

Chapter 11

The Design Process

Architects have the patience to plan. Builders have the savvy to improvise. Improvisation, however, is not a substitute for planning. The purpose of planning is to achieve predictable results. The purpose of improvising is to maintain work progress.

—John McClean, “20 Considerations That Help a Project Run Smoothly,” 2003

Americans hold the notion that good teaching comes through artful and spontaneous interactions with students during lessons. . . . Such views minimize the importance of planning increasingly effective lessons and lend credence to the folk belief that good teachers are born, not made.

—James Stigler and James Hiebert, “Understanding and Improving Classroom Mathematics Instruction,” 1997, p. 20

If you have been following our running account of how fictional teacher Bob James is thinking through his design, you may have noticed that he has to rethink elements of his unit as each new idea is presented. For example, his initial understandings were not framed as understandings; they merely summarized the topic. His process illustrates a fundamental idea of UbD—that coming to a deep understanding requires rethinking key ideas, whether we are talking about young students or veteran teacher-designers.

More practically, it underscores a vital lesson about the UbD Template and helps us avoid a common misunderstanding. The template is structured to reflect a completed, organized design, with the elements aligned. It does not follow, however, that the best way to design is to fill in the template in the order that the boxes appear. True, backward design calls for carefully thinking about the goals, logically deriving the assessments from the goals, and finally inferring the appropriate learning activities. But in practice, all design is a non-linear process. Designers—whether they are unit designers, composers, or landscape architects—go back and forth from one aspect of a design to another. Although the final *product* must obey the three-stage logic, the ongoing design *process* unfolds in an unpredictable way, unique to each designer and each design challenge. Yes, you have to end up with a filled-in template, with all elements aligned; however, the pathways for getting there differ.