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Teaching and Learning Enhancement (TALE) Center

TALE Teaching Tip:

Fall 2020: Start Here and NOW, Teaching & Learning Pandemic Edition

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TALE and IMDC will be offering additional training and resources on many of these topics. Also consult content in TALE's BOLT organization. Many other Teaching Tips are available on our webpage.

Fall Calendar

- Fall I - August 17 - November 24
- Fall II - August 17 - October 6
- Fall III - October 7 - November 24

Please note: The date ranges for Fall I, II, and III have been labeled in two different ways. These dates for Fall I, II, and III are in the COVID-19 update for 17 June 2020. https://www.bloomu.edu/coronavirus

Implications of the Calendar?

In examining the calendar, we are inclined to think that this situation is comparable to summer school, but this approach is misleading. In summer, students rarely take more than two classes in a single session. With our modified 2020-21 academic calendar, students will be taking three classes in the truncated semester in order to earn fifteen credits. (**Note: t**he number of weeks listed in the scenarios are based on me counting backwards from the calendar given the end and start dates, and as of this writing, does not take into account time set aside for final exams.)

- **Scenario 1:** student takes a fourteen-week three-credit (Fall I) + 2 three-credit classes (Fall II), then continues the fourteen-week class and takes two more three-credit classes (Fall III).
- **Scenario 2:** student takes two three-credit classes in Fall II and three three-credit classes in Fall III.
- **Scenario 3:** student takes three three-credit classes in Fall II and two three-credit classes in Fall III.

Teaching and learning with this schedule is going to be intense!

So, how do we optimize student learning? We might be inclined to one of two approaches:

1. take an "accelerated" approach and cram fifteen weeks of content into the shortened times.
2. review course goals and modify how you will teach them.

No matter the course and discipline, if you are taking an accelerated approach, how many other "accelerated" courses will your students be taking at the same time? Is it fair to students to be taking one or more "accelerated" courses at any given time? They did not sign up for this – and neither did we, but this is our temporary reality, with long-term consequences for our students, their learning, and the future of the

university. In short, the course-level choices that you make reverberate through your department and the university.

How long does it take your students to complete work?

When we speak to our students about how much time they should spend studying, the conventional approach: for each hour spent in class, students should spend three hours outside of class. I wonder how many of our students take this to heart. Still, we need to develop a clear sense of how much time it takes for students to complete tasks. Equally important: students may not have multiple days between class sessions to complete work. For example, we might have students in a 100-level course on average read a book chapter each week, would it not be an unreasonable expectation that they read two or more in a week. Therefore, you should not only calculate **times to complete tasks**, but consider **how much time students will have between each class**. Faculty will find this helpful to calculate their contact time, increase awareness of what they can reasonably expect of themselves, contemplate learning goals, and create teaching and learning activities and assessments can realistically be achieved in a pandemic.

I adapted the following "Time on Task" worksheet that Utica College provides students, who are preparing to take courses online. The guideline should be adjusted by faculty when they have better insight on the cognitive and time-related demands of the tasks. Here is a sampling of the Time on Task[1] estimates:

- Reading: Text Heavy Material – 25 pages/hour; Light Material – 50 pages/hour; Online journal article; 25 pages/hour
- Video: 15-minute duration – 20 minutes
- PowerPoint Presentation (20 slides) – 1 hour
- Discussion Board Postings (original plus three responses) – 2 hours
- Reaction/Reflection Papers – 1 hour per page
- Research Paper – 4 hours per page
- Quiz (10 questions) – 1 hour (note: I am uncertain if this hour estimation includes study time)

Module or Unit

Learning Activities/Assessment	Time on Task	Time between Task

Is your course content-driven? Does your course promote convergent or divergent thinking?

Some courses are primarily **content-driven** and require **convergent thinking,** that is we are asking students to identify the most correct or "best" answers for specific problems. We often associate convergent thinking with foundational or gateway courses. What is more, the course may contribute to a sequence in which we expect prior knowledge to be recalled and applied to new circumstances. Alternately, some courses may be driven primarily by **skills** and are mostly **convergent**, in which students must learn to make calculations, operate equipment, use software, develop and run a computer program, etc. While another group of courses

[1] My appreciation to Mary Nicholson, IIT, who shared this worksheet with me.
https://www.utica.edu/academic/cil/CourseReview/Interaction_Tips/Time%20On%20Task%20Online%20Courses.pdf

promote **divergent thinking**. Divergent thinking generates multiple approaches to solve problems, applications, etc.; there is no single answer. In these courses, content creates a foundation for thinking, yet there may not be any agreed upon canon of knowledge that must be learned as pre-requisites. For example, students can learn how to interpret historical context from studying any event or time period. Subsequently, the content is being used to develop reading, writing, and thinking skills. By the way, content-driven and skills-based courses are creating a foundation for divergent thinking, but that may not be the primary goal. We want creative thinkers in all university disciplines by the time our students earn their degrees!

