

12 Ways to Kill Understanding by Design

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Despite our cautions, well-meaning local change agents continue to make mistakes in how Understanding by Design (UbD) is implemented. Below, find 12 ways of killing the effort for sure, and some suggestions for how to avoid the all-too-common mistakes:

1. ***Fixate on terminology and boxes in the Template and provide little or no insight into the issues and purposes that underlie UbD.***

INSTEAD:

- Start with common sense through an exercise: “You really understand if you can...” and use staff answers as the basis for initial experiments in understanding-focused learning.
- Delay showing all the Template boxes with all their names.
- Concentrate on making clear that the aim is a better focus on understanding as opposed to superficial coverage
- Use whatever language makes sense locally to make the process and design tools transparent

2. ***Mandate that every teacher must use UbD for ALL of their planning immediately (without sufficient training, on-going support, or structured planning time).***

INSTEAD: Think big, but start small and smart.

- Work with volunteers at first
- Ask all teachers to plan ONE unit in Year One.
- Encourage teachers to work w/ a colleague or team, and begin w/ a familiar unit topic.
- Provide additional designated planning and peer review time.
- Provide online help

3. ***Introduce UbD immediately as this year’s focus to suggest that UbD can be fully implemented in a year, and that last year’s initiative bears no relation to it. Thus: This, too, shall pass.***

INSTEAD: Develop and publish a multi-year plan that links your long-term goals to UbD strengths, and shows how UbD will be slowly implemented as part of a complete strategic plan.

4. ***Attempt to implement too many initiatives simultaneously (e.g., UbD, Differentiated Instruction, Curriculum Mapping, Marzano’s “Strategies” etc.)***

INSTEAD: Develop a multi-stage multi-year plan to improve current initiatives via UbD –

- improve mapping categories
- differentiate via Essential Questions
- unpack Standards to identify transfer goals
- develop a 1-page graphic showing how all local initiatives are really a part of the same one effort (e.g. limbs of a tree, pieces of a puzzle, supports of a building, etc.)

5. *Assume that staff members understand the need for UbD and/or will naturally welcome it. i.e. hurriedly prescribe UbD before helping staff to understand and appreciate the need for change – ensuring that they do not own the change.*

INSTEAD: Establish the need for a change – the diagnosis – before proposing UbD as a prescription. Make sure that staff see UbD as a logical response to a deficit or opportunity that they recognize and own.

6. *Provide one introductory presentation on UbD and assume that teachers now have the ability to implement UbD well.*

INSTEAD: Design professional development “backward” from your understanding goals, i.e. practice what UbD preaches –

- Make staff meetings and walk-throughs devoted to UbD learning and trying out
- Help PLCs develop action plans for trying out unit ideas while also reading further on unit design and how people learn.
- Use annual personal goals (SLO’s, SGOs, etc.) as the action research ground for the year, based on understanding goals.

7. *Provide UbD training for teachers, but not for administrators; give leaders and supervisors the same training as teachers.*

INSTEAD:

- Establish parallel tracks of training for Principals and Asst. Principals in which they work on how to look for elements of UbD in action. (They do not need training in how to design units, only how to offer feedback)
- Develop peer review systems so that teachers and administrators work together in informally and formally giving feedback to units
- Develop supervisory teams to develop a UbD approach to curriculum writing

8. *Provide minimal UbD training for some willing teachers in a Train-the-Trainers program, then expect immediate and effective turn-key training of all other staff by those few pioneers.*

INSTEAD:

- Establish a process for carefully soliciting, interviewing, testing, and hiring would-be trainers.
- Develop a year-long training program
- Support trainers with on-line and in-person troubleshooting

9. *Train people in Stage 1 in Year 1, Stage 2 in Year 2, Stage 3 in Year 3 – insuring that no useful results will occur for years, and the big picture is rarely seen.*

INSTEAD: Train so that designers have tried out a few unit strands through all 3 Stages (e.g. just a design based on 1 Essential Question) at least twice in year One, then a full-blown unit by year's end.

10. *Announce that UbD is the official way to plan all lessons from here on – even though UbD is not a lesson-plan system.*

INSTEAD:

- Make clear that UbD focuses on unit planning.
- Provide differentiated freedom in how people write lessons
- Perhaps make elements of Stages 1 & 2 mandatory, but leave Stage 3 open to personal bent and creativity

11. *Standardize all implementation and experimentation. Don't permit options/alternatives/different approaches to learning, trying, and using ubd. Don't play to any particular interests, talents, and readiness of staff.*

INSTEAD: Differentiate the UbD work –

- Build in choices of role (trainers/designers/piloters/observers),
- Try out simpler as well as full versions of the Template, based on readiness
- Build a schedule that permits others to join in with R & D later, on a rolling timeline

12. *Start with any old unit.*

INSTEAD: start with units that are not engaging and effective currently. What do you have to lose??