

Learning Goals and Outcomes (part 2)

Ways to distinguish learning from teaching goals/objectives, and to distinguish goals from objectives

- By sense
- By syntax

Goals v. Objectives

Criteria by sense

- Objectives focus on actions
 - It is by performing these actions that students demonstrate that they have met the objective; this performance constitutes data for assessment.
- Goals are basically categories for objectives

Criteria by syntax

- Goals can be stated as noun phrases (here their role as categories is most clear)
- Goals statements in sentence form may have intransitive verbs.
 - e.g., “students will become critical thinkers”
- Goals statements may have verbs that reference capacities* or states, which can’t be directly observed
 - E.g., “know”, “understand”
- Goals statements will lack specificity regarding context.
- The means of by which a skill may be assessed (the thing to be collected for assessment) will be identified by the verb of an objective.
 - e.g., “students will be able to list the major causes of the Civil War”: to assess student ability, one asks them to create lists
 - This can therefore be used as a criterion to identify objectives

*Philosophical digression: I hold that knowing or understanding are not true mental states (they belong to the realm of “folk psychology”); rather, their meaning can only be cashed out in operational terms. If you disagree, you can instead think of objectives as determining what proxies will serve in lieu of the state indicated by the goal statement. In any case, objectives must point to actions, and knowledge or understanding are at least states.

Note that the key distinction here is between capacities and actions. How do you know if a student understands finance (or philology, or how to cook soup)? You can’t get inside his head: you have to look at evidence for the ability. **The process of determining objectives just is determining, before the fact, what you will count as sufficient evidence that the student has the capacity.**

- This saves the instructor the challenge of trying to read minds.
- This gives the instructor a template for how to design the course.
- This tells students, as a practical matter, what they’ll need to do.

A common but significant error is to mistake goals for objectives.

- Goals don't provide any guidance in how to design or teach a course, though they may help determine potential content.
 - Instruction in critical thinking is all about what students are asked to do, not the content of the course.
- Goals don't provide any standards for students.
 - This is particularly clear with the bugbears of goal setting, knowledge and understanding. When a student doesn't yet know a discipline, they necessarily won't know the standards for what constitute knowing and understanding in that discipline.

Examples of verbs for goals statements

- Know
- Understand
- Be
- Become
- Demonstrate (begs the question of how demonstration will occur)
- Recognize (contrast with "identify," which can be deictic)
- Participate (though this can be active, it does not determine any possible object of assessment)

Note that **goals statements can use action verbs that also occur in objectives statements**. In goals statements, the context of performance is left unstated (and unimplied by context) so that it is not clear what would count as meeting the standard that the statement establishes.

Teaching v. Learning

Criteria by sense

- Who's it an objective for? That's really the only question here.
 - Is it an objective for the student? Then it's a learning objective.
 - E.g., formulate arguments and produce written commentaries on historical topics
 - Is it an objective for the professor? That includes getting the student to do something.
 - E.g., familiarize students with key theories and methodologies in Western philosophy
 - E.g., cultivate and assess writing skills in the following ways: paper assignments, essay exams, in-class writing assignments, . . .
 - Is it an objective for the program or department? Then it's a program goal.
 - E.g., establish baseline of performance for all students in introductory course sequence

Criteria by syntax

- Who's the agent? That's the only question here.
 - When the student is mentioned in the objective statement, then it's easy.
 - If the student is the subject of an active verb, then it's a learning objective.
 - If the student is the object of an active verb, then it's a teaching objective.
 - If the student is the subject of an intransitive verb, then it's either a learning goal or a poorly written teaching objective.
 - example: *students will become critical thinkers*
 - probably general and without context or statement of performance criteria – so it's probably a learning goal
 - conceivably shorthand for a passive sentence (“students will be shown how to think critically”) – in which case it's a poorly written teaching objective
 - When the instructor is mentioned, then it's easy.
 - If the instructor is the subject of an active verb, then it's a teaching objective.
 - Imperatives need to be rewritten in one's mind with third-person subjects for these rules to work

One of the most common errors faculty make is mistaking teaching goals for learning goals.

