

### Understanding by Denise

by Denise Ryder

*Author's note: I haven't been so "all over the map" with regard to writing an article since college! Here I am with a great headline, and now I'm not sure where to go!*

*Across the district we have such varied experiences with Understanding by Design, I wasn't sure if I was expected to poke fun at UbD (like I think some of my colleagues might be hoping), or try to explain it). Or a little bit of both.*

*The first three or so paragraphs are lightly seasoned with obnoxious commentary. But as I continued, one thing became clear. I do not have sufficient training in UbD to effectively poke fun at or clearly explain. Now I'm getting that uncomfortable feeling you get when you are supposed to do something and you realize you haven't received proper instruction. It's like walking back into school in September and being expected to use PowerSchool with no training. Wait. That did happen.*

*Although I am a quick study when motivated, this doesn't take the place of proper instruction and/or hands on experience. I did, however, have my own personal break through, but if I told you what that breakthrough was now you probably wouldn't keep reading. Maybe you won't anyway! Anyway, here goes...*

*Understanding by Design* is an "increasingly popular tool for educational planning focused on 'teaching for understanding'." Teaching for understanding. Now there's a thought!

Most folks refer to Understanding by Design as UbD, because what would an educational trend be without a cool acronym – and that lowercase "d" is *sooo* sexy. It was created by educators Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, as a "framework for designing curriculum units, performance assessments, and instruction

that lead your students to deep understanding of the content you teach." Ahhh, deep understanding...because before, we were only looking for a sort-of vague, superficial kind of understanding from students??

The emphasis of UbD is backward design, which means looking at the outcomes... Ahhh, looking at outcomes... OK, I'll stop. But wait! Did I mention the cool template?

Fine. Fine. Fine. It's out of my system. Let's get down to business.

I am struggling with this topic, as evidenced by the sarcasm above, because, thus far, UbD does not "speak" to me. But there are plenty of people I respect who are really into it, so I have to figure out *why*. And I have to write about it. Because I promised I would.

What do I do when I need to know? I read a book! I am reading the book. On pages 7-9 of Understanding by Design (Alexandria: ASCD, 2005), in a section called, "What this book isn't about," I found a few pearls. Number 4 says, "This book is primarily focused on the design of curricular units (as opposed to individual lessons...)." This may be why I am not *personally* enthused about UbD - because I don't normally write curricular units myself. Or should I say *by myself*. And number 5 says, "There are clearly circumstances when this is neither feasible nor desirable..." It goes on to list things like learning the alphabet, acquiring certain technical skills, and developing the basics in a foreign language, because these skills do not call for in-depth understanding. I am certainly not saying that *all* I teach are skills, but lots of things I teach *are* skills. The cool stuff mostly comes from the content and the content, for me, comes working with other teachers.

#### "I want my UbD!"

As I read on, I see at least one reason why administration wants UbD.

### Jericho Teachers Association

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Although I have heard some UbD enthusiasts boast that you can even plan a dinner party with it, UbD is designed for unit and or curriculum planning. This would suggest (without actually *saying*) that your Phase I R&D should be a unit. Sneaky, sneaky! But that's OK because, if you think about it, nobody is actually asking you to invent anything new. More on that thought later.

Let's say you have a really great unit that you already teach. If it is truly a great and effective unit, then it should just *slide* into that cool template. Right? Maybe, maybe not.

In the center I have included three figures from Understanding by Design. The first figure (11.2) shows a Social Studies unit on Westward Movement. At first glance it looks like a fine unit and I'm sure the kids would have fun at "Prairie Day."

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Understanding by Denise *continued*

(Continued from page 1)

Take a minute to glance at 11.2. The second figure (11.3) is the same Social Studies Unit in a UbD template. The third figure (11.4 on page 4) is the same lesson with the template complete. I went through it section by section. If you follow along with me, the next part will make more sense.

### Stage 1

The first thing that struck me is (if we can agree that it is good to start with the goal in mind) that the title of the unit went into the Established Goal area of the template (labeled G), but in the figure (11.4), established goals are listed. Having the goals right there at the start is nice, it gives perspective and makes things clear.

The next two sections of the template in figure 11.3 - "Understandings" (labeled U) and "Essential Questions" (labeled Q) are blank. "Essential questions" is sort of UbD jargon, so I see why that section is blank, but why is "Understandings" blank? Aren't these kids going to understand anything when they're done? Puzzled, I go on to the next section. "Students will know..." (labeled K) which has three bulleted items.

