Art and Science of Teaching / Targets, Objectives, Standards: How Do They Fit?

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When I think about such constructs as learning targets, instructional objectives, learning goals, outcomes, education objectives, standards, and the like, I've come to the conclusion that besides having something to do with what students are expected to know and be able to do, there's no consensus as to how these terms fit together.

A watershed event in the history of statements concerning what students should know or be able to do was the publication of Bloom's taxonomy of education objectives (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Subsequently, different authors have provided interpretations of these objectives (see Airasian, 1994; Anderson et al., 2001; Marzano & Kendall, 2007).

Five Recommendations

In light of any confusions or contradictions in the literature, I have five recommendations that will help educators see how these terms can align.

1. Create an internally consistent system.

An internally consistent system helps ensure that all practitioners use terms—such as *learning targets*, *instructional objectives*, and *learning goals*—in the same manner. Ideally, this effort should be conducted at the district level. If the district doesn't offer such a system, it's best to create one at the school level. If the school doesn't have one, collaborative teams might create one on their own.

2. Start with objectives that focus on a single unit of instruction.

Whatever you decide to call them—learning targets, instructional objectives, learning goals—start with statements of what students should know and be able to do *in a single unit of instruction*.

It's useful to think in terms of two types of objectives. *Declarative objectives* are informational. The unit objective of a social studies teacher might be for students to understand and be able to explain the generalization that a region's geography can have a significant effect on a country's future. *Procedural objectives* address skills and processes. A health teacher's unit objective might be for students to be able to use a strategy for refusing to do things that might be detrimental to their physical or mental health. Both objectives can easily be addressed in a single unit of instruction.

Objectives commonly fit within much broader statements of what students should know and be able to do, which we commonly call *standards*. The unit objective for the social studies teacher might relate to one part of a standard that states that students will understand and be able to explain the various factors that influence a country's development—one factor being geography. The unit objective for the health teacher might relate to one part of a standard that states that students will

understand and be able to use strategies that enhance their physical and mental well-being—one strategy being refusal skills.

3. Break the objective into a learning progression.

A learning progression describes the stages of understanding or skill that lead to fully developed declarative or procedural objectives. Thinking through the learning progression for a specific objective greatly enhances a teacher's ability to provide feedback to students on how they're doing on that objective.

For example, the social studies teacher might design the following learning progression:

Students should be able to

- Describe how the geography of countries discussed in class has affected those countries' futures.
- Describe how geography has affected the future of countries not discussed in class.
- Recall specific facts about geographic characteristics that affect a country's development, such as temperature extremes (India); proximity to water (United Kingdom); and altitude (Switzerland).
- Explain basic terminology, such as *region*, *natural resources, physical features*, and *topographic features*.

The health teacher might design the following learning progression:

Students should be able to

- Use specific refusal skills in a real-life situation and report their outcome.
- Use specific refusal strategies, such as not hesitating when refusing (because hesitating will create a chance to think of reasons to go along with the requested behavior); looking directly at the person requesting the behavior; keeping responses short and clear; and speaking respectfully when refusing.
- Describe basic facts about the need for refusal skills—for example, that teenagers are susceptible to peer influence and that deadly accidents are more prevalent among teenagers than among any other group.
- Explain basic terminology, such as *peer pressure, personal responsibility*, and *group dynamics*.

4. Use the learning progression to establish daily targets.

Once teachers have established a learning progression, they can identify daily targets. For example, the social studies teacher might spend one class period focusing on student awareness of specific vocabulary terms. The next learning target might shift to student understanding of factual information about geographic characteristics.

Learning targets can span several days. The health teacher might spend two days addressing the learning target of being able to speak respectfully when refusing to do something. Also, teachers don't have to address the elements in a progression in strict linear fashion. The social studies teacher might begin the unit by introducing the generalization that geography can greatly influence a country's future and then present important details as students continue to explore this idea.

5. Translate daily targets into student-friendly language.

To ensure student understanding of learning targets, some researchers recommend the use of the "I can" format (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). "I can" statements will differ from student to student. One student might rephrase a daily target that concerns respectfully refusing a request as, "I can say no to someone without them getting mad at me." Another student might say, "I can say no but also let the person know that I'm not mad at them." One of the most powerful aspects of "I can" statements is that they help students see where they are on the learning progression for a unit objective.

Seeing Clearly

Any system that organizes statements of what students are expected to know and be able to do enhances student learning because it provides clarity to students and teachers alike. Educators should feel free to create their own systems or adapt those that others have proposed.

References

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