



# MAKING LEARNING STICK

TEACHING FOR TRANSFER ENSURES STUDENTS CAN APPLY WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED

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**A** dilemma for teachers at all levels is planning for *transfer* of learning, or students' long-term retention. Most teachers consider their lessons a success if students can acquire information and understand it. But it is not until students can apply what they learn that there is cause for celebration.

Much has been written about how difficult it is to achieve transfer, the third of three learning stages. The previous two are easier to accomplish: *acquisition*, or taking in a body of information, and *meaning-making*, which involves analysis and synthesis

to make sense of the learning at hand (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Getting students to transfer, or *application*, is difficult to achieve, but essential. Transfer of learning takes time, a precious commodity for teachers bound by a tight schedule. Unfortunately, transfer often gets lost in the day-to-day realities of schools, including testing requirements.

Students who are seeking good grades often ask, "Will this be on the test?" and try to commit information to memory only if the teacher says it will be on the test, quickly forgetting the information after the test because they never truly understood or applied it.

One way for the teacher to make sure that he or she is taking the learning to transfer is to follow the framework of Understanding by Design, developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.

In their 2011 book, *The Understanding by Design Guide*, Wiggins and McTighe flipped the notion that teachers teach content to be regurgitated (and promptly forgotten) to a learning community with teachers as designers of learning. In this approach, teachers begin with a transfer goal and then backwards plan so that their classroom strategies and instructional practices target the goal.

One of the unique things about the

BREAKING DOWN THE TRANSFER GOAL		
<b>A</b> If I see and hear them do this, they <b>CAN</b> transfer this learning.	<b>B</b> If I see and hear them do this, then they <b>CANNOT</b> (yet) transfer:	<b>C</b> I will commit to doing this differently in my classroom to ensure my results look like Column A and not Column B.
Use vivid adjectives and adverbs to help the reader see what the writer sees.	Descriptions are simple and lack clarity. Details tell rather than show.	Introduce new vocabulary based on senses and actions. Together prepare a class word bank with pictures in the Moodle.
Write a well-organized descriptive paragraph using spatial order.	When describing a picture, the details are in random order.	Show them models and pictures to help with description. Use gradual release of responsibility and models of spatial order paragraphs to help them organize details.
Look at a picture and clearly describe the context and what people are doing.	Student is confused and frustrated. The description of the picture is simple, incomplete, or vague.	Using the communicative approach, model correct writing, and teach them how to write a paragraph. Teach students to use rubrics for self-assessment and reflection on how to improve.

Understanding by Design framework is that it focuses on learning from the student’s point of view. To consider transfer in the design process, teachers must remove themselves from the expert position and consider what it will take for a novice learner to grasp the ideas and concepts.

Two different sites where teaching for transfer is thriving are a university in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and a high school in North Carolina. They show how this process can be useful at two different educational levels and in very different contexts, yielding similarly positive results.

### THE TRANSFER GOAL

Teachers begin with establishing a transfer goal — what they want students to be able to do with the content they are learning. Then they complete the following prompt: “I want my students to learn ... so that, in the long run and on their own, they can ... .”

To complete this prompt, the teacher needs to ask himself: Why am I teaching this? What do I want my students to do with this when we are finished with the unit? What about this content do I want my students to remember in the long run?

Here is an example of a transfer goal: *I want my students to learn to use vivid adjectives, appropriate grammar,*

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*and vocabulary so that, in the long run and on their own, they will be able to produce a well-written descriptive paragraph.* The transfer goal clearly delineates the expectation for the unit and spells out what needs to be included in the instructional plan.

### MAKING THE GOAL VISIBLE

To plan classroom activities and assessments that target the transfer goal, teachers need to deconstruct, or break down, the transfer goal. In this process, teachers ask themselves two questions: What would I see and hear if the students were able to transfer? What would I see and hear if the students were **not yet** able to transfer?

Both questions help the designer think about expectations, outcomes, obstacles, and misunderstandings. The “not yet” idea points to the issue as temporary with a possible solution that the teacher controls.

