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Crossing the River Together: Complicating Learning Outcomes in Writing Classes

By Sophia Brauner

Abstract

In this essay, I ask how Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe) functions in planning skill-based composition classes. I inspect how the first step of Wiggins and McTighe’s approach to course design, establishing desired learning outcomes prior to meeting the students, makes generalizing and limiting assumptions about a heterogenous group of students. I complicate Understanding by Design with Willie James Jennings’ notion of “forced affection,” positing that predetermined learning outcomes hinder students in their unique expression of ideas and identity. I close by suggesting inventing “big ideas” for writing classes which students then fill with meaning themselves, resulting in a distribution of affection.

The 2022 Writing Instructor Support Retreat introduced Western Washington University (WWU) writing teachers to a variety of approaches for teaching writing in a way that strives for social justice and recognizes the heterogeneity of writing students. One of the methods that the facilitators presented was “Understanding by Design” (UBD), an approach to help intentionally design desired learning goals, assignments, and in-class activities for any college-level class. One of the first steps of UBD is to determine learning outcomes for a course. Determining learning outcomes in preparation for the course seems plausible to me in content-heavy and textbook-led classes, where the content, which students need to be familiar with by the end of the class, is specific and tangible. To what extent are predetermined learning outcomes useful in skill-based writing classes? What assumptions do learning outcomes make about students and their writing? What might alternative approaches to pre-established learning outcomes look like in skill-based classes?

In this essay, I explore the mechanisms of UBD and the problematic aspects that accompany determining learning outcomes in writing classes. I complicate UBD with Willie James Jennings’ notion of “forced affection” before closing with suggestions of how to responsibly apply UBD’s learning outcomes to writing classes in a way that distributes affection. I connect my findings to English 201, a writing class I’m currently designing.
Building Bridges: Where do writing classes fit in?

Before I delve into what UBD is, I want to share a metaphor for writing classes that surfaced during a conversation among student-teachers who are pursuing their MA or MFA at WWU whilst teaching English 101, a first-year composition course. One of the student-teachers noted that education, as well as teaching, is akin to helping students build a bridge to reach the other side of a river. In her comparison, the teacher knows where they want to take their students; they have traveled to the other side of the river many times. When the teacher and their students gather by a river, students start building a bridge with the materials and support provided by the teacher. At the end of their time together, the class will have reached the other side of the river, as explicitly intended by the teacher.

Thinking about building classes the same way one might think about building a bridge, a direct route to a predetermined destination is mostly smooth sailing for teachers. My observations as a writing teacher leads me to think that the bridge analogy plays out differently in skill-based writing classes. I envision the class putting up tents by the riverside, examining the river, possibly even attempting to cross it. Some students might try to build a raft, whereas others might go for a swim in the river. Different from content-based classes, writing classes are grounded in encounters with writing, reading, and researching practices. There are no facts, formulas, or dates for students to memorize and walk away with. Instead, writing classes encourage students to develop and communicate their unique ideas to a situation-specific audience.

I don’t intend to suggest that writing classes don’t have a clear purpose. With that considered, as a writing teacher, I don’t want to lead my students to an already discovered, predetermined destination: one that suggests that their destination is final, when writing is an endlessly evolving practice. Rather, I want to encourage them to find their own paths, to chase down their ideas and to embrace their voices. So, what do I, a writing teacher, do with my students when I get to the river? And, to return to my initial question, how can I establish learning outcomes in a writing classroom that don’t make constraining assumptions about my students?

To be more concrete, I ask this question in the context of teaching English 201, which offers students “advanced instruction and practice in writing using ideas, texts and questions from a specified topic in the humanities,” according to Western’s course catalog. Essentially, ENG 201 is a course that introduces diverse researching, reading, and writing practices using a larger topic. My iteration of ENG 201 will explore how
visual texts function as community building, identity exploration, resistance, and protest for the LGBTQIA+ community. That being said, the class won’t center the content and histories of those texts, instead investigating which new understandings of writing emerge from analyzing and interpreting visual texts. In other words, the course is not based on teaching content, but on offering a variety of writing skills for a variety of writing situations.

Establishing a destination: What is Understanding by Design?

Understanding by Design is a course planning approach presented by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their book Understanding by Design (2005). Wiggins and McTighe outline three stages of UBD: (1) Identifying desired results, (2) determining acceptable evidence, and (3) planning learning experiences and instruction. In the first stage, instructors determine what the learning goals of their class are by asking which knowledge and practices they want their students to take away from the class. Then, instructors create assignments that showcase students’ success in achieving the learning outcomes. These assignments are designed so that teachers can see evidence of the knowledge or skills applied in their students’ work. Finally, teachers decide which in-class and homework assignments help students practice and “perform effectively” the skills and knowledge for the larger assignments to successfully showcase the learning outcomes (2005, p. 19).

UBD is an approach that works backwards by starting with overall learning goals, which influence the larger assignments, and finally the day-to-day activities in the class. “Backward design”, as Wiggins and McTighe call it, enables intentional course planning ensuring that each activity, text, and homework assignment purposefully feeds into the desired learning outcomes. In UBD, nothing is randomly designed; instead, the learning outcomes serve as a guide for teachers while lesson planning so every miniscule part of the class works towards those learning outcomes.