- After all, teachings goals tend to target things that students will do.
- The difference is that teaching goals are goals for the professor.
- Consider the two examples above:
 - *familiarize students with key theories and methodologies in Western philosophy*
 - students will become familiar with theories and methods (though this isn't a learning goal either because it doesn't establish a performance criterion), but they're not doing anything, the professor is intending to do something to them
 - “Familiarize students with” is really a polite way of saying “tell students stuff.” Rephrasing makes it clear that it's really a goal for the professor, a goal relating to coverage of content.
 - *cultivate and assess writing skills in the following ways . . .*
 - It's clear here that the students aren't supposed to cultivate and assess – the professor is.
 - Note that in an active learning classroom, students might be encouraged to develop and use metacognitive strategies (monitor and improve their own learning), so conceivably “cultivate” and “assess” could be learning goals. But students wouldn't use papers and exams to assess their learning – those are ends for the student and means for the student and professor.

Stylistics

- Different authors write goals and objectives differently. The most common strategies include:
 - Using noun phrase (goals only)
 - E.g., *knowledge of the periodization of Greek history*
 - Using infinitive
 - E.g., *to prepare students for careers teaching Latin in secondary schools* (a program goal, although it could be the goal for a course in how to teach Latin)
 - Using an imperative verb.
 - E.g., *situate a reading of ancient dramatic texts within the context of literary and social history*
 - Use second person, with one of the finite verbal constructions given below.
 - E.g., *at the completion of this course, you will be able to develop and argue a thesis about the meaning of a text*
 - Using simple present tense.
 - E.g., *students identify the major events of the history Ancient Sicily as narrated and dramatized in some fo the major works of Classical literature (in translation)*
 - This one may be misleading. It's complicated, so it sounds good, but are they really going to be asked to try to identify whether works mentioned in ancient literature count as "major"? Probably the author intends to point them out to students – then it's a teaching objective.
 - But it is simple present tense.
 - Using simple future tense.
 - E.g., *students will assess critically the function of source materials within the context in which they were produced.*
 - Using future tense or a modal auxiliary with a verb like "be able".
 - E.g., *students will be able to discuss the principal ideas in the texts we have discussed*
 - E.g., *students who successfully complete this course should be able to capably compare and contrast the core elements, qualities, and characteristics in each of the religious traditions studied.*
- Is one better than another? I guess it's a matter of personal preference.
 - I'd argue that using simple present and simple future tenses make the statement demonstrably false, unless students will always succeed at every goal – probably an unreasonable assumption. But we should probably treat this as shorthand for future or modal auxiliary with "be able."
 - Anyone who uses second person should probably use it throughout the syllabus, for consistency. And then anyone other than a student in the class who reads the syllabus will experience a brief "wait a minute, that's not directed to me" moment.
 - Lone infinitives appear ambiguous. Also, it's easy for the author who uses this format to lose track of the implied subject and fall into the trap of writing teaching objectives.
 - I prefer imperatives or future tense with "be able," because they're accurate and clear.

How should goals and objectives be set?

- What's the point of the course? That's the real question. A course is defined by its objectives.
 - This judgment is up to the individual faculty member, and the department/division.
 - Resources are available for getting ideas of goals and objectives:
 - professional associations
 - departmental/divisional goals (see below on this)
 - other people's syllabi, for example from the internet
 - previous exams and paper topics (because that's a way of determining what's really important to you in a given course)
 - You should address each objective sufficiently during the term.
 - If you can't cover all your intended objectives in a term, then you need to drop some. No one is served by listing objectives you know students won't be able to meet.
 - Sometimes professors confuse means with ends. Don't.
 - E.g., *be able to locate and download documents from library e-reserves*
 - That's a real example I found on the internet from a course on the history of ancient philosophy. I'm not making it up.
 - Students won't be using their library's e-reserves after college, so why have that as a goal? Maybe for something like COE 101, but not for ancient philosophy.
 - E.g., *make articulate contributions to discussion of classical texts; be informed readers not only of classical texts, but of their appropriation in later contexts*
 - Is it really a learning goal to figure out how to make one's contributions to a discussion "articulate"? The professor probably is trying to encourage discussion. Then it's a teaching goal, and a hard one at that – it's easy to penalize students for not being sufficiently articulate, but really hard to get them to be more articulate.
 - E.g., *develop an expertise in one of topics for an in-class discussion and articulate the significance of the topic to Egypt*
 - That's an assignment. There is no doubt a reason for making the assignments, but it's just something that students will be asked to do. The statement of the learning objective will indicate what doing this will accomplish.
 - This is from Religious Studies 294, May 2010, Vanderbilt – yeah, I'm naming names. Ha.
 - The list of required reading also includes *Islam for Dummies*. C'mon.
 - To make this a viable learning objective, we'd have to remove the reference to the course: *develop expertise in new topics regarding the history of Egypt*. Even then, in order to assess this, you'd have to ask students to develop a new expertise, and that's probably impractical.