If you are teaching a content-driven or skills-based, convergent course, the faculty in your department need to have conversations and collaborate; you may already be doing this. Is an accelerated approach fair and will it achieve the learning goals as we teach in a pandemic with modified schedules? Even in a 15-week semester, you know that covering content does not ensure all students will learn. In this context, how have you been handling the challenge of students' struggling to learn? Do you teach them strategies to learn how to learn? Are they encouraged to meet with tutors? Do you hold recitations or one-on-one tutoring sessions? Do you refer students to success coaches? Do you give them a pep talk? The university and your department will provide learning supports and interventions, yet we have less time to identify students who need help and intervene. Offering lower stakes, more frequent assessments will help faculty identify these students. By the way, not all of these assessments have to be graded, yet we need to check in with our students early and often.

If you are teaching a course that promotes divergent thinking, you are most likely using content to develop reading, writing, or performance skills. The challenge that you face is daunting as well. You should be able to scale back on content, yet you need to provide students ample time to reflect upon their reading and writing, to hone their writing skills, or to practice so they can improve performance. Are you willing to cut back on content? Do you need to shorten reading assignments or assign less challenging reading? Can you expect students to conduct a research project in a seven-week session? Can you expect students to read full-length novels or monographs? If your course contributes to your department's program goals, you need to have conversations with colleagues about creating coherency and continuity between courses in the program. When students struggle with reading and writing, how do you handle this situation in normal times? Do you consult with the student, connect them to a success coach or tutor? Do you give them a pep talk? Offering lower stakes, more frequent assessments will help faculty identify students, who are struggling. By the way, not all of these assessments have to be graded, yet we need to check in with our students early and often.

General Education

If you are teaching a general education course, the focus may be to develop an appreciation for art, music, the improvement of health, or to introduce students to a specific disciplinary approach to X. You may note we tend to encounter high levels of student resistance. Is this going to be the only course that students may take in your department? Or do you hope this course will attract students to your major? In either case, consider what the science of learning and common sense tells us: we can **cover** content, but that does not ensure students will learn it; if we don't use it, we lose it. In short, if our general education course may be our only chance to get students to see the world through our disciplinary prism, would it not make sense to use content as a means to uncover how our discipline will help them think about the world? As a historian teaching a survey course, I strive to create enduring understanding of history by getting my students to think historically, not about dates and names which they can easily look up on their smart phone.

Contemplate the goals for your general education course. What is most essential? How do we optimize a meaningful learning experience? We will find a more satisfactory approach if we create significant learning

experiences, if we make the course content relevant to students, and if we are transparent about the expectations and how to thrive in the course.

Backward Design to Promote Enduring Understanding or Significant Learning Experiences

In any context, **Backward Design** is the best approach to designing courses, developing units, lessons, assignments, and assessments. If you are not already familiar with Backward Design principles, this approach will help guide your decisions as you prepare your fall courses. It will help you focus on what is most essential.

Two books are having a profound impact on innovative college teaching: Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's, *Understanding by Design* and L. Dee Fink's, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*. Wiggins and McTighe define understanding, as "the capacity to explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, and self-asses." When students achieve this potential, enduring understanding, deep learning has occurred -- the experience is memorable, transferable. Wiggins and McTighe recommend that faculty define their desired results in the form of big ideas or essential questions that create meaning and coherency throughout the semester. Fink advocates an integrated course design that makes learning significant to our students. How we define our course goals and objectives should not be determined by the content, but by our students' needs or what we uncover about how our content can fulfill our students' needs. In Fink's course design, significant learning experiences are more likely to occur during the course of the semester, if we not only create foundational knowledge and opportunities to apply it, but we also help students connect (integrate) to their learning experiences or other realms of life. In addition, students learn about themselves and others, develop feelings, interests, values (caring), and learn how to learn, to help students become more self-directed. Both books advocate a more intentional design approach to developing courses and how we teach them. Both have been shaped by the science of learning and how the brain works. The most important concepts to include:

