apply the BD process to language instruction, focusing on postsecondary education, and the integration of technology into “language teaching”¹.

How It Began

Françoise Sorgen-Goldschmidt was first made aware of the BD mode for constructing curricula through discussions with Valerie Braimah. She recognized some familiar ideas, became curious, and decided to explore the process further for several reasons:

1. Beginning “with the end in mind” reminded her of the focus on the “target audience” that communicative teaching brought about, following as it did, previous methodologies such as grammar/translation, audio-lingual, or structurally-based, which would start out with lists of vocabulary items, forms, syntax, or structures to be taught, set out to teach them around appropriate topics, and test their acquisition.

2. In the current context of “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), many educators fear that teachers will be “teaching to the test.” BD provides a research-based strategy for ensuring that curriculum and class activities are driven by assessments that are tightly aligned with desired learning outcomes and goals; not in random fashion, but through an integrated, and cohesive process.

3. In addition, making curriculum decisions based on “big ideas” might support smoother transitions within the K-16 continuum.

Why Backward Design?

Teachers frequently let their textbooks determine what will be introduced and in what order. The material of the textbook must be “covered”. Even when not following a textbook, teachers often choose topics and activities first, and then design assessments for those topics. In language instruction, one may observe a disconnect between communicative activities at the discourse level in the classroom, and testing based on discrete parts of speech, or between meaningful, contextualized in-class activities and non-contextualized tests and exams. When technology has been used as a “drill master”, the disconnect may be more severe, as discussed in a previous article following the 2003 IALLT conference².

Whether textbook-based or from another source, activity design lies at the heart of most language classes. With the emphasis on communication, language instructors at all levels as well as textbook authors and publishers have had to become imaginative activity builders; many are, and have shared their ideas through activity banks, in articles, or at conferences; many of the activities are pedagogically sound, and “fun”. Sometimes however, one is left with a sense that the more activities teachers can present, (or “cover”), the more accomplished they are as professionals. Here also, technology has expanded the array of possibilities, at the same time leading to the possibility that using technology becomes an end rather than a means to an end. In order to emerge from this flurry of activities towards a more

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strategic and goal-oriented method of instructional design, it is necessary for instructors to pause and ask questions such as: "What should I prioritize?"; "What is essential?", or very simply: "Where are we going?" for indeed, as the Cheshire Cat answers Alice when she asks where she "ought to go from here": "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to"³

In Backward Design, standards are the organizing principle, and standards-aligned assessments drive instructional activities. Instructors are rarely provided opportunities to deeply analyze their course standards or learning outcomes in order to determine the nature of student proficiency that is required by the standards. There are many models of BD in K-12 education. The idea of Backward Design was made popular by Wiggins and McTighe's seminal book, "Understanding by Design"⁴, often referred to as "UbD": This book introduced the concept of a three-stage planning model that begins with the "end (standards) in mind". Building off the UbD approach, Insight Education Group, Inc., developed another model that provides instructors with a concrete and systematic method designing standards-based instruction. Strategic Design for Student Achievement (SDSA) engages instructors in a multi-step process that utilizes Bloom's Taxonomy as a tool for dissecting and organizing standards, aligning assessments, and designing instructional activities. In the late 1950's B.S. Bloom developed a taxonomy that classifies educational objectives into six levels of cognition: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Bloom's Taxonomy has since been established in K-12 education as the defining framework for designing instructional activities that challenge students to demonstrate proficiency in all levels of cognition, across the curriculum. The SDSA process asks instructors to analyze their course standards/outcomes, using Bloom's Taxonomy to identify the level of cognition required by each standard. Instructors then use that information to identify which standards represent "big ideas" – complex, multifaceted concepts that require "uncoverage", and which standards represent the discrete knowledge and skills that support those "big ideas." This process of unpacking the standards allows instructors to then prioritize their instructional units around big ideas.

Once standards have been prioritized, instructors can again use Bloom's Taxonomy to align assessments to those standards. The assumption here is that the level of cognition embedded in the standard can help guide decisions about what kind of

assessment (selected response, performance assessment, etc) is best suited to measure that level of cognition. The question instructors must ask at this stage is, “what would constitute credible evidence that students have mastered the standard?” For example, a standard that only requires the “knowledge” level of cognition should be easy to assess using a multiple-choice test whereas a standard that requires the “application” or “analysis” levels of cognition may require a more complex performance assessment, given that analytical reasoning is difficult to derive from a multiple-choice response.

Finally, having aligned assessments to standards, instructors can make more strategic determinations about how to design instruction to ensure student mastery of each standard, to the level of rigor required by the standard.

The SDSA process outlined above is clearly a very different design process from the traditional conversations about how to organize instructional activities. For example, rather than discussing whether different forms of negation should be taught before or after a new tense is introduced, (a discussion which has continued to be a core concern for many curriculum designers, be they instructors, course coordinators or textbook publishers), instructors will develop units based on big ideas, and driven by how students will be asked to demonstrate their mastery of a standard.

Our Presentation

Language instructors face different sets of standards. Most universal are The Standards for Foreign Language Learning which identify five goal areas: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—the five C’s of foreign language education. There also exist different state standards, or teachers may choose their own outcomes. Regardless of the outcomes being used for a particular class, the SDSA process will help teachers to prioritize those outcomes, and strategically determine what to teach, when, and for how long.

We will present a model for adapting the BD process to align instructional technology resources to World Language Standards, focusing on the Communication, Cultures, and Comparisons standards. Specifically, we will present a planning tool that can help instructors uncover alignments between those Standards, design appropriate assessments of mastery of those standards, and instructional technology resources that are targeted to move students towards success on the assessments.

The following example illustrates the BD planning process, as it would occur using the planning tool:

BD can be used at any stage in language learning, and for any of the skills, subfields, or specialties usually addressed by language departments. In order to illustrate the versatility of BD, we will explore its connections to Content-Based Instructions (CBI) and Content-Based Language Teaching Through Technology (CoBaLLT). We will thus demonstrate how BD helps instructors find answers to frequently debated questions such as:

- What should the respective roles of language, literature, and Italian studies be within the Italian Department?
- Should we teach content through language or language through content?
- What genre of written texts shall we study- or use as supports?
- What multimedia texts shall we use?

We will give specific examples that demonstrate how BD allows instructors to make more targeted decisions about what kinds of instructional technology will most effectively support student mastery of course standards, thus hopefully avoiding the pitfall of technology for the sake of technology. Finally, we will discuss how a shared curriculum design process (K-16) could lead to more effective articulation and integration of pedagogies in foreign language, and across the curriculum.

Notes

¹Language teaching will be used in its broadest sense: it refers to all of the areas and skills addressed in foreign language departments, e.g., language acquisition, literatures, cultures etc.

² Sorgen-Goldschmidt, Françoise, 2003. Does the Pedagogy Drive the Technology? Revisiting an old saw after the '03 IALLT conference. *SWALLT Newsletter* 2.2, December.

³ Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Chapter 6, as quoted from Project Gutenberg at <http://www.cs.indiana.edu/metastuff/wonder/ch6.html>.

⁴ Wiggins, Grant & Jay McTighe. 2000. *Understanding by Design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

