



## Development of Subject Department Series



## Rethinking Curriculum Review:

# Let's Begin with the End

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Helping students to achieve satisfactory grades in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination is one of the ultimate goals of teachers. The release of results signifies the end of the six-year uphill struggle. From another perspective, it is time for teachers to begin their review of learning and teaching efficacy. As a School Development Officer, my goal is to help teachers achieve theirs.



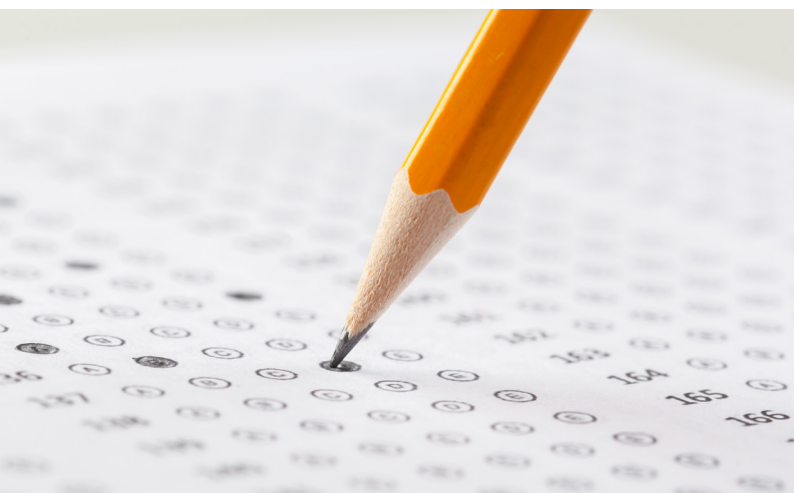
## Needs Analysis

To get the collaborative team started on the right foot, understanding the needs of students and teachers is the preliminary step. Making good use of assessment data like TSA, DSE and internal examination is a strategy to serve this purpose. Analyzing the data in context not only provides a means to identify students' learning difficulties, but also provides information about program effectiveness.

Based on my experience in supporting the curriculum leaders at different schools, an “Aha” moment would come when teachers realize the influence of curriculum quality on academic failure. The most common problem falls into an apparent lack of alignment between teaching, learning and assessment. Thus, developing a coherent school-based curriculum with horizontal coherence and vertical progression is always the focus of our collaboration.

## The Backward Design Approach

In the process of curriculum review, it is not rare to notice a typical practice among teachers: revolving around topics in a textbook, targeted grammar items and lesson activities. In contrast with this traditional model, teachers are recommended to go for the idea of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) which works the other way round. The approach places intended learning outcomes at the heart of the planning process of the curriculum design. There are three stages to backward design:



### Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

At the very beginning of the planning process, teachers need to think about the assessments and goals. They may ask themselves a few key questions like “What should students be able to do in the test?” or “What goals (such as common core DSE standards) that students are to achieve?”

### Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence of Learning

For stage 2, teachers should think about how they will know if a student has or has not achieved the learning outcomes and what tasks will provide evidence of achievement. Examples include asking questions, homework, reflections, performance tasks, quizzes, examinations, etc.

### Stage 3: Develop Learning Experiences

After deciding how students will demonstrate their learning, create activities that correlate with the assessment method to help them achieve the desired results.

Beginning with the end, teachers are able to address the learning needs of students, guide curricular development from the get-go and prepare students for summative assessment at the end of the school year. The clearer we know what and how students are expected to demonstrate competence, the better we plan instruction.

## A School-based Example

To strive for a better alignment of teaching, learning and assessment, a group of English teachers<sup>1</sup> have adopted the theory of Backward Planning to create their teaching unit plans, ensuring teaching and learning remains focused and organized. They closely followed the three stages step by step: placing the desired outcomes; deciding how students will be assessed and planning teaching and learning activities. Let's take the writing part of an S4 unit plan to illustrate how teachers put the new approach into practice.



### Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

It is expected that students will be able to write a job application letter by the end of the unit. In their letter, they should include the features below:

1. the correct format
2. appropriate sentences for opening and closing of the letter
3. appropriate vocabulary describing job duties
4. appropriate vocabulary describing personal qualities suitable for the chosen job
5. past tense to describe past experiences
6. present tense to describe personality
7. present perfect tense to talk about what they have learned from the experiences
8. correct coherence (cause-effect relationship)

### Stage 2: Determine Acceptable Evidence of Learning

In order to measure whether and to what degree students have achieved the unit goals, students will be asked to write a letter to apply for a summer job, referring to details shown on a job advertisement in the second term examination. Students have to state why they are interested in the position and why it is suitable for them. The assessment task allows students to show their mastery of the specific skills/items specified in the previous stage.

### Stage 3: Develop Learning Experiences

With an intention to help students accomplish the assessment task, the following supporting instructional strategies are designed.

1. Mixed tenses exercises focusing on simple present, simple past and present perfect.
2. Sentence writing using causal conjunctions “so, therefore, hence and thus”.
3. Reading of job ads to explore vocabulary of names of common jobs, duties of common jobs and qualities of candidates.
4. Analysis of the structure of a formal letter.
5. Introducing sentence patterns for the opening and closing.

After trying Backward Planning for two years, teachers agree that it is an effective way of providing guidance for instruction and designing lessons and units. Once the desired results have been identified, teachers find it easier to focus on what is necessary. They now employ more thoughtful and purposeful planning and teaching, which can sufficiently equip students with what they need to achieve their learning outcomes. Most importantly, the noticeable improvement student made in writing further places confidence in using Backward Planning among the teachers. Backward Planning will definitely continue to be one of the major concerns of the English department in the coming years.

#### Notes

Note [1]: Teachers of Caritas Fanling Chan Chun Ha Secondary School.

#### References

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design (2nd ed.)*. ASCD.

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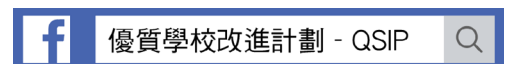
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