Dear New GCS-ACT Participant,

Congratulations on embarking on what I know will be one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences of your life! You'll learn a lot over this coming year, and I can promise you two things: First, there will be times when you will want to quit. Second, don't do that, because it will all be worth it!

By the time you're done, you'll be an expert in what's call Backwards Design. In this letter, I'm going to give you a primer on what that's all about. I couldn't possibly do justice to all the details and nuances involved, but don't worry. Your fabulous GCS-ACT mentors and colleagues will guide you through everything you need to know.

First, I want to tell you why backwards design is considered best practice. I know when I was hired, one of my first questions was, "Okay, but what *exactly* am I teaching?" Backwards design is the process we use to answer that question. It helps us to focus our curriculum so that our planning can be efficient and effective. We all know that time is precious and we can't afford to not be intentional with our planning and teaching. We all want to find the best route possible to our students' learning goals, but you can't determine how to get "there" without first determining where "there" is.

We unpack our standards to see the curriculum in its entirety. You will soon realize that you cannot teach *everything*, so you will have to make some judgements about what to prioritize for in-depth teaching, and what to maybe only touch on. You'll need to determine how students can demonstrate their learning, and then design activities that will equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to be able demonstrate mastery.

As soon as you start unpacking standards you will see that there is much more to a standard than initially meets the eye. It's intensive, but your effectiveness as a teacher is directly related to how thoroughly you understand your content. Here's how you uncover exactly *what* you will be teaching so you can become the expert on *how* to teach it. You'll need to look at multiple sources to be thorough. First, go to the NCDPI and get the clarified standards for your content area. Then you'll want to check how GCS clarifies those same standards. Then you'll want to collect a representative sample of released test items.

Now imagine with me for a minute that you walk into a library where nothing is organized. Books are just in stacks on desks and floors or haphazardly placed on shelves. There's a lot of information there, but how likely are you to be able to access it? We all know that if information isn't organized, it isn't useful. Now imagine again walking into that library, but the books are organized by the color of their cover, rather than by author or subject. This second scenario might be more visually appealing, but it's not likely to be any more accessible than no organization at all. Just because you have all of the information doesn't mean your students will

be able to access it. Don't make your students feel like they're sifting through a disorganized, or misorganized, library. Information needs to be organized, and it needs to be organized *logically*.

There can certainly be more than one way to organize your content. What worked for me was to comb through all of my sources (DPI, GCS, and release test items) and sort the information into the facts, concepts, and skills associated with each standard. Then I thought about how all of the concepts related to each other, and how they built on each other. I ordered them from least to most complex, and from there I chunked the information into eight sections that I thought could feasibly be taught within one lesson. Then I developed I CAN statements that encompassed the most essential parts of that information.

Once you've sorted and ordered your information, you'll need to determine the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) level this task is asking for, then design (or find) an assessment question with a DOK that matches or exceeds the DOK expected by the standard. Go back to your standards and your I CAN statements. Separating out the verbs and the nouns will help you look at the thought processes involved in each standard and to align that standard with a task at a corresponding DOK level. Your assessment can be objective (multiple choice, T/F, etc.), subjective (free response questions, projects, performance tasks, etc.), or some combination. Use your judgment, depending on your content and your students.

To develop the assessments that you'll use in class to inform your daily instruction (DFAs) you'll want to consult Blooms taxonomy. Blooms is related to the DOK scale, but Blooms has more gradations, and while DOK is focused more on the summative *tasks* you want your students to be able to perform, Blooms will guide you in developing questions to use in class to prompt the critical thinking that will become the daily training that your students engage in to prepare for summative assessments. You can think of DOK as the learning, and Blooms as the thinking that causes the learning. Think of your DOK levels like the layers of a cake. If your I CAN is a DOK 3, then you have three layers to that cake, and you need three Blooms questions corresponding to each of those DOK levels to inform your planning, for a total of nine questions.

We could all probably fill books with information that we've memorized for tests, and then promptly forgotten as soon as the test was over. What students really need to make learning stick is multiple opportunities and multiple contexts to *apply* their new knowledge. Performance tasks are a great way to accomplish this, and one of the most accessible is a RASP. A RASP gives students a role, an audience, a situation, and a product they need to produce in order to demonstrate mastery of their new knowledge. Performance tasks serve the function of a "photo album" providing "snapshots" of your students' progression over time.

You'll need to be clear about what it is you are expecting students to produce. The best way to do this is to create exemplars yourself of what a proficient submission would look like. This serves a few functions. First, just as we can't reach a goal unless we know what the goal is, neither can our students; they need to know where "there" is in order to get "there." Providing an example serves the very practical purpose of helping to clarify expectations in a concrete way.

Second, going through the process of creating an exemplar yourself helps you to experience the process students will go through, to anticipate where they might struggle or need clarification, and to provide that clarification in advance of putting something in front of the student. Clarity and specificity are what will ensure that your assessment is aligned with the content and the DOK of your standard.