"Students will know

- factual information about prairie life
- pioneer vocabulary
- the story Sarah Plain and Tall

And this is when I realize, or become more acutely aware, that there *is* a difference between *knowing* and *understanding*. Look it up, I did. Understanding is deeper. "Students will be able to..." (labeled S) is also blank, because, considering what they know (facts, vocab, a story), all they are probably ready for is a quiz.

### Stage 2

"Performance Tasks" (labeled T) is blank. "Other Evidence" (labeled OE) has a few items listed, but I'm not sure why they are "Other Evidence" and not "Performance Tasks." At this point, I don't think it matters much.

### Stage 3

The "Learning Activities" section (labeled L) has activities listed but by now the whole thing just screams "I could have been more!" The students were never asked to think, never to engage in the topic. In order to make this Westward Movement and Pioneer Life unit take off you'd really need to be a content area expert with loads of experience and be teaching WAY off the page. Yeah, yeah, everyone *is* an expert. But what's the harm in your unit plan reflect your creativity and brilliance.

Now looking at figure 11.4. I would feel a lot more confident if given this plan. But of course that's because this is not my area of expertise.

To me, what makes it better are all the questions. In my "business" I see *a lot* of assignments. All different grade levels, all different subjects. Before we started talking about *Understanding by Design* I used to call some assignments "copy and paste" projects, because *when* they are lacking, *what* they are basically lacking are essential questions - the kind that cannot simply be found. They shouldn't be able to "Google" it.

I know you are saying to yourself, "Ryder has gone over to the UbDark side." Not true. I am always open to new ways of doing things. The day I refuse to reflect and revise is the day I should think about shoveling horse manure full time (and no, that is not a reference to becoming an administrator)!

How would one of your units fair in a UbD template? Better than the Westward Movement I'd bet. Try it. After all, nobody asking you to do anything new....

## Our Fab Faculty: Congratulations to...

**Serena McCalla** (HS, Science Research) won the Long Island Junior Science & Humanities Symposium Outstanding Teacher Award which honors the individual teacher and his/her school's contributions to advancing student participation in research.

**Paul Bode** (HS Math), **Mary Jo Moriarity** (HS Guidance), and **Charu Vardhan** (HS English), were selected as Harvard Club of Long Island Distinguished Teachers.

**Mary Bauer**, **Trish Gulitti**, and **Suzanne Valenza** (all HS English) received the Award for Technology and Reading from the International Reading Association.

**Jan Porinchak** (MA Art) recently completed an extensive series of illustrations for Suffolk County Parks, which are being used as interpretive signage for the new Seatuck

Environmental Center in Islip. The detailed illustrations depict a portion of Long Islands coastline, and many of the animals which live there. Children visiting Seatuck can interact with the display by placing the animal pictures (which are magnetic) on the landscape illustration where they think the different creatures would be most likely to live. Jan also recently completed illustrations depicting various plants, animals, and habitats for use at the Cary Institute of Ecosystems Studies, in Millbrook NY. As a volunteer, Jan also hosted a video about the ecosystems found in Long Islands Nissequogue River State park. The movie is being used by the Kings Park School District as part of its science curriculum, and was on local access TV. You can see more of Jan's work and the nature program at: <http://natureworks-illustration.com/about-us.html>

(Continued on page 5)

**Non-elective Employer Contribution of Retirement Lump Sum MOA Passes with 221 votes**

Figure 11.2  
Original Version of a Social Studies Unit

<b>Topic</b>	Westward Movement and Pioneer Life Social Studies—3rd Grade
<b>Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read textbook section—"Life on the Prairie." Answer the end-of-chapter questions.</li> <li>2. Read and discuss Sarah Plain and Tall. Complete a word-search puzzle of pioneer vocabulary terms from the story.</li> <li>3. Create a pioneer-life memory box with artifacts that reflect what life might be like for a child traveling west or living on the prairie.</li> <li>4. Prairie Day activities: Dress in pioneer clothes and complete the learning stations.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Churn butter</li> <li>b. Play 19th-century game</li> <li>c. Seal letter home with sealing wax</li> <li>d. Play "dress the pioneer" computer game</li> <li>e. Make a corn husk doll</li> <li>f. Quilting</li> <li>g. Tin punching</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<b>Assessments</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quiz on pioneer vocabulary terms from Sarah Plain and Tall</li> <li>2. Answers to end-of-chapter questions on pioneer life</li> <li>3. Show and tell for memory-box contents</li> <li>4. Completion of seven learning stations during Pioneer Day</li> <li>5. Student reflections on the unit</li> </ol>

