About Backward Design:

Narrator:

Backward design is a useful framework to build a college course.

This framework contains three parts: objectives, assessments, and learning activities. These three elements work together to help create a course that can have a legacy long after the end of the semester. But what makes it backward? Where you start is what makes it backward. The common approach when designing a college course is to start with the "stuff." You grab a textbook, and if you're lucky it's broken into 16 chapters, and you can just cover a chapter a week for the semester and call it done. Ta-da! Instant course. That's a very common approach, but I would argue it's problematic for two reasons. Reason number one: you're the expert in your context, not the textbook publisher. You know your discipline, your department, your university, and your learners better than the publishers. It's not that I think that they're just trying to exploit the tension of an academic's limited available time to sell you their products. Nah... or maybe I do. The instructor, not the textbook publisher, is in the best position to see the ultimate value of the course and to create something meaningful with their learners. And reason number two: when you start with content, you're looking at the things of the course, not the destination. It's like preparing to go on vacation by first packing your suitcase. I've got sunscreen, and a book to read, and a sweater in case it's cold, and some extra socks. I mean, I don't know where I'm going yet, but my suitcase is packed. That's what makes backward design backward. You don't start with the suitcase; you start with the destination. The first step in backward design is creating objectives. It's imagining a time when the course is over and then asking, "What is it I hope that students will have learned that will still be there and have value two years after the course is over?" Your learners are long gone. What do you want them to still know and be able to do from your course? This is your vision for the course, where you dream beyond the sixteen weeks of the semester. I've been asking faculty that question for a decade, and I have never heard the response, "I want my learners to have read chapter four in their textbook." Think bigger than your content. And how you answer that question forms the basis of the learning goals, or the objectives.

Objectives are simple statements that define your vision for the course from the perspective of your learners. My learners will be able to... Identify the forces involved in fluids at rest. Describe public health as a system. Identify the steps to developing a youth leadership development program plan. When you have your objectives, you move on to the second step, which is creating assessments. Begin by asking yourself, "What would the learners have to do to convince me that they had achieved those objectives?" The process of working out the answer to that question clarifies the real meaning of the learning objectives as you create the assessments. And the more honest your objectives are, the more authentic your assessments can be—meaning the projects you ask them to engage in actually look like the work of the discipline outside the classroom. So if your objective for your learners is "Identify the steps to developing a youth leadership development program plan," you can have your learners meet that objective in an authentic way by creating an actual youth development program that they could implement in their lives outside the class. That's an authentic and meaningful assessment. So, you have your objectives, and you've made your assessments. Then you move on to the third step, which is crafting learning activities. Here's where you ask yourself, "What would the learners need to do during the course to be able to do well on these assessments?" You know where you're going. You know what it would look like for your learners to get there, and now you're planning out how to prepare your learners for that journey. This could be readings from a textbook, video lectures, conducting experiments, guest presenters, or anything that helps your learners master what they need to master.

Figuring out the content of the course is the last step in backward design. Now, you need all three elements for this process to work. If you don't have explicit objectives, your assessments, and your learning activities—they may be enjoyable, but they will lack an obvious purpose. Without assessments, how will you know if your learning activities prepared your learners to reach, and possibly reach beyond, your objectives? And without learning activities, well, you miss the opportunity to help your learners practice their skills and are functionally setting them up to fail. These three elements are connected and continually interacting with each other. While I've presented them to be airly linear, in practice there are always revisions along the way— especially with objectives. Starting with the textbook is a very common practice when designing a course, but the tension is that you're starting from the stuff, as opposed to the vision. It's not that starting with the topics you want to cover is wrong, so to speak. But what if starting with content actually limits what you really want your students to learn? Backward design asks the question, "What is it I hope that students will have learned that will still be there and have value two years after the course is over?" And gives you a framework to build towards that vision, creating a learning experience that has a legacy long after the end of the semester.