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Course Revision Using Backward by Design

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Backward by Design Mini Study 2017/2018 Report

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Course Revision Using Backward Design

As a new tenure track faculty member of the Communication Studies Department in Fall 2016, I was assigned the Research Methods in Communication (COMM 398) course to teach in Winter 2017. A few designated faculty teach COMM 398 and students consider it the most challenging course in the Department. My goal for the course was to leave students with writing knowledge sets for abstract, annotated bibliography, and research proposal. I was able to teach the course timely with an appreciable pace. My students found the course challenging but my approach of demystifying their preconception by thoroughly engaging them in the material through unannounced quizzes (aimed at encouraging them to read thoroughly before and after each class), thorough assignments on each topic, and a research proposal overwhelmed my students. My expectations for their performance were also unmatched as most students, for instance, though studying Communication Studies as a major, were not familiar with APA formatting, found the research process (e.g., finding research articles and synthesizing information) frustrating, had little knowledge on communication theories, and had a hard time differentiating between research findings and their opinions. This challenge motivated me to participate in the Backward by Design (BbD) Retreat in August 2017. Using BbD to plan for COMM 398, I focused on one aspect of my initial goal as my priority to redesign the course.

Course Description

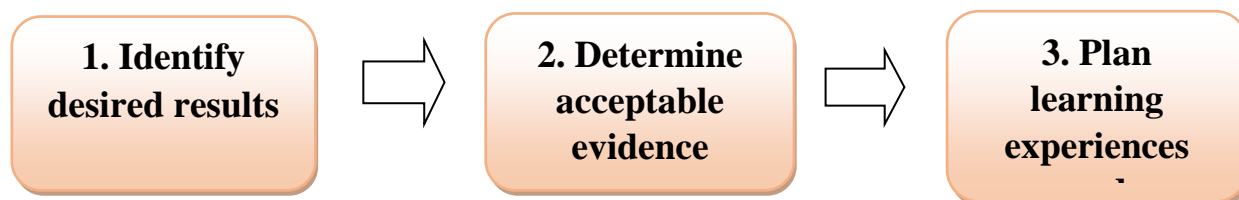
COMM 398 provides an overview of the concepts, methods, and tools used in designing, conducting, interpreting, and critically evaluating communication research. I teach this course in a lecture format while employing group work and presentations as well as class discussions. I encourage my students to participate actively in all classroom discussions, activities, and assignments by keeping up with all readings.

Focus of the Study

I used Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) stages to backward design (See Figure 1) to redesign COMM 398.

Figure 1

UbD: Stages of Backward Design



Stage 1: Identify desired results

Having reviewed curriculum expectations and my initial goals, I realized I had more content than could reasonably be covered within a quarter. To experiment course design using BbD, I

prioritized one goal of introducing my students to basic knowledge on research methods in the context of Communication Studies. With this goal, I developed the following objectives:

- define concepts and identify vocabulary of communication research
- read, understand, explain, and evaluate communication research studies
- identify and understand the gaps in different research methods; explore ways to effectively bridge these gaps
- write an abstract to an article in APA format

From the above objectives, I matched them unto my Department's learning outcomes:

Concepts: Students are able to apply communication concepts

Critical Thinking: Students are able to employ critical thinking skills

Ethics: students are able to reflect on the ethical dimensions of actions

Team Work: Students are able to work cooperatively in small groups

Stage 2: Determine acceptable evidence

I used mean and median scores on assignments (an estimate of majority of my students falling in the A/B grade range) as evidence of desired results. I also used student feedback on the challenge level of assigned work, relevance of course content in terms of field, instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter, instructor's contribution to the course, and the course overall. As BbD orientation suggests, I did not rely on the fact that the content had been covered even though my students' responses (in terms of questions asked and answers given to my questions) and nonverbal communication during my teaching suggested their understanding of the content.

Stage 3: Plan learning experiences and instruction

At this point, my focus was to decide on teaching methods, resource materials, and lesson sequencing. I used the lecture/discussion approach to teaching as a form of method triangulation. In terms of resource material, the APA manual was a given. In my consideration for course textbook, I desired a textbook written by a communication researcher who conducts and publishes both qualitative and quantitative research. Above all, the textbook should focus on communication research by way of emphasizing *communication* in all topics related to the objectives of the course. My search resulted in Keyton's (2005) *Communication research: Asking questions, finding answers*. Given my selection, I planned my lessons and assessments under two broad headings: quantitative research and qualitative research. Students also completed assignments on APA formatting and submitted abstracts based on communication research (through which they also learned communication theories for their research projects).

Results of Study

The average course grade from a class of 15 students was in the B range [mean 83.77, median: 83.94]. Feedback from students showed that assigned course work was challenging but the effective teaching of the course content, the relevance of the course to communication studies, and the instructor's contribution to the course made the course overall worth taking. BbD enabled me to demystify students' preconception about COMM 398 while thoroughly engaging them in the course material. My students did not express any frustration in their quantitative and qualitative research assignments nor did I receive complaints about APA formatting.

Future Direction

Having been successful with the use of BbD, I intend to experiment this approach in another course and gradually redesign my courses using BbD. Most importantly, final course evaluations will direct plans for future teaching methodology in COMM 398 and in future courses.

Additionally, I look forward to incorporate other strategies learned at the retreat to enrich my student learning and my teaching.

References

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD