

Overview of Backwards Course Design Script Draft

Hello, I'm Carol Subino Sullivan, Assistant Director of Faculty Teaching and Learning Initiatives at the Center for Teaching and Learning. In this video, I'm going to provide an overview of the backwards design approach to developing courses. The goal is for you to identify how the backwards design process can help you make the rapid transition to remote teaching.

Backwards course design is an approach to creating courses that starts with the end in mind. That is, you start off by thinking about what students should be able to do after taking this course and then work backwards to build in the elements that will help students achieve those goals.

Though to me this doesn't seem backwards at all, the reason we call it backwards is in contrast to the way that many courses are designed, by starting with a list of topics to cover.

What's wrong with a list of topics, you might ask? Well, this approach makes it vague as to what exactly students need to be able to do with a topic. Do they need to memorize it for later recall? Make it meaningful by relating it to their own experiences? Apply it to solve a novel problem? Use it to evaluate a complex situation? Each of these questions would require a different approach to instruction. Even if instructors intuitively have a goal in mind and teach accordingly, students may not be as clear on what the goal is and focus on the wrong thing—for example on memorization instead of developing the ability to apply a concept to a new problem. Clearly defining the learning goals at the beginning of the course design process creates sense of purpose for both the instructor and the students.

The backwards design process challenges instructors to carefully consider what the goals of the class should be up front. The rest of the course, including the topics to be covered, are then intentionally selected to support student mastery of those goals. The goals act as a compass, guiding faculty as they select what to include—and, importantly, what to exclude since there is always much more than what can fit in a single class. The goals also become the foundation on which assessments and learning activities are developed. In the end, all elements of the course should be aligned with the goals.

This diagram illustrates the backwards course design process and the alignment between course elements. First we start by defining specific, learner centered, measurable learning objectives. Then we determine what assessments will best allow students to demonstrate their mastery of those objectives. Finally we determine the most appropriate instructional strategies to support students in developing mastery of the objectives, including selecting the content and how to engage students in learning that content.

Once you have these elements, you have the core components of the course that you can use to build your syllabus and develop the day by day lesson plans. Having the big picture laid out will also help you develop a timeline and flow for your class that allows students enough time to prepare for and complete their assessments. In addition, you will be able to use the backwards design framework incorporate flexibility into the course to provide multiple ways for students with diverse learning needs to achieve the course learning goals.

Thinking specifically about our current situation, rapidly converting courses originally designed for face-to-face engagement to a remote format, the backwards course design process can help instructors make decisions about changes that facilitate remote engagement while still maintaining the integrity of the

course. The learning goals serve as that compass needle that faculty can use to evaluate the alternative options for assessments and instructional strategies.

Outro video: In this video you learned how in the backwards course design process, well-defined learning objectives become the compass that let you align all other course elements and let you make well-grounded decisions about what to include in your course. Using the backwards course design process is an important way to ensure that any changes you make to your course as you transition to remote teaching stay aligned with the core learning that students need to achieve.