

ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

Enduring Understandings, or “EUs”, are big, bold, but concise content claims that require *uncoverage* and reside at the heart of one or more disciplines. At their best, they require extensive demonstration and experience for learners to understand and internalize. They are like the “thesis statements” of a curriculum.¹ “BUDi” is an acronym for 4 ways **EU’s serve as filters** for helping educators to select and articulate the most relevant and intellectually rich content when designing their learning programs:

Big idea?	The content claim is a big idea; it has value, significance and relevance outside the artificial classroom laboratory, and in the larger world. Guiding filter question: <i>Does this content matter outside of the classroom context, to real people out in the world, where there are hefty stakes involved?</i>
Uncoverage?	The content claim requires vital un-coverage. It is not obvious to the learner, and may be counter-intuitive, requiring plenty of examples, unpacking, and experiences, in order to understand and accept the claim the EU is making. (if it is a basic and apparent fact that can be explained in a sentence and accepted as true, it does not pass through this filter) Guiding filter question: <i>Is this content complex and surprising enough to require lots of explanation, experience, engagement, and experimentation to accept and internalize how it’s true?</i>
Discipline/s?	The content claim lies at the heart of live debate among one or more disciplines or professional fields. (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology, rabbinics, political science, philosophy, history, literature, etc.) Scholars in that area are talking and writing about this content. Guiding filter question: <i>Is this content something that you could overhear some academics, experts, or professionals arguing about?</i>
Ideal citizen?	An ideal citizen/learner can be imagined in someone who internalizes the content claim and its underlying ethics and values. Ethics check: “It is no virtue to teach well what should not be taught at all.” (Elliot Eisner) Guiding filter question: <i>Is this content worth teaching and worth teaching well?</i>

¹ EUs are the anchor of Backwards Design. Without idea-focused concepts, there will be no content, and a program likely becomes a haphazard crazy-quilt of activities, however engaging or unengaging, and/or there will be just unexamined content, with unexamined filters and unconscious criteria leading to a program whose parts are not aligned or coherent. No less than the quality and sophistication of the learning are at risk. If we neglect clear articulation of content choices, it’s not clear what a course of study uniquely offers. Without EUs/clear content, we tend to focus only on “process”/activities and end up teaching solely for some vague sense of “identity formation” (an extremely slippery and inchoate target) without actually having made any clear choices and commitment to a particular content. It is best to choose carefully to do **fewer** things really well, which is infinitely better than doing a lot (or everything!) less well, or poorly.

Sample EU's that pass through all the BUDi Filters (across various subject matter areas):

- Apologetics disturb critical readers. (literature, art, journalism,)
- You can know something without understanding it. (psychology, education)
- Our capacity for being vulnerable can never be greater than our willingness to be hurt. (adapted from Brene Brown: psychology, education, leadership)
- Second drafts tend to be messier than the first. (Aaron Henne: authorship, experimentation)
- Contact before content: relationships precede cognition and connection precedes correction. (education, online learning, leadership)
- In every era and place, Jews have had to navigate being a part of and apart from, their host countries. (history, sociology, identity studies)
- Maximum learning potential requires anxiety; not too much and not too little. (developmental psychology, education)
- The Israel of American Jews reveals more about American Jewish ideals than about the realities of Israel. (Jonathan Sarna: sociology, history, identity studies, educational tourism)
- Self-esteem comes from accomplishments, not compliments. (Ron Berger: psychology, education, supervision, leadership)
- It is impossible to tell if teaching goals are being met without learning outcomes. (education, psychology, social work)

Six Tips for Composing Powerful EUs that pass through the BUDi filters:

- A great EU makes a bold and intriguing claim, like thesis statement of an essay. Both EUs and theses need to be supported with evidence to prove the claim. In a curriculum, the various activities and assessments are where the proving takes place.
- A great EU is crystal clear to readers outside of your head. Vague language is not the same thing as needing uncoverage.
- A great EU works best when it is able to say a lot leanly, without extraneous phrases that do not contribute to the Big Idea (that tend to clutter or eclipse it).
- A great EU *tends* to have a strong connecting verb (not "is/are") which demonstrates how two or more concepts of a content area are in dynamic and dramatic relationship with one another in sometimes unlikely, counterintuitive, surprising ways that require uncoverage.
- A great EU is exclusively about content not about the process of teaching the content. Therefore, it should neither be conflated with a Teaching Goal nor a Learning Outcome, which involve what either teachers or learners do. An EU is exclusively focused on subject matter and stems from scholarly or expert knowledge and wisdom.