Figure 11.3  
Social Studies Unit in the UBD Template

<b>Stage 1—Desired Results</b>	<b>Established Goals:</b>  Topic: Westward Movement and Pioneer Life
<b>U</b>	<b>Essential Questions:</b>
<b>U</b>	<b>Understandings:</b> <i>Students will understand that . . .</i>
<b>K</b>	<b>Students will know . . .</b>
<b>S</b>	<b>Students will be able to . . .</b>
<b>Stage 2—Assessment Evidence</b>	<b>Other Evidence:</b>
<b>T</b>	<b>Performance Tasks:</b>
<b>OE</b>	<b>Learning Activities:</b>
<b>L</b>	<b>Stage 3—Learning Plan</b>

# Save the date! JTA End-of-Year Party

Wednesday, June 9, 2010 at the Fox Hollow, 4-7:30

We will be celebrating both our retirees and our newly tenured teachers!



*Retirees: Mary Bauer, Paula Cardias, Kathy DeFina, Barbara Harris, Chuck Koppeis, Josephine Langone, Mike Malkush, Andrea Messinger, Janice Raphan, Kathleen-Maurer Rittel, William Wuest*

*Tenure Recipients: John Cicale, Danielle Dunbar, Lauryn Fischer, Serena McCalla, Joseph Sapienza, Pamela Travis*

Figure 11.4

## Social Studies Unit After Backward Design

Stage 1—Desired Results	
<p><b>Established Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2D—Explain the lure of the West, while comparing the illusions of migrants with the reality of the frontier.</li> <li>5A—Demonstrate understanding of the movements of large groups of people in the United States now and long ago.</li> </ul> <p>Source: National Standards for United States History</p>	<p><b>Other Essential Questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why do people move? Why did the pioneers leave their homes to head west?</li> <li>How do geography and topography affect travel and settlement?</li> <li>Why did some pioneers survive and prosper while others did not?</li> <li>What is a pioneer? What is "pioneer spirit"?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Understandings:</b></p> <p>Students will understand that . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many pioneers had naive ideas about the opportunities and difficulties of moving West.</li> <li>People move for a variety of reasons—for new economic opportunities, greater freedoms, or to flee something.</li> <li>Successful pioneers rely on courage, ingenuity, and collaboration to overcome hardships and challenges.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Students will know . . .</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key facts about the westward movement and pioneer life on the prairie</li> <li>Pioneer vocabulary terms</li> <li>Basic geography (i.e., the travel routes of pioneers and location of their settlements)</li> </ul>
Stage 2—Assessment Evidence	
<p><b>Performance Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a museum display, including artifacts, pictures, and diary entries, depicting a week in the life of a family of settlers living on the prairie. (What common misunderstandings do folks today have about prairie life and westward settlement?)</li> <li>Write one letter a day (each representing a month of travel) to a friend "back east" describing your life on the wagon train and the prairie. Tell about your hopes and dreams, then explain what life on the frontier was really like. (Students may also draw pictures and explain orally.)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other Evidence:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral or written response to one of the Essential Questions</li> <li>Drawings showing hardships of pioneer life</li> <li>Test on facts about westward expansion, life on the prairie, and basic geography</li> <li>Using pioneer vocabulary in context</li> <li>Explanation of the memory box contents</li> </ul>
Stage 3—Learning Plan	
<p><b>Learning Activities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use K-W-L to assess students' prior knowledge and identify learning goals for the unit.</li> <li>Revise Prairie Day activities (e.g., substitute Oregon Trail 2 computer simulation for "dress the pioneer" and ask for journal entries while the simulation is played).</li> <li>Include other fictional readings linked to the identified content standards or understandings (e.g., <i>Little House on the Prairie</i>, <i>Butter in the Well</i>).</li> <li>Create a time line map of a pioneer family's journey west.</li> <li>Add notification sources to accommodate various reading levels, such as <i>Life on the Oregon Trail</i>, <i>Diaries of Pioneer Women and Dakota</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Layout:</b> Guide students in using a variety of resources to research the period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review the scoring rubrics for memory box, museum display, letters, and journals before students begin the performance tasks.</li> <li>Include opportunities for students to study examples of these products.</li> </ul>

