Understanding by Design, 2d

By Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe. (2005), 370 pages, ISBN: 9781416600350. $32.95

Subject: How to be a better teacher

Useful for: Useful for teachers interested in how the planning and design of their course impacts how students learn

Format: Chapters with index and an appendix with a sample template

Reviewer's Comments:

Have you ever felt discomfort seeing your students miss something that you know you taught them? For example, on occasion my students have not thought to review the annotations in a statute when looking for case law or secondary sources related to that statute. How could they miss something so obvious?! More discomforting: how can I have done such a bad job teaching that they miss something so obvious? I have realized that I need to adjust how I teach annotated statutes to ensure my students' understanding.

Fortunately, Understanding by Design (referred to as UbD by the authors) can help me with my approach to teaching annotated statutes. The primary purpose of the book is to provide instructors with advice on how to design a course, or units therein, to increase student understanding. For better or worse, the book feels like a textbook written for education students.

What is understanding? Don't worry, there are plenty of pages devoted to this question. In fact, Chapter Two is titled: Understanding Understanding. Joking aside, wordiness, and overly-complicated discussion on relatively straight-forward ideas take away from the book's utility. However, work through the discussion, and you can find gems to help you think critically about designing a course to better ensure understanding. For example, the authors frequently note how to apply their material to skills courses such as legal research.

The core of UbD lies in backward design, which has three stages: 1) identify desired results; 2) determine acceptable evidence; and 3) planning. Each stage is broken down and extensively discussed. The backward design is apparent in that you are first designing the course with the end in mind. I liken stage one to the expected outcomes that I have in my syllabus. One such outcome in my syllabus reads: Know how to find and assess statutes and annotations, and understand how they relate to other sources in the context of legal research. Well, it is one thing to have outcomes, but UbD reinforces the importance of planning your course and assessments with the outcomes in mind.

Stage two introduces assessments, including a discussion on rubrics, and ensuring they are valid and reliable. Stage three covers the actual planning of your course. There are templates throughout the book that help put all this into practice, but it can still feel overwhelming. Also, there is an additional workbook that can be purchased with opportunities to put the material learned into practice: Understanding by Design Professional Development Workbook. I am

interested in next reviewing the Workbook to see if I can apply the lessons learned in UbD to recreate my unit on annotated statutes.

This book is valuable for all those interested in improving course planning. The main ideas and goals of the book are sound, but streamlining the content would greatly increase the effectiveness of the book.

Reviewed by: Stewart Caton, University of North Texas Dallas College of Law, in 2017