

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN

by Craig Doerksen, Regents School of Austin

We have a threefold goal—cultivating affections and character, developing skills and capacity, and building a foundation of knowledge and understanding. At our school, this is embodied in our mission statement when we say we work that students will “know, love, and practice that which is true, good, and beautiful.”

But because schools are culturally and primarily “academic,” and as a result we generally divide up our students’ time by “subjects,” we fight a constant tendency to focus too heavily on the knowing at the expense of loving and practicing. In no place is this clearest than in our curriculum, which we will tend to talk about in terms of content we “cover,” by which we mean the things we will want them to know.

But, we want to focus on all three, and in fact are convinced that they are ultimately inseparable—when I come to deeply understand any aspect of God and His world and order, it will happen also with a love of God and His work, and I will discover my unique capacity to participate in His work with skill and wisdom. If we are only developing knowledge and skills, we are developing clanging gongs, not human beings fully in God’s image.

This challenge—to ensure the curriculum works towards all three goals, not just knowledge—is actually a rewarding one for every teacher. It is not just their minds we want to develop—this is why we teach! So how do we do it?

Beginning a few years ago at Regents, we began a

process (and we are by no means done with the process!) of putting our curriculum into a structure and tool that would help us work towards our ultimate aim. The curriculum structure we use is borrowed from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s *Understanding By Design* (2nd edition). In it they outline a curriculum that encourages two things: One, to think backwards with all curriculum—from content or activities toward the purpose of the unit, from the unit toward the purpose of the course, from the course toward the cross-curriculum purpose of the school year, from that year toward the purpose of the whole school by graduation day.

I highly recommend their work, but I want to pause on a specific concept within it, enduring understanding, as it has been especially helpful for us. As the title of the book implies, understanding is the goal by design. That is, we seek to design our curriculum not around content we cover, but by understandings about reality that we uncover or discover. As a lover of long road trips, I know what it means to cover many miles. And I know that, having covered them, they have no real impact on me. But when I stop, get out of the car, and explore a smaller part of wilderness on foot, I discover things that I keep with me forever. That is what we seek.

Where this is a helpful concept that takes us beyond knowledge-focused education, can best be answered for us when we ask, what does it mean to understand God loves us? That is not just a question for my prefrontal

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cortex, is it? Yet it is the understanding we desire to deepen in our students' education. And it is one that a study of history, literature, science, and the arts can deepen.

Let's connect this to a more academic subject. What does it mean to understand rebellion? Is it right to rebel? When? How do we understand that? Our juniors spend a semester studying European history and literature through the essential question (another key term for Wiggins and McTighe): "When is it right to rebel?" The understanding that we seek to uncover takes them through a wide range of historical people and events, but the end will not be that they've "covered" the French Revolution, but that they've discovered fundamental challenges and realities of our human experience. Imagine how their discovery is enhanced when they are reading *Paradise Lost* at the same time.

Last year I experienced firsthand how much they take with them, when I taught Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to a group of juniors the following semester. The issues and motivations of rebellion were inseparable from their discussions of Frankenstein's transgression of the laws of nature and the monster's hatred of his human creator.

One of the most common "yes, but . . ." challenges as we have been making this transition to "backwards design" has been around the amount of content in our curriculum. "I just cannot get through as much as we used to." On the one hand it is a problem (though I argue we have a false sense of accomplishment when we cover content they do not keep with them for long). But on another, we have discovered (uncovered?) an incredible hidden blessing. When teachers begin to evaluate the content of their courses through the lens of backward design toward understandings that move them closer to knowing, loving, and practicing that which is true, good, and beautiful, they begin to see things that aren't as important to "cover" as others. And, as a leader of teachers, it is a joyous thing to watch teachers improve their courses toward greater fulfillment of our mission,

driving towards the purpose, discovering ways to get there that no one else could imagine without their experience each day with their students. They are both freer to adapt methods to reaching the goal because they have greater clarity of what we're trying to accomplish.

There is much in "backward design" philosophy that we are still discovering. They do not write it with the expectation that schools have such a comprehensive mission as our schools have, missions that are not just academic, but theologically grounded and spiritually formative. They did not have an apologetics course in mind that worked students toward an enduring understanding, ". . . that the problem of evil cannot be "solved" by an argument." Nor can it anticipate the moving joy of seeing students wrestling through arguments, proofs, readings, and stories until they begin to understand not as a sentence to be memorized, but as a profound truth about our condition and God's abounding sacrificial love.