By posing and answering these questions, the teacher becomes action-oriented, interested in seeing how

and why things work and making adjustments along the way. She is able to see from her own experience where students are on the learning continuum.

### TAKING ACTION

In our own work applying the Understanding by Design framework in schools, we found that breaking down the transfer goal was helpful but often was not enough on its own. Teachers tended to stop too soon rather than considering what was next in the design, the classroom activities, and the assessments.

It became clear that we needed to add a third question to help create a commitment to action: What will I, as the teacher, commit to doing? Any process that promises to yield results requires a commitment with an actionable step to follow through, and this question helps teachers make that commitment.

To follow through on the previous example, the table above shows what it would look like to add the third question.

### GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR: Designing for transfer at the college level

Universidad Casa Grande in Guayaquil, Ecuador, offers a master’s degree to prepare teachers of English in

<b>KARINA IZQUIERDO ZAMORRA'S BREAKDOWN OF TRANSFER GOAL</b>		
<b>A</b> If I see and hear them do this, they <b>CAN</b> transfer this learning.	<b>B</b> If I see and hear them do this, then they <b>CANNOT</b> (yet) transfer:	<b>C</b> I will commit to doing this differently in my classroom to ensure my results look like Column A and not Column B.
Use vocabulary they know/ word choice. Use transition words. Communicate simple ideas in a cohesive way. Write a main idea and supporting details. An introduction with a thesis statement. Use subject-verb agreement.	Weak vocabulary/word choice. Sentence structure is poor. No transition words. No organization of ideas. No main idea and no supporting details. Poor introduction and weak thesis statement. Poor conclusion. Weak subject-verb agreement.	Create two-word banks. Develop a bank of transition words. Provide immediate feedback. Collaboration for brainstorming. Provide scaffolding strategies such as brainstorming, a five-paragraph essay structure, peer collaboration, graph. Use Answer Garden and Padlet web tools for peer collaboration. Scaffold for thesis statement and collaboration for brainstorming.

both the public and private schools at the elementary, secondary, and college levels.

Among the program’s requirements is a course in instructional design. It focuses in large part on teaching that results in transfer of learning and culminates with implementing an innovation in the classroom to be tested with an action research model. Students use the process of Understanding by Design, with the three reflection and planning questions described above about getting to transfer.

After taking the course, graduate student Karina Izquierdo Zamorra summarized her transfer goal and breakdown. Her transfer goal was: “I want my students to learn how to communicate simple ideas, new vocabulary and transition words, appropriate word order, subject-verb agreement, writing paragraphs, and a thesis statement, so that, in the long run and on their own, they will produce short, simple essays on current topics.” The following is the breakdown of her transfer goal. See table above.

After the intervention, she used a rubric measuring the content, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions to score students’ pre- and post- essays. Students in her class improved significantly in their writing. Now, two years after

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taking the course, Zamorra is using what she learned as a facilitator of learning for other teachers.

Since 2017, 127 graduate students have taken the course on instructional design and learned to use the breakdown of the transfer goal successfully. The students choose a final project, either taking an exam or conducting action research, in which they plan an innovation using the Understanding by Design process.

The majority choose the latter — 97% of the 2018 cohort and 77% of the 2017 cohort — and their projects were generally successful, as indicated by either moderate or substantial effect sizes when comparing students’ pre- and post- test results.

**RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA: A high school’s culture of transfer**

At St. Mary’s School, a private high school in Raleigh, North Carolina, designing for learning is taken seriously. From the dean of teaching and learning to the faculty, designing learning for

transfer is embedded in the culture of the school.

The faculty has an agreed-upon set of learning principles and principles of professionalism that identify what designing for transfer looks like. These documents help faculty to be on the same page and understand what is expected of them in and out of the classroom.

Faculty members begin their tenure with a three-day institute about designing for learning, which itself is shaped by transfer goals. They examine why Saint Mary’s places value on getting students to transfer, learn about the concepts in the Understanding by Design framework, and practice getting to transfer by building a unit in their content area curriculum with a transfer goal. They share their units, get feedback from veteran faculty, and refine them.

