

# Integrating

## & Differentiated Instruction

### UNDERSTANDING *by* DESIGN

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# UBD AND DI: AN ESSENTIAL PARTNERSHIP

*What is the logic for joining the two models?*

*What are the big ideas of the models, and how do they look in action?*

Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction are currently the subject of many educational conversations, both in the United States and abroad. Certainly part of the reason for the high level of interest in the two approaches to curriculum and teaching is their logical and practical appeal.

Beset by lists of content standards and accompanying “high-stakes” accountability tests, many educators sense that both teaching and learning have been redirected in ways that are potentially impoverishing for those who teach and those who learn. Educators need a model that acknowledges the centrality of standards but that also demonstrates how meaning and understanding can both emanate from and frame content standards so that young people develop powers of mind as well as accumulate an information base. For many educators, Understanding by Design addresses that need.

Simultaneously, teachers find it increasingly difficult to ignore the diversity of learners who populate their classrooms. Culture, race, language, economics, gender, experience, motivation to achieve, disability, advanced ability, personal interests, learning preferences, and presence or absence of an adult support system are just some of the factors that students bring to school with them in almost stunning variety. Few teachers find their work effective or satisfying when they simply “serve up” a curriculum—even an elegant one—to their students with no regard for their varied learning needs. For many educators, Differentiated Instruction

offers a framework for addressing learner variance as a critical component of instructional planning.

That a convergence of the two models seems useful for addressing two of the greatest contemporary challenges for educators—crafting powerful curriculum in a standards-dominated era and ensuring academic success for the full spectrum of learners—is gratifying. The purpose of this book, however, is to move the conversations beyond a sense of “intuitive fit” to a more grounded exploration of why each of the models is potentially significant in today’s classrooms—and why their partnership is not only reasonable but essential wherever teachers strive to help each student develop his or her maximum capacity.

With that goal in mind, we will first present a straightforward explanation of why the two models should be linked in the classroom. Then we will provide a set of axioms and corollaries that demonstrate important links between the two models. (Key theory and research that support UbD and DI can be found in the appendix.)

## The Logic for Combining UbD and DI

Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction are not only mutually supportive of one another but in fact “need” one another. The reason is straightforward.

In effective classrooms, teachers consistently attend to at least four elements: whom they teach (students), where they teach (learning environment), what they teach (content), and how they teach (instruction). If teachers lose sight of any one of the elements and cease investing effort in it, the whole fabric of their work is damaged and the quality of learning impaired.

Understanding by Design focuses on what we teach and what assessment evidence we need to collect. Its *primary* goal is delineating and guiding application of sound principles of curriculum design. It also emphasizes how we teach, particularly ways of teaching for student understanding. Certainly the model addresses the need to teach so that students succeed, but the model speaks most fully about “what” and “how.” In other words, Understanding by Design is predominantly (although not solely) a curriculum design model.

Differentiated Instruction focuses on whom we teach, where we teach, and how we teach. Its *primary* goal is ensuring that teachers focus on processes and procedures that ensure effective learning for varied individuals. Defensible models of differentiation will *necessarily* address the imperative of differentiating quality curriculum. Nonetheless, differentiation is predominantly (although not solely) an instructional design model.

If we had at our grasp the most elegant curriculum in the world and it missed the mark for students with learning disabilities, highly advanced learners, students with limited English proficiency, young people who lack economic support, kids who struggle to read, and a whole host of others, the curriculum would fall short of its promise.

On the other hand, if we were the most effective disciples of flexible grouping, interest-based instruction, responsive environments, and a host of instructional strategies that allow us to attend to learner variance but used those approaches in the absence of powerful curriculum, our classrooms would fail to equip students with the ideas and skills necessary to make their way in the world.

Simply put, quality classrooms evolve around powerful knowledge that works for each student. That is, they require quality curriculum and quality instruction. In tandem, UbD and DI provide structures, tools, and guidance for developing curriculum and instruction based on our current best understandings of teaching and learning.

That the two models stem from current best understandings of teaching and learning—and that they are not only compatible but complementary—will become more evident as the book progresses. At the outset of that exploration, it is useful to share some “axioms” and “corollaries” that demonstrate some ways the two models interface. The axioms are fundamental principles of Understanding by Design. The corollaries demonstrate the way in which Differentiated Instruction works to ensure that each student will have access to and support for success with the axioms. Together, the axioms and corollaries illustrate some ways in which UbD and DI work in tandem toward shared goals. For each set of axioms and corollaries, we’ll provide a brief classroom scenario illustrating the combined logic of UbD and DI.