- our working memory has limited ability to process
- practicing is essential to learning (rehearsal, restating, problem-solving, etc)
- attempting to recall what we know (retrieval), improves learning, by helping us recognize what we have and have not remembered
- spreading practice and retrieval out over time (interleaving) deepens learning, while massed practice (i.e. cramming) does not
- the desire to learn deepens when we evoke emotions, pose a challenging or worthwhile problem, or make it relevant to our students

Backward design builds upon these concepts. When we develop courses, syllabi, units, assignments, always begin at the end and take these steps see **Figure A**:

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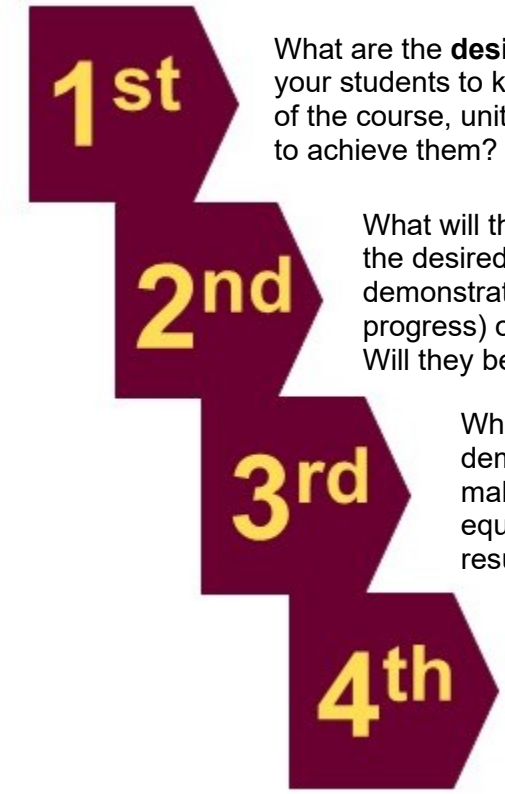
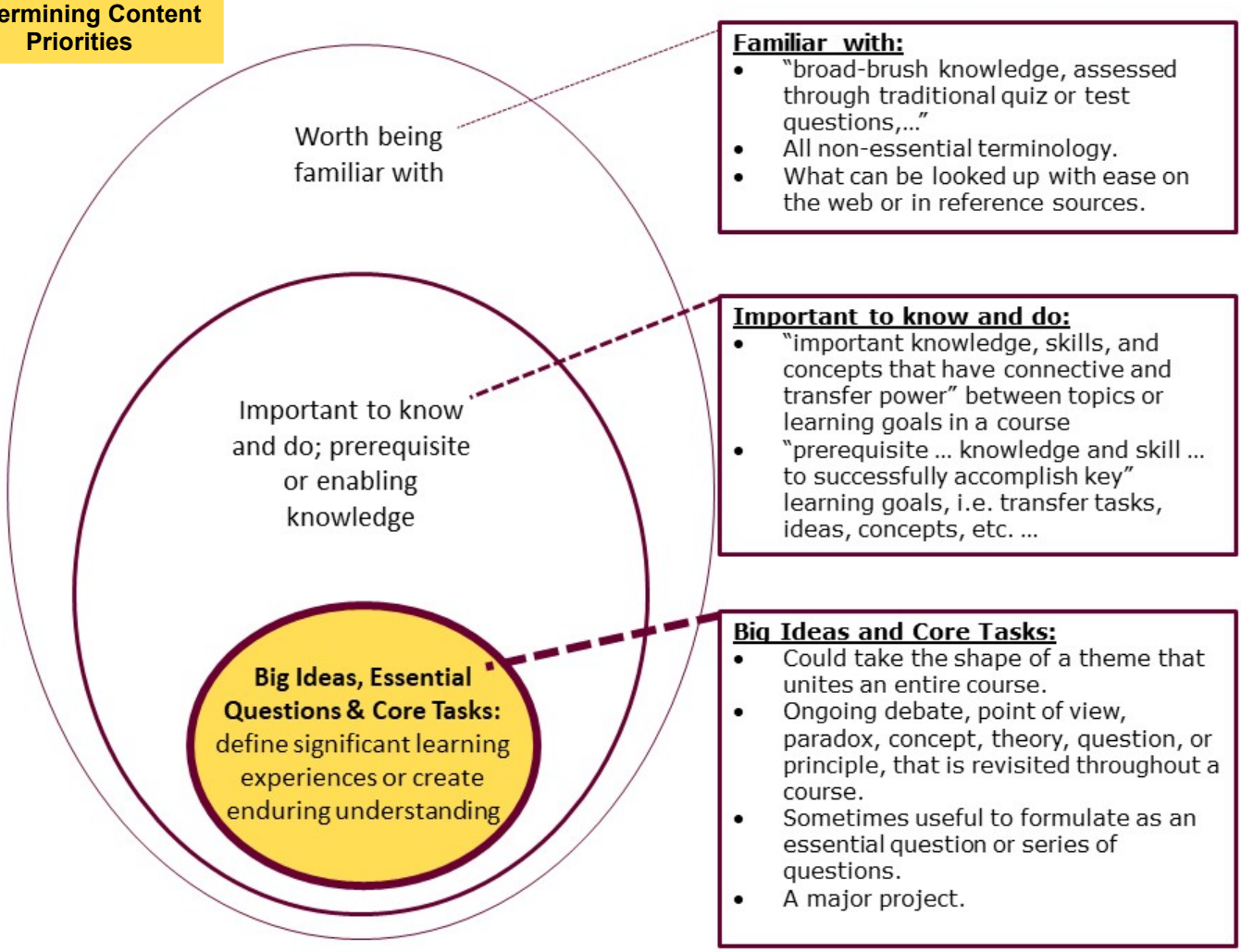


