



ACET, Inc.

Action Consulting and Evaluation Team

Summer 2011 Newsletter

Issue 31

Summer Activities

After a long winter and a cool spring, we're ready to get started with summer! Here are some of our plans:

Stella: Summer for my husband and I is always filled with summer chores. This year, we are tackling a backyard landscaping and patio project that involves trenching over 150 feet to bury a gas line for an outdoor fire pit. With this effort, we hope to be able to spend many weekends barbecuing in the back yard and enjoying the sun. On another note, we have been busy searching for a new home for my mother. She currently lives in Louisiana and we hope to bring her closer to our home since the passing of my stepfather.

Kirsten: My husband, Zack, and I will (hopefully) be installing a fence in our backyard this summer for our dog, Casey. We will also be doing some 'staycationing.' My 86-year old grandfather will be visiting this summer and we plan on spending a week with him and other members of our family, preferably on a lake. Zack loves to fish and Casey loves to swim. Me? I'll be happily sitting on the beach with my toes buried in the sand and my nose buried in a great book!

Joseph: My partner and I will be heading back to California to see the family and revisit some of my home state. There are tentative plans to spend some time on the north coast in the Redwoods and on the beach, to take a trip down to Napa and Sonoma wine country, and to spend a day in San Francisco. Around Minnesota, I hope to put my camping supplies to good use and, as with all seasons, keep the dog exercised.

Rachel: This summer I plan to make the rounds to all my favorite Twin Cities coffee spots, lakes, and bookstores before moving out to Washington, D.C. in July. I am sad to be leaving Minnesota and my work at ACET, but excited to begin a new chapter of life in the nation's capitol, working for the next two years in a federal agency as a Presidential Management Fellow.

Cassie: I am very excited to start my summer mainly because my long-distance partner of two years is finally moving back to the cities. I am glad to have him home, but it's going to be a long few months of moving him up and then finding a place to move in together. As a break, we will be attending my family's annual tubing party and grill-out – that's always guaranteed to be a good time. Also, I am both sad and excited to announce that I will be pursuing a new opportunity as a Community Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator with my favorite nonprofit, West Suburban Teen Clinic. I will definitely miss all of the wonderful people I have met through my position here!



Congratulations Rachel!

We at ACET are pleased to announce that as of May 15, 2011, our Research Assistant, Rachel, officially received her Master's of Public Policy from the University of Minnesota. Please join us in congratulating Rachel on all of her hard work. She will join the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a Presidential Management Fellow.

Evaluation Workshops

In April, Stella conducted a six-hour workshop on impact reporting for the University of Minnesota-Extension Office. The five-part workshop covered topics relevant to the Center for Youth Development, including drafting impact statements and reporting results to a variety of stakeholders. Upcoming workshops include a four-part webinar series on focus group facilitation for the National Interpreter Educational Center. If you are interested in a similar workshop customized to fit your organizational needs, please contact stella@acetinc.com

***Subscribe to ACET's blog for weekly updates! www.acetinc.com/blog**

Understanding by Design—Backwards Design

By Cassie Clark and Rachel Wofford

“Knowing the facts and doing well on tests of knowledge do not mean that we understand.”

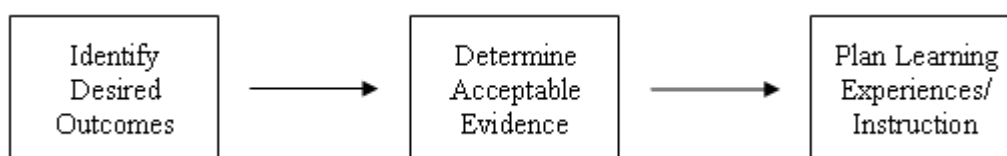
Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998, p. 39)

In *Understanding by Design*, authors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argue that in many schools, success is measured not by how deeply a student understands a concept, but by how capable that student is of memorizing facts, opinions, and processes and then regurgitating them on tests or projects. Consequently, even the most successful students may have only surface-level (and, ultimately, fleeting) understandings of concepts supposedly needed for success in the real world. Teachers’ expectations of their students, the authors argue, only require their pupils to appear to understand. Thus, teachers are satisfied when their students provide the right term, recite an exact definition, or use an appropriate equation in a familiar context.

An education system satisfied by such superficial appearances of understanding produces students who are unable to apply what they learn beyond the walls of the classroom or who cannot produce strong justifications for their opinions. The authors recall a story (p. 39) about philosopher John Dewey, who got no response when he asked a class of children who had been studying layers of the earth, “What would you find if you dug a hole in the earth?” The children’s teacher reprimanded Mr. Dewey, saying, “You’re asking the wrong question.” She then turned to the class and said, “What is the state of the center of the earth?” to which all the children immediately replied, “igneous fusion.” The authors found this scenario, which highlights the limited applicability of students’ learning, to be surprisingly common across the country.

To tackle such superficial understanding, Wiggins and McTighe offer a solution called backwards design. They propose that considering the goals or desired outcomes of the curriculum before drafting the instruction can significantly enhance student understanding. By first identifying acceptable “evidence” that would indicate students have a deep understanding of a concept, Wiggins and McTighe believe that teachers can “combat the likelihood of deeply rooted misconceptions and the potential for misunderstanding” (p. 43). In other words, planning curriculum in entirety allows teachers to avoid a classroom full of students only able to recall precisely phrased questions.

But how does a backwards design approach work? Wiggins and McTighe suggest that by giving curriculum a precise, structured framework, teachers can guide their design to increase student understanding. The diagram below illustrates the authors’ layout:



Allow us to break this down further. Teachers start by identifying themes, connections, and timeless truths that students should understand when a unit is over, keeping content standards (i.e., national, state, district) in mind. They also review curriculum expectations, knowing that not all material can or should be covered. They then determine acceptable evidence that would indicate students’ mastery of those objectives (i.e., informal check, observation/ dialogue, quiz/test, academic prompt, performance task/project). Finally, teachers plan the day-to-day lesson plans and activities that will lead students to success.

Although Wiggins and McTighe do not have much evidence that backwards design significantly improves student understanding, they do provide anecdotal evidence that many students are not leaving school with deep, long-lasting comprehension. In their book, the authors go into great detail on their proposed solution to helping students achieve and obtain a deeper understanding throughout their education. If interested in learning more, we suggest reading their book, *Understanding by Design*.

References:

Wiggins, G & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, Inc.