To provide ongoing support for designing with transfer in mind and linking this process to the school’s curriculum, the school invested in an instructional coach position, committed to working with all faculty to build better designs for learning, addressing questions that may arise during the process, and evaluating the effectiveness at the end of the learning cycle.

The learning coach frequently employs the three-column transfer

<b>GROW COACHING PROCESS</b>		
<b>Goal:</b> I want to _____ so that _____.		
	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Sample questions</b>
<b>Reality</b>	Invite self-assessment of topic and situation.	How do you know this is accurate? What impact does it have? Are there any other relevant factors? What have you done to this point?
<b>Obstacles</b>	Identify any obstacles, i.e. people, time, resources, money. (Eliminate those over which you have no control.)	What keeps you from achieving your goal? What else is an obstacle? How are you involved? What changes would you have to make?
<b>Options</b>	Cover the full range of possibilities and invite suggestions. Make sure there are choices. (In a group coach, these will come up naturally.)	What are your alternatives? Is there someone who can help you? What are the pros and cons of that option?
<b>Way forward</b>	Get a commitment to act. Plan detailed options.	What will happen first? What is your time frame? What are possible problems? What kind of support will you need?

goal breakdown matrix in coaching sessions to maintain transfer at the forefront. This doesn't replace the curriculum but helps teachers maximize its use so that students achieve transfer of the information.

During faculty meetings, all faculty members have opportunities to continue their growth in lesson design. Using a coaching process called GROW (see table above), faculty are encouraged to pitch an idea they are thinking about and have others coach them through the process to assist them in thinking about a transfer goal, empathize with students where there may be a disconnect in their learning, and design for an appropriate tension between having a grasp of concepts and stretching student learning to their "what's next."

Some helpful probing questions that point at possible pitfalls while engaged in the process are: Where do you think the students may have difficulty? What will it look like, sound like, feel like, if they are transferring their learning?

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**GROW COACHING PROCESS**

Learning walks (Guilott & Parker, 2012), also focused on transfer, are embedded in the school's culture and help faculty to understand and identify transfer in their own classrooms as well as others'.

Through a generative process, faculty visit other classrooms and practice identifying what engaging learning looks like so that they get inspiring ideas to bring back to their own classrooms. The learning walk focuses on the students, not the teacher. Faculty practice observing what learning looks like as acquisition, meaning-making, or transfer, and ways

to avoid common problems.

Rather than relying on identifying issues when students are ready to be assessed, learning walks can help faculty understand the power of observation and conversation with students in the formative assessment process. When debriefing a learning walk, there is no judgment, just learning about learning as it happens with peers. See table on p. 27 for details about conducting learning walks.

**PUTTING STUDENTS FRONT AND CENTER**

These two examples show how Understanding by Design puts the student perspective front and center. If students know what and why they're learning, the possibility for transfer and understanding increases exponentially.

Teaching for transfer is a continuum that requires time, but the time is well-spent because teachers begin to own the process and feel empowered, and students come to understand what and why they're learning, increasing exponentially the

HOW TO CONDUCT A LEARNING WALK		
Absolutes for learning walks	Questions for students	Questions for the people on the walk
<p>We are all learners helping each other improve our skills by going into classrooms for 4-5 minutes, asking 3-4 students some questions, and immediately debriefing the experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No one is there to judge.</li> <li>We record nothing.</li> <li>We are looking for evidence of learning for transfer.</li> <li>No one goes alone on a learning walk.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are you learning? How will you know when you learned it?</li> <li>What are you being asked to do?</li> <li>How is this like something you have already learned?</li> <li>What will you do with this?</li> <li>Why is it important to know this?</li> </ol>	<p>Ask these questions immediately following the 4-5-minute conversation with students to guide their collective thinking.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What did you observe that you could take away immediately?</li> <li>What was the teacher enabling the students to do?</li> <li>Was the teacher taking the students to transfer? How do you know?</li> <li>If you were the designer of learning, what would you do next to kick it up a notch?</li> </ol>

possibility for real and lasting learning.

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