

Understanding by Design Textbook Adoption Criteria

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Over the years, educators have often asked what to consider when evaluating textbooks in the context of Understanding by Design (UbD). In recent years many publishers have begun to use UbD terminology (e.g., “the big idea” or “essential questions”) as a way to label their books without necessarily integrating the UbD approach. Below is a series of questions to evaluate the fidelity of a textbook program to UbD and help inform your adoption decision. A total score of more than 60 (an average rating of at least 3 on each question) would be needed in order to make the claim that the text is faithful to the UbD approach.

Rate textbooks on each criterion using a 1–4 scale. ① not at all ② rarely ③ usually ④ always

Do the materials really stay focused on big ideas? Or do they just mention them in passing and focus on content?

Materials provide:

- A few “big” questions and ideas—concepts, themes, issues—worthy of intense study
① ② ③ ④
- Questions and issues that are vital and thought-provoking, not just “teacherly”
① ② ③ ④
- Chapters and units that are not only introduced with a key question, concept, or strategy, but are explicitly organized around them
① ② ③ ④
- A layout that focuses learner’s attention on a few key understanding-related goals without endless distractions
① ② ③ ④

Do the materials continually revisit big ideas? Or is each idea addressed once, superficially?

Materials provide:

- Chapters and units that use *recurring* “big” ideas and questions to develop ideas in greater depth, and from different perspectives
① ② ③ ④
- Study guides and graphic organizers that help students stay focused on the big picture
① ② ③ ④

- Assessments and activities that ask students to reconsider their previous answers and textbook claims from previous lessons, units and/or chapters
① ② ③ ④

Do the materials consistently require learners to draw inferences beyond what is stated in the text? Or are the learning activities predominantly low-level and devoted mostly to learning content without larger purposes or tasks?

Materials provide:

- Continual opportunities for students to go beyond the content to make important generalizations, conclusions, and other inferences
① ② ③ ④
- Work that requires the “six facets of understanding”—students must explain, interpret, apply, consider varied perspectives, empathize, and explore their own perceptions
① ② ③ ④
- Real problems that require strategy and careful thought, not just simple exercises that only reinforce the content just taught
① ② ③ ④
- Ample opportunities to use high-level processes, e.g., research, scientific inquiry, strategic reading, writing, problem solving and decision making
① ② ③ ④

(continued on other side)

Do the materials include many assessments of student understanding (meaning-making and transfer)? Or are most of the assessments focused on recall and “plugging in” of the recently-covered content?

Materials provide:

- Assessments that require students to go beyond what was covered in the chapter: links to issues in other chapters, transfer of learning to relevant real-world contexts, in-depth connections to local or present circumstances, and so on
① ② ③ ④
- Tips to both teachers and students about common misconceptions or problems with transfer, and what to do about each
① ② ③ ④
- Formative assessments during the units to gauge student understanding, and useful instructional tips for how to remediate in the absence of adequate understanding
① ② ③ ④
- Transfer tasks that require students to apply their learning in varied and realistic contexts, mindful of purpose, audience, and setting
① ② ③ ④

Do the materials contain interesting, challenging, and varied learning activities? Or is the material as presented in the text likely to encourage too much teacher talk, dull exercises, and/or passive and purposeless learning?

Materials provide:

- Activities that help students engage right from the start with important ideas and issues
① ② ③ ④

- Narrative that doesn't overwhelm learners with technical vocabulary and facts before they are needed
① ② ③ ④
- Varied work that helps students work individually and collectively on worthy challenges/problems/projects to further their understanding and their ability to use it
① ② ③ ④
- Explicit advice to teachers on how to use different instructional strategies and classroom structures to make learning engaging as well as effective
① ② ③ ④

Do the materials encourage increasing student autonomy and strategic decisions in students' work? Or are students just expected to march through content in a highly directed way?

Materials provide:

- Activities and assessments that require increased student strategic thinking about what is being asked by a question, how to plan, what materials and past content to use, what to do when stuck, and so on
① ② ③ ④
- Work that provides students with fewer and fewer obvious clues, scaffolding, and hand-holding as to what content the activity/test question requires
① ② ③ ④