Establishing Learning Goals

Course- or degree program-level objectives have become standard practice in higher education, but perhaps less common are explicit learning goals at the scale of a unit, week, or even a single class session. Just as course objectives facilitate demonstrable learning and lend a framework for organizing content and instructional time productively, so too do more local learning goals.

Backward planning—beginning with semester-end goals for what students will know and be able to do and establishing interim milestones—allows you to articulate more discrete and narrow learning goals for each unit and class session. Ask yourself what knowledge and skills students will need in order to meet your desired outcomes at each stage, and then be transparent about these. Clearly stating learning goals for assignments and specific class sessions will help your students understand the purpose of their work in each step, in turn facilitating their focus, **metacognition**, and active learning.

Some tips for establishing clear and helpful learning goals:

- Learning goals should be student- and outcome-centered. Develop your goals with the sentence stub "Students will be able to…" to ensure their utility.
- Continue your goal stubs with action verbs ("summarize," "analyze," "identify," "distinguish," etc.) to lend them specificity. You may find Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives helpful in identifying the best verb, and in sequencing your learning goals toward progressively more complex skills. (Many versions of Bloom's Taxonomy, organized into easy-to-read charts, are readily available online.)
- Complete your goals with the most specific and concrete objects you can. For example, "Students will be able to identify relevant qualitative data in journal articles" will prove a more useful learning goal than "Students will be able to identify evidence."

References

Ambrose, Susan A. et al. *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Stanley, Christine A., and M. Erin Porter, editors. *Engaging Large Classes: Strategies and Techniques for College Faculty.* Boston, MA: Anker Publishing, 2002.

See also

Evaluating Student Work
Performances of Understanding
Scaffolding Student Learning