It's essential to be clear with your expectations. Clear expectations give students peace of mind and a sense of control, both of which are fundamental needs that must be met before higher learning can happen. You can communicate your expectations with task descriptions, checklists, or rubrics, in addition to your exemplars. Look at the tasks you've designed and find any gaps where students might be confused. Add the clarifying info students will need to be successful. Give them the best chance possible to succeed.

You'll know ABC lesson planning inside out by the time this is all through! When you're designing your activators, builders and consolidators, a great resource to turn to is Don Buehl's book *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*. The book is organized to help you choose learning strategies that correspond with the skill or concept you're trying to teach. Choose the right tool for the task. There's a wide variety, and far more than I could expound on here, but a few I really like are the Frayer model, Story Mapping, and the Connect Two vocabulary strategy.

The best instruction is informed by data, and the best data considers multiple measures. Your students are not just machines to feed information into, and our job is not just to teach content. We commonly think of data that measures student learning, test scores and GPAs, for example. But we also need to consider measures of school processes (tutoring, PBIs, attendance policies), demographics (who attends this school in terms of gender, ethnicity, national origin, language, and economic status), and perceptions (what do students, parents, and other communities think of this school and its practices). All four of these measures work together to inform instruction.

Once you have data about the specific instructional needs of your students, you can plan for differentiation. Differentiating for content involves changing the way the student receives the content (changing what the *teacher* does). Differentiating for process involves changing the access or engagement with the content (changing what the *student* does). A strategy that I incorporated in my lesson design was to use two different graphic organizers—one simple and one more complex—to help students engage with the concept of story elements. The concept was the same, but the process was differentiated so that all students could access the content.

You might think that learning centers are just for grade school, but if well-designed, they can be an effective tool for student engagement and differentiation all the way up through high school and beyond. Who doesn't love variety and movement? Centers take a lot of work to set up on the front end, but with trial and error and tweaking, they can be mostly self-sufficient during class time. This self-sufficiency helps students to see that ultimately *they* must be responsible

for their own learning. No teacher, no matter how skilled and caring, can ever do the learning *for* the student.

Clear expectations are absolutely critical for successful learning centers. Establish the ground rules before turning students loose. Include cooperative tasks in your centers. Space your centers at least six feet apart, and make sure your materials are organized. Designate a leader and a substitute for each group to handle logistics like distributing and collecting materials and collecting work for absent students. The number of centers will depend on what it is you want students to learn and what they need to do, and also the length of your class. Maximize space by locating centers against walls or in the center of rooms. Use hallways and outdoor spaces, or the media center. Be creative. Your directions should include the learning objective, the expectations, directions for the task, what to turn in and how, and extension activities for students who finish early.

Culture includes our language, family background, customs, ethnicity, food, traditions, and religion. Because culture is such a huge influence on us and our students, we can't not consider culture when we design our lessons. This requires developing some awareness of your own culture and its influences on you, and educating yourself about your students' various cultures. Anytime you can connect content to a student's culture, you're more likely to entice that student to engage. However, it's just as important to watch out for material that might make a student feel dismissed or disrespected based on their culture.

Socioeconomic status is another factor we must consider when planning instruction. As with all the strategies we discuss, the strategies that benefit students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will ultimately benefit all students. Here are a few you can incorporate. First, activities involving movement help to engage multiple modalities, and have a greater chance of hitting on skills and strengths more specific to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, fostering community and camaraderie is helpful for all students. We are social creatures and we form our understanding of who we are and how to be collectively. Collaborative activities help to build community, which is particularly important for homeless or highly mobile students, who can often feel isolated. Third, providing the time, space, and resources *at school* to complete learning tasks ensures that all students have equal access, regardless of their varying home situations.

For EC students, I have three pieces of advice: Follow what's in the plan, follow what's in the plan, and follow what's in the plan. The types of accommodations needed vary widely from student to student. Your students might need special seating during instruction, a separate setting or extended time when testing, larger print for texts, or modifications in either the rigor or the length of a task. Follow the plan exactly, document everything, and consult with your EC teacher for clarification.

English Language learners also need special consideration. Some things to keep in mind: gestures, images, and repetition are all very helpful when verbal language is limited; and

students acquire aural language before written language, so things like reading aloud, and providing opportunities for conversation between peers can be helpful. Scaffolding is going to be very important for your ELLs. Adaptations like allowing a student to explain their knowledge orally rather than in written form, or providing a word bank are appropriate as well.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that your academically gifted students don't need you. They often have needs that go unnoticed, and they may not even be aware themselves of what they need. I thought that Vertical Enrichment was the most helpful suggestion for AG students: go "up" with your AG students; don't give them more of the same (I *still* remember the endless pages of tedious multiplication tables of two- and three-digit numbers I had to do in fourth grade; I pretended to sleep to get out of it). Use Bloom's Taxonomy to guide you in designing tasks that use higher levels of critical and creative thinking.

If you've read this far, congratulations! You probably have the stamina and discipline to make it through GCS-ACT. And this time next year, you'll be the expert.

Best,

Ms. Leah Elliott