



Understanding Bible by Design: Create Courses with Purpose

Lester, G. Brooke; with Webster, Jane S.; and Jones, Christopher M.

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Book Review

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Lester, Webster, and Jones came together from different academic contexts to create a practical, succinct resource for professors on course design. Lester and his co-authors set out to demonstrate how the principles of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's 2005 updated *Understanding by Design* (UbD) model can be applied to theological or religious disciplines in higher education. UbD is a method for designing courses that intentionally fulfill the instructor's stated course goals from day one.

UbD is a learner-centered approach intended to focus on the macro-level objectives of the course. UbD seeks to generate courses where each class is connected clearly with the objectives. Lester finds that UbD works best for course units or individual lessons in his Master's level courses on the Bible. He provides helpful examples of how he applies the concepts of UbD to his teaching approach or assessment of assignments. While Lester uses the model's "essential questions" to structure course units, the other authors show how UbD could apply to an entire course.

For teachers of undergraduates, Webster's chapter is very insightful. She provides in-depth examples of the types of assignments she assigns, exam questions and "metaquestions" utilized throughout the course. For her New Testament course, Webster assigns sixteen one- to two-page papers that build on each other and advance students' writing skills. This is an ideal assignment for any instructor, but it must be noted that all three authors have teaching loads lighter than a typical small liberal arts college faculty member's teaching load of 4/4 or 4/3. Nevertheless, such assignments constitute a helpful resource for all higher education teachers.

The final chapter demonstrates how the principles applied by Lester and Webster aid in developing non-biblical courses. Here Jones writes about his successes and failures as he developed his courses on Rituals and Early Judaism for the first time. The benefit of this chapter is the honest analysis of how he set up his course and his own reflections on the results, including pitfalls for new followers of the UbD model and thoughts on the unique pressures of teaching at a college or university for the first time.

The chapter on creating an online course is less effective because half of the chapter is a general defense of online teaching. The other half of the chapter lacks the type of precision one finds in the other chapters since it does not include a specific course as an example.

This small volume is a great resource and quick reference for graduate students, new professors, and professors who have had little guidance on teaching. Each author introduces the concepts of Understanding by Design in a succinct and accessible manner that moves smoothly through the thought process of implementing it. For anyone who has been teaching for a longer period of time, the book could be a good resource for modifying current courses. While the work is geared toward courses on the Bible, the concepts can be transferred effortlessly to nearly any other theological discipline.

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