The Design Down Model in Authentic Learning Contexts
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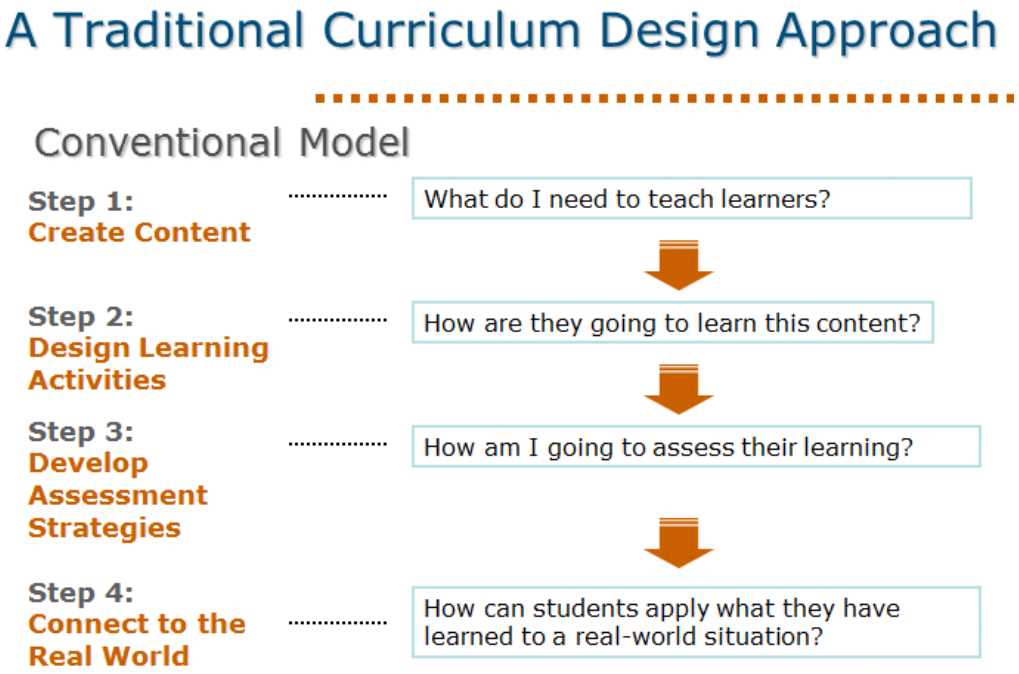
Figure 1



The above graphic illustrates, in a simplified form, one of the most common approaches that course instructors use to design courses. This traditional curriculum design model tends to be classroom-focused and content-centric. The emphasis is on filling up the student with as much content that can be "covered" in the time available in the classroom so that he or she can reach a acceptable level of proficiency. By focusing on what context goes from our heads (the teachers) into their heads (the students), however, we are setting them up for disengagement, confusion, compartmentalization and de-contextualized learning.

It is difficult to design effective authentic learning activities using this approach because the application of the learning process to a relevant real-world context is not integral to the lesson or course design. It is often considered an additional component or it is frequently left to the end of the lesson for the student to consider.

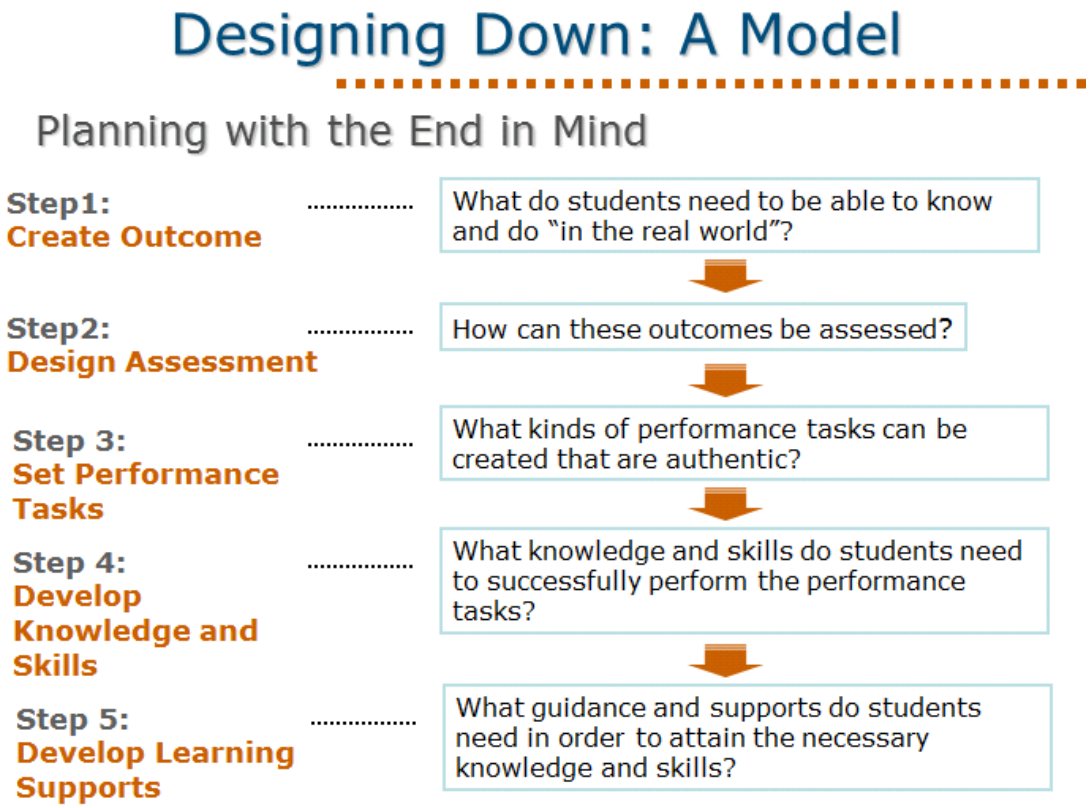
In designing learning for authentic contexts, the following questions become paramount:

- Are my students focusing on the relevance of what they are learning?
- Can they put themselves into the shoes of a professional in the same field they are learning?
- Are the learning tasks and contexts sufficiently complex enough to mirror a meaningful real-life application?

Using these framing questions, the course designer or instructor needs to start the curriculum design process with the end goal in mind, i.e. the real-world learning outcomes.

Figure 2 shows an overview of the key steps in starting with the creation of the learning outcomes. The first step involves asking the question: "What do my students need to be able to do 'out there in the real world' that I am responsible for 'in here'?'. This leads the instructor to consider a subsequent question that becomes critical in the design of a meaningful assessment system: "What can my students do 'in here' to demonstrate a level of proficiency in the outcome?". Step Three involves determining relevant and meaningful performance tasks that will help an instructor answer a subsequent question: " What can students do to demonstrate mastery in a relevant and meaningful way?". Asking two subsequent questions in the next step of the design process helps the instructor consider the course content from a learning-centric perspective: " What skills must my students learn? What concepts, themes, and issues must they understand and demonstrate?". The key question in the final step, "What roles can I play to ensure that I am supporting students in the most effective way possible?" illustrates the multiple approaches that an instructor has to employ in providing the most effective process of supporting the student in learning the appropriate skills and knowledge. Although these steps are presented linearly, the design process for Steps Two – Five often becomes iterative and recursive in practice.

Figure 2



Helpful References:

Stiehl, R. (2000). *The Outcomes primer: Reconstructing the college curriculum*. Corvallis, OR: The Learning Organization.

The NorthWest Internet Gateway for Adult Education Online Resources (2005). The design down process. Retrieved from http://www.nwlincs.org/fmlt/f-design.htm.