Stacking of goals and objectives

- Objectives differ from goals in two main ways: they are more specific, and they reference performative standards.
 - It's not clear how a given goal will be implemented in a given course: that's why it needs to be operationalized in a set of narrow specifications (these are the objectives).
 - But even course objectives aren't narrow enough to help determine how they will be operationalized in a given lesson. **So just like instructors have course objectives, they also have (or should have) objectives for every exercise and every assignment.**
 - Specifying these explicitly helps one ensure that course objectives are indeed being met.
 - It should be possible to identify, for each day of class, exercise, or lesson, which objectives are being targeted, and the instructor should be able to give an account of how that objective is being targeted.
- Just as course goals can be narrowed to course and lesson objectives, so can they be broadened to program, department, or division objectives.
 - Ideally your course goals will dovetail with your IE goals. If they don't, that's a good sign you need to revisit your IE goals.
 - As for the QEP: critical thinking **goals for individual courses should dovetail with the subskills that you identify as important in your annual assessments for majors.** We don't require departments to explicitly identify critical thinking subgoals targeted in common core courses, but we could – and departments should be able to provide such an account.
 - Critical thinking subskills for common core courses don't need to be the same as those for majors (although they might be a subset of them).
- **The same applies to rubrics:** more detailed rubrics can (and should) be constructed as assessment gets closer to the individual exercise.

How many goals and objectives are appropriate for a course?

- I'm not aware that there's been research on this, which is a pity.
- My suggestion: 4-6 main goals, and one to four objectives tied to each goal.
 - Why? You want to be able to target every objective over the course of the semester, generally several times. Three hours a week over a 15 week term amounts to 45 hours in class. Five goals with three objectives each amounts to 15 objectives total. Let's say you target one objective per hour of class: then you can target each one three times.
 - What does this look like in practice? At the end of this handout is an example from a course I designed for this summer (the tour it was meant to accompany got rescheduled for January).
- Of course, it depends on how much reinforcement you want for the various objectives. Some objectives might need to be covered many times during the semester, others just once or twice, so the total number could swell or be reduced according to the importance of each.

Learning Goals and Outcomes, Greek Civilization [a sample list for one course]

- 1) Basic familiarity with Greek history
 - a) identify major events in ancient Greek history
- 2) Basic familiarity with organization and evolution of the Greek city-state
 - a) describe basic structure of Athenian government from seventh through fourth centuries
 - b) describe some features of non-governmental social organization in Attica
 - c) describe some of the differences in political organization across the Greek world (including both temporal and geographic spread)
- 3) Basic familiarity with ancient Greek religion
 - a) describe describe some elements of Greek religiosity in the Hellenic and Hellenistic period
 - b) explain something of the cultural context of written expressions of Greek religiosity, based on the content and form of a given text
 - c) describe some ways in which Hellenistic Judaism and first-century Christianity interpreted Israelite tradition as found in the Tanakh and living traditions of Palestine
- 4) Basic familiarity with Greek literature
 - a) describe the historical context of each work studied in the course
 - b) explain how genre-specific features and historical context may affect interpretations of a work
 - c) describe the role of archaic texts on classical Greek thought
- 5) Development of skills in critical thinking and writing
 - a) draw connections between personal experience of historical sites and historical facts as known from primary and secondary sources [*after all the course was designed as the companion to a tour*]
 - b) develop interpretations of primary source texts in response to narrow prompts
 - c) abide by most of the norms of Standard Written English

Notes

- 1) Historical background is necessary since most students will need it. But it's not strictly a history course, so goal #1 has only one objective.
- 2) Some objectives are mutually reinforcing, such as 3c) and 4c), both of which focus on the reception of earlier literary and cultural traditions.
- 3) Therefore, the objectives could be resorted, so that 3c) and 4c) applied to the same goal, if the goals were rewritten.
- 4) Note the role of qualifiers, such as "some," "basic," "most."
- 5) I've opted for goals in the form of noun phrases and imperatives for objectives. I think this makes it easier to read. A previous version had "by the end of the course, students will be able to:", which was completed in turn by each objective, but I found the goals looked out of place this way.