## Axiom 1

The primary goal of quality curriculum design is to develop and deepen student understanding.

### Corollaries for Axiom 1

- All students benefit from and are entitled to curriculum that develops and deepens their understanding.
- Given variance in student ability, experience, opportunity, language, interest, and adult support, they will grow at different rates and require varied support systems to develop and deepen their understanding.

## Scenario

Mr. Axelt designs his curriculum around the essential knowledge, understanding, and skill reflected in both the subject he teaches and the content standards used in his district. Right now, his U.S. history students are studying the relationship between rights and responsibilities of citizens under the U.S. Constitution. He wants all of his students to explore the enduring understanding that democracies balance the rights and responsibilities of citizens who live in them. He also wants all his students to explore the essential question, “How are rights and responsibilities under the U.S. Constitution like and different from rights and responsibilities of members in other groups with which I’m connected?”

In Mr. Axelt’s class of 32, he has three students with significant learning disabilities affecting their reading and writing. He has four students with a very advanced knowledge of U.S. history. He has several students who have great difficulty staying on task, some with identified learning problems and some who have no formal label. He has two English language learners. Some of his students have always liked history, and some have previously found it dull and disconnected from their lives. There’s also a wide range of students’ interests and learning preferences represented in his class.

Mr. Axelt begins teaching the unit on the U.S. Constitution with two primary goals in mind. First, he has designed tasks and assessments with the intent of having all his students understand the Constitution’s essential principles and relate the principles to their own lives and experiences. Second, he is making instructional plans that use different materials, time frames,

student groupings, and modes of student expression to ensure that each student will have fully supported opportunities to develop and extend the targeted understandings and skills.

## Axiom 2

Evidence of student understanding is revealed when students apply (transfer) knowledge in authentic contexts.

### Corollaries for Axiom 2

- Such authentic applications will reveal varying degrees of proficiency and sophistication in students' knowledge, understanding, and skill.
- The most effective teachers use the evidence of variance in student proficiency to provide opportunities and support to ensure that each student continues to develop and deepen knowledge, understanding, and skill from his or her current point of proficiency, interests, and learning preferences.

## Scenario

Mr. Axelt's students will develop a charter for a group (family, team, class, club, etc.) that includes explicit and implicit indications of members' rights and responsibilities. Students will present their charter documents in a way that directly compares and contrasts their construction of rights and responsibilities with those concepts in the U.S. Constitution, and that makes a case for why their charter is at least as effective as the Constitution in addressing rights and responsibilities.

To provide for student variance in the class, students may select a group in which they have an interest for which they will develop the charter. To provide for student variance in reading sophistication, Mr. Axelt will work with the school media specialist to provide resource books and other materials, including bookmarked Web sites, at a broad range of reading levels. Students have the option of working alone on their charters or with a partner who shares an interest in the group for which the charter will be designed and a preference for collaboration. Mr. Axelt will also offer brief minisessions on various facets of the charter design and reflection process for students who want that extra support and guidance.

### Axiom 3

Effective curriculum development following the principles of backward design (described in Chapter 3 and explored throughout the book) helps avoid the twin problems of textbook coverage and activity-oriented teaching in which no clear priorities and purposes are apparent.

#### Corollaries for Axiom 3

- All learners benefit from and should receive instruction that reflects clarity about purposes and priorities of content.
- Struggling learners require focus on the truly essential knowledge, understanding, and skill of a unit to ensure that their efforts are most efficient and potent in moving them forward in reliable ways.
- Advanced learners need challenge predicated on what is essential in a discipline so that their time is accorded value and their strengths are developed in ways that move them consistently toward expertise in the disciplines.

#### Scenario

Activities, discussions, and assessments in Mr. Axelt's class are designed to ensure that all students focus on the unit's enduring knowledge, understanding, and skills. He also uses the essential knowledge, understanding, and skill as a focal point for differentiating instruction for students who struggle to learn and for students who are advanced as learners.

Mr. Axelt's students who struggle to learn and have gaps in prior knowledge and skill still focus on the enduring understandings and skills of the unit. Mr. Axelt makes opportunities to work with students on skills they are lacking and often asks them to apply those skills to their assessment tasks. For some of these students, he may emphasize important skills and knowledge from past years rather than "nice but not imperative to know" knowledge and skill from the current unit. Whatever adaptations he makes for these students, however, their focus on the unit's enduring understandings and skills remains a constant in his planning for them.

When Mr. Axelt has evidence that students have already achieved proficiency with unit goals, he recrafts homework, sense-making activities, and key assessments to provide appropriate challenge as well as opportunity for these students to pursue interests. The adaptations continue to focus