## Letter to the Editor?

*I found this paragraph in my mailbox. I don't know if the writer wanted to be anonymous or just forgot to sign his or her name, but the concern is a good one, so here it is:*

The school district spends more than \$80,000 a month on its energy consumption, and we are all aware of Jericho's efforts to curb costs, particularly as they impact staff and purchasing decisions. Why can't staff make the smallest effort to turn off computers and monitors when they leave for the day?

It's dispiriting to drive by the school at night, or enter a district building early in the morning, to be met by the glow of computer equipment. One can enter a teacher's workroom or classroom during a holiday break and find more than 90% of the equipment running (albeit in standby mode). Do most of you do this at home? Doubtful. And aside from the wear on the equipment, it's more than a few cents if you multiply the pennies by the number of devices in the district. Why aren't we setting an example or, at the very least, demonstrating some restraint?

Take a moment to act responsibly and reduce both the district's costs and your carbon footprint.

*The note was accompanied by the following Web address: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/6747323.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6747323.stm)*

## Our Fertile Faculty: Congratulations to...

Joe Sapienza (HS Life Skills) is the proud father of Tyler Michael Sapienza who arrived April 25th.

Peggy Minnick (HS World Language) is proud to announce her newest grandchild, Ada Linden Cornett, born on Monday, April 26.

Jim Mendonis (HS Social Studies) welcomes *twins* Lilah and Nicholas who were born April 20th.

Kathy DeFina (Cantiague) is proud to announce the birth of her granddaughter, Lucy Ramirez, who was born on April 15th.

Janine Maione (Cantiague) gave birth to Jaden Richard Maione on March 5th. He arrived 9 weeks early and was 3 lbs 9 oz. He was in the NICU for a month but is home now and doing fine!

Elissa Cosenza (Jackson) welcomes baby Francesco, born February 18th.

Debbie Larkin (Jackson) welcomes Samantha Grace, November 25th.



## Our Fab Faculty *continued*

*(Continued from page 2)*

**Louise Millmann** (HS Art) and **Nadine Boulter** (HS English) had their art exhibited in the following venues this year: Emily Harvey Foundation Gallery NYC, Museum of Modern Art Wales in England, Queens Museum of Art, Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, Exit 11 Gallery in Belgium, San Diego State University, Los Angeles County Museum of Fine Art, Museu Brasileiro da Escultura in San Paulo Brazil, Ripe Art Gallery in Greenlawn, Louisiana State University Digital Art Gallery, Festival of Art and Literature in Tijuana, Mexico, The Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, Artists Wanted Exhibition NYC, Surface Gallery in Nottingham UK, and the Museum of Modern Art Library Collection in NYC. Louise will be showing her work with photographer Rob Gilmer in a photography/ collage exhibition this summer at the RNG Gallery in Omaha, Nebraska. Nadine and Louise will be teaming up for a special 2 person art exhibition in December 2010 at the Ripe Art Gallery in Greenlawn, NY. Updates and portfolios of recent work can be seen at

Nadine's Boulder- Design Group Blog located at <http://boulderdesigngroup.blogspot.com/>

**Holly Kim** was selected as one of 15 teachers into Bilingual Education and ESL Teacher Leadership Academy (BETLA) at Fordham University. Fordham received this grant from NY State and selected 15 ESL/Bilingual teachers from Long Island Schools!

**Cate Rawlings** (HS World Language) is an inventor! She just received one patent and has another patent pending for pet products for the home. Take a sneak peek at her website: [www.invention.net/rawlings](http://www.invention.net/rawlings) Hey! Anyone know a manufacturer?

A collection of essays by **Alberto** (HS World Language) titled "**MEMENTO**," has been published in *The Artists Registry*. Published both in this country and abroad, they have been at the Smithsonian since 2002. Also, the WTC Memorial Museum has informed him that some of his contributions will be there permanently. One is an interview he gave to *StoryCorps*, regarding his comments on essays about 9/11 (600 interviews were selected).