Figure A: Steps 1-4 Backward Design

The most essential step is the first; all further decisions about our course (or unit or topic) derives from clearly defining our desired results. We must be driven by a purpose that facilitates our students' learning, not just covers content; we are obliged to create significant learning experiences and promote enduring understanding. It is a purposeful and meaningful approach to every teaching decision that we make. Equally important we tell students what we are doing and why – making their learning tasks and goals **transparent**.

Even when we have clearly defined goals and objectives, we must adjust to a pandemic calendar that makes it nearly impossible to teach as much content as we do in ordinary times. We are going to have to let go of and prioritize content to improve student learning. See **Figure B** adapted from Wigging and McTighe's *Understanding by Design*. They provide these guidelines to help teachers determine content priorities. May I also suggest that we share this content priority approach with our students. It can serve as a study guide that creates greater transparency.

Figure B: Determining Content Priorities



Red – Yellow – Green – It makes us Blue

We have to be prepared for multiple contingencies while we teach in the pandemic. Multiple factors, including class and room size, will determine if we can even be together with all of our students at any given time. Of course, if the threat of COVID-19 increases, we have to be prepared to pivot to remote teaching and learning. In this larger context with so much beyond our control, students and faculty may need to take sick leave as well.

Flipped Classroom. How can it prepare us to be flexible and agile? Taking a "flipped classroom" approach can easily be adapted to remote teaching and makes our face-to-face teaching more interactive and engaging. The advantage: any materials that you create or adapt will easily be useful when the threat of COVID-19 passes. Just avoid making references to specific semesters, events, dates if you record lectures, etc.

Flipped classroom. In many traditional classes, sometimes large percentages of class time might be dedicated to lectures, screening documentaries, or demonstrations, the classic "sage on the stage." The flipped classroom is driven by a belief that the best learning environments are active, hands on, and that knowledge is socially constructed. In a flipped classroom, first exposure to new content occurs outside of

class. The flipped classroom requires students to take responsibility for learning the content independently. Then, they bring their questions and background knowledge to the face-to-face (F2F) class to get a more hands-on experience to learning. Outside of class, students learn content by watching recorded lectures, reviewing online material, reading physical or digital texts, drafting essays, performing research, etc. Face-to-face time is dedicated to practicing skills, discussion with peers, debates, presentations, lab experiments, peer reviews, and other F2F activities. When students struggle, the professor serves as "guide on the side" to bring clarity to challenges, provide expert advice, and facilitate student interactions and engagement with the content.

