

Learning Objectives: Where We Start and Where We End

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On the surface, learning objectives don't seem all that complicated. You begin with an objective or you can work backwards from the desired outcome. Then you select an activity or assignment that accomplishes the objective or outcome. After completion of the activity or assignment, you assess to discover if students did in fact learn what was proposed. All that's very appropriate. Teachers should be clear about what students need to know and be able to do when a course ends. But too often that's where it stops. We don't go any further in our thinking about our learning objectives. There's another, more challenging, set of questions that also merit our attention.

How many activities and assignments does it take to accomplish an objective? With some simple and straightforward objectives, one is all that's needed. But many objectives deal with mastery of complicated content or complex skills, and the best time to know how many it takes is at the point of course design. Sure, there may be a bit of flexibility to add a necessary activity or assignment on the fly, but big alterations aren't possible once a course is underway. Having taught the course for a while helps guide our decision-making, but every collection of students is unique and that impacts how many activities or assignments it takes to accomplish the objective.



What's a realistic number of objectives to pursue in a course? When it comes to course planning, many of us still start with the content. In some cases, what needs to be covered in the course is highly prescribed. In other cases, faculty have more discretion. Either way, course objectives grow out of the content and most of us know we've got way too much material jammed into our courses. So, it's likely we also have too many objectives. What's a reasonable amount of learning to expect of students in a single course? How much content does it take to promote that amount of learning? Would starting with objectives make it easier for us to get control of how much material ends up in a course?

What about activities and assignments that do double (sometime triple) duty? If we ask students to summarize the big take-aways at the end of class and we give them a bit of time to prepare that summary, they are getting to interact with the content in a way that could promote learning, thereby accomplishing part or all of a course objective. Simultaneously, they are creating a summary, potentially learning a new skill and fulfilling an objective related to crafting accurate and useful summaries. Should we look for learning experiences that do double duty or does that diminish the learning potential of the individual objectives?

What about the relationship between objectives? Do those relationships have implications for teaching and learning? If so, what are they? An array of relationships is possible. Course objectives can be connected sequentially so that the accomplishment of one leads to the accomplishment of the next one. The relationships may overlap in such a way that the knowledge or skill to be learned is reinforced by a collection of activities and assignments that build on each other and end in some coherent conclusion. Is this how we teach? It certainly isn't the approach students prefer. They want content chunked, and once they've made it through a chunk they'd like to pack up that material and forget about it.

What about the collection of objectives within a curriculum? Here there are questions of sequence and order as well as relationships. The nature of the content, how knowledge of it unfolds and deepens, has implications for where objectives best fit in a course of study. And that consideration must be weighed against objectives that lay out how students need to grow and develop within the degree or program.

Questions like these make it very clear that the systematic, purposeful design of a course is a complicated process and putting together a curriculum an even more daunting task. Yes, we need to start with the essential, well-written objectives, the activities and assignments that promote their accomplishment, and the assessments to see if they did. But that's not where the story ends; it's where it begins.