The intentionality of UBD is beneficial for teachers and students as it keeps courses focused and goal-oriented. The issue with UBD is that predetermining learning outcomes can limit the work that comes out of a writing class because the skills students are introduced to in writing classes are often difficult to measure. For example, how well a student is citing sources or developing their ideas in writing is subjective and may exceed the parameters of established learning outcomes. Writing, even in a discipline-specific class like ENG201, is situational, meaning it depends on
the audience, context, and genre conventions. Further, setting learning outcomes before getting to know students’ needs and identities can result in the teacher making generalizing and limiting assumptions about students and their writing. This is not an issue of quality of writing, more so of disregarding the heterogenous identities in a classroom that predetermined learning outcomes struggle to account for.

**Multiple paths: Predetermined learning outcomes as forced affection**

In his book *After whiteness: an education in belonging* (2020), Willie James Jennings describes “affection” as one component of academic design (p. 61). The classes a department offers, the texts a teacher assigns, and the methods which teachers privilege all participate in the design of students’ affection, of what texts, methods, and ideas they feel drawn to, of what they come to appreciate and reach for even outside the class. Designing affection is not per se a bad practice, but it can mutate into “forced affection (p. 62).” Affection is forced when there is no room for the personal histories, identities, and desires of students. When affection is forced, students are not seen as active participants in the classroom, but mere passive recipients of the teacher’s affection (pp. 63-66).

Jennings notes that in academe, forced affection grows out of “a white aesthetic regime” which ultimately serves to reproduce “the full range of human existence around the white body (p. 63)”. Approaches like Understanding by Design privilege pre-determined learning outcomes that grow out of a racially coded regime. Hence, in writing classes, forced affection isn’t as trivial as students not wanting to write about a certain topic or read a provided text. Forcing affection in writing classes can mean enforcing one standard way of using English, often Standard American English, over other varieties of English. Forcing affection can mean setting up distinct, stifling boundaries of what is considered academic, critical, or creative work. It can mean enforcing one way of what writing is supposed to look like according to the teacher. Forced affection, in any class, but in writing classes in particular, prioritizes one way of being over another, or “white self sufficient masculinity” (Jennings, p. 32).

As the designer of a class, I’m intensely involved in curating course readings, assignments, and the writing skills I choose to introduce to my students. However, my students are not an abstracted body of neutral writers taking up my designed affections without resistance. Therefore, when I establish learning outcomes prior to my course, I make assumptions about the students in the classroom, their needs, and identities. While Wiggins and McTighe do consider “diverse student interest,
developmental levels, large classes and previous achievements” (p. 14), their work lacks focus on identity. For example, desired learning outcomes don’t consider gender, race, class, ability, and other identity markers that make writing more diverse and nuanced than can be captured in one predetermined learning goal. If the learning outcome of a class is to teach students ‘proper’ grammar, excluding varieties of English that aren’t the Standard, certain writers are forced to discount a large part of their identity.

Jenning’s notion of “forced affection” helps complicate desired learning outcomes because they are essentially a way of forcing affection from the moment teachers start planning their course. My intuition is to invite my students to participate in the design of the class and shape the learning outcomes communally, however, even if I adapt my desired learning outcomes after first meeting my students, there is still a way in which my affection is forced by curricular expectations and institutional guidelines. Furthermore, letting students co-design learning outcomes only offers the illusion of choice because eventually, I, the teacher, make decisions based on institutional guidelines, personal preferences, and biases I carry. Additionally, transferring responsibility of the course design onto students is unfair and, I’d argue, an indolent attempt at making a class more student-run. So, the question that lingers for me is, how can I intentionally design a course that doesn’t force affection and considers the identities and learning desires of the actual students in the class?

**Deciding what to do: Course design using “big ideas”**

Based on my research and my prior experiences with teaching English 101, instead of setting iron-clad learning outcomes while planning the course, I plan my course by coming up with “big (and purposefully vague) ideas” I would like my students to engage with during the course. Big ideas still inform my lesson planning and assignments, starting out hollow with potential to evolve as they are filled with different meanings by students and teachers as the class progresses. Students will encounter a plethora of writing methods in ENG 201, they will bring prior knowledge of writing to the class, as well as their embodied knowledge based on their identities, with which they fill the big ideas with specific meaning. Additionally, new methods and understandings of writing can emerge ecologically during the class because the big ideas aren’t as confining as learning outcomes. As a result of big ideas not being as concrete as UBD’s learning outcomes are set out to be, I won’t be able to find explicit evidence of it in my students’ assignments. How students make these big ideas meaningful and show up in their writing depends on their own writing biographies, their personal preferences, and, crucially, their identity.
In ENG 101, I’ve taught a course built on big ideas and have seen many different ways of writing emerge from these classes. The two big ideas of the First-Year Writing Program at Western, developed by Writing Program Administrator Jeremy Cushman, are “Writing looks and works differently in different places” and “Writing is a meaning-making activity.” In other words, writing is situational and inventive, not just a conduit for meaning. For ENG 201, I add onto those ideas by headlining my course with the idea that *researching, reading, and writing are evolving, communally emergent, and diverse practices that create, critique, and contextualize meaning.*

By letting this big idea, instead of learning outcomes, guide my course design, I aim to support students’ individual needs and introduce writing as a communal, relational activity. I also hope to limit the assumptions I make about my students and their writing goals which will require reflection on my part before and during the course. I hope to create space for diverse identities and leave interpretative wiggle room for the form and function of writing. At the same time, my course planning won’t be random because the big idea can still inform the kind of research, reading, and writing encounters I hope to offer my students. By centering an open-ended big idea, I strive to create a classroom culture in which affection is distributed. So, at the end of ENG 201 (and ENG 101, for that matter), my students and I will not have put up our flag at the other side of the river but instead set up tents, have a picnic, light a campfire, or maybe even build a bridge. What students then do with these materials is up to them and something that I cannot plan before we get to the river.

**References**