Pros and Cons. Flipping is a student-centered learning strategy. Face-to-face time is dedicated to engaging students in the content; we increase the opportunity to practice the discipline with the support of faculty experts, while thinking critically in a supportive environment. In-class time can certainly be used to take quizzes and exams. The drawbacks should be obvious: getting students to do the preparatory work before class (though lack of preparedness is a challenge even now), student resistance to the strategy that may result in lower end--of-semester student evaluations, excessive screen time, digital divide, and considerably more work on the front-end for faculty. Yet if we prepare for a flipped classroom, if we anticipate the potential pitfalls, we can be more ready to pivot to remote teaching using distance education tools. Asynchronous tools such as discussion boards and synchronous tools like Zoom replace the face-to-face classroom. If we are forced into remote teaching, we will be more prepared this time.

Large Lectures

Colleagues who are teaching large classes of fifty or more are facing daunting challenges. In ordinary times, the anonymity of large classes makes the development of student-student and student-professor relationships difficult. We have heard that students want to be back in the classroom (as do faculty), and that they did not care for asynchronous approaches. Among the many reasons, we need to realize that asynchronous learning requires more self-discipline on the part of students, and faculty were on a steep learning curve trying to adapt to teaching remotely. The summer permits more time to contemplate and prepare, but there is no ideal solution that will satisfy students and faculty and optimize student learning (sorry if this sounds negative). As of this writing, we do not even have our schedules, so it is difficult to ponder options.

Focus on the learning goals, not the objectives, if you accept that it will be impossible to explore all the content that you normally do. For example, let's consider the general education learning goal "to apply knowledge from the **arts and humanities** to analyze, evaluate, or participate in the artistic and literary traditions of our diverse world." Given the exceptional circumstances of teaching in the pandemic, create an element of choice for the students that allows them to analyze, evaluate, and participate, but that they do so with fewer traditions. For example, one of the objectives for Music 101, Music Listening, is to "distinguish between aspects of music associated with <u>each</u> musical era." [emphasis added] Identify a big idea or essential question that they should be able to answer upon completing the study of each era (provide a list that you normally teach). Offer students a range of eras to select that will offer a range of opportunities to compare. Then divide the large class into several smaller groups (perhaps forty) based on their choices. Outside of class, all students would complete readings, watch recorded lectures, take low stakes quizzes (automatically graded in BOLT) based on their choices. Then on a rotational basis meet with groups of forty in a classroom or through Zoom to discuss the essential ideas that shape the era to be explored (with a class of 240 students, you would meet with each group every sixth time within the constraints of contact time), when not meeting with the professor, the others post to a discussion board to respond to an essential question defining their choice. By the way, when faculty teach large online classes, they do not read every discussion board post; they divide their students into smaller groups, and on a rotational basis randomly select a forum, read, and grade; they add comments and observations to let students know they are "present;" and they keep the grading simple

plus-minus or plus-check-minus that translates into points. In these large online courses, most assessments are low stakes.

"Learning Bundles." In large lectures that serve students seeking general education points as well as a gateway to the major (e.g. General Psychology), focus on the learning goals, but perhaps adopt a type of contract grading or "learning bundles." When I was an undergraduate at Wichita State University, our Introduction to Astronomy course provided a variety of assignment options tied to the lecture topics and units of the course. We were offered choices between paragraph-length answers, quizzes, exams, but if we wanted to aspire to an A, we had to complete a short research project. By the way, my Physics professor had teaching assistants. Linda Nilson offers a more in-depth explanation of a comparable approach in *Specifications Grading* (chapter 7). She begins this chapter describing how a professor of Management Information Systems creates "learning bundles" that outline what students must do to earn a D, C, B, or A grade. Not surprising, each bundle makes more demands on students. There is a high degree of student self-determination and goal setting in this approach. I wonder how it would work with large classes, as I noted, my professor had TAs?

What can we be doing now?

As of this writing, our schedules have not been set; yet, you can

- ☐ review your master course syllabus and course learning goals and objectives;
- ☐ adopt the backward design approach;
- ☐ make your goals relevant and transparent to students;
- ☐ use the backward design to determine your content priorities -- what must stay, what can go;
- ☐ discuss learning goals and how sequential courses will be affected with department colleagues;
- ☐ reflect upon what went well and what did not go well when our face-to-face classes were suspended;
- ☐ create a reasonable challenge for yourself to learn one or two techniques or tech tools that will help you achieve your teaching and learning goals (do not get distracted by shiny options or go overboard);
- ☐ find out what sort of technology the university has to offer and supports;
- ☐ consult the TALE Director, IMDC, and Asa Kelley for Mediasite (we don't have to wait for training); and
- ☐ breathe deeply.

Sources:

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Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (2005)

 Updated on 18 June 2020