At the beginning of a new term, it is important to remember that refining your teaching and the courses you teach is an iterative process, allowing you to incorporate changes based on what works or does not work in a given semester - each course offering presents an opportunity to strengthen your design. Knowing what you hoped to accomplish sets the stage for this improvement cycle to be effective.

The three major categories of a course foundation - learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment, are often thought of as a triangle. If these three components of the course are aligned, it increases the likelihood of creating a successful course. Because changing any one component might have implications for another part of the process (especially in the case where you are improving an existing course) working back and forth between the three is important.

In this tip sheet we will discuss how to develop effective learning objectives.

The Course Story

To set the context for the course, some find it helpful to draft a course “story” (that you might tell on the first day of class) that will be the backdrop for everything that follows. Why is it exciting (or important though not so obviously exciting)? Why should students care? What is the course and what is it not? From this departure point, a logical next step is to describe the intended learning goals and objectives for the course that will help you and your students to achieve your overall course objectives.
Learning Goals and Objectives

Learning goals and objectives, though sometimes used synonymously, differ in a few ways. Learning goals, often stated as course goals, are broad and define the general purpose of the course. They focus on the big picture and from these goals flow the more specific and concrete learning objectives. Objectives should be constructed in a way that allows you to determine whether the course effectively accomplished what you hoped it would - did the student meet the objectives? How do you know, and how will the student know? Having clear objectives sets you up to continuously refine and improve your teaching with student learning at the core.

Positioning Your Learning Objectives

Bloom's Taxonomy, originally developed in the mid-1950's, and more recently revised, can be a useful framework for positioning learning objectives. Most courses have objectives at many levels - introductory courses might focus more on remembering and understanding, and move toward the end of the course to applying concepts, analyzing and evaluating alternative theories and solutions to issues posed in the course. Upper level and graduate level courses might have a focus more on the top part of the hierarchy, as the foundation has already been laid for students to be able to synthesize, evaluate and then create new meaning from or solutions to problems.

Each level in the hierarchy suggests certain types of questions appropriate for the level. For example, at the lowest level, objectives using the verbs recall, define, repeat would be appropriate. At the application level, words like practice, demonstrate, and translate might be more fitting. At the highest level, using the verbs construct, create, design, and plan would be desirable. Carefully considering which verbs to use will help you to write effective learning objectives. One tool you might find useful in positioning your learning objectives is a teaching goals inventory developed by Angelo and Cross (2003.)
Designing Learning Objectives

A learning objective should clearly state what students should know or be able to do as a result of taking the course. Solid learning objectives shouldn't be too abstract (“the students will understand what good literature is”) or too narrow (“the students will know what a biome is”).

Each individual learning objective should support the overarching goals of the course, and reflect all the skills or learning students should have mastered by the end of the semester or course. Typically, the number of learning objectives is kept to no more than six. They should be clearly stated, measurable (you have to be able to determine whether a student has met them), realistic, match the level of the learner, and be important.

In designing learning objectives, it is important to include:
1. a specific and observable behavior (use a measurable verb - for example, "the student will be able to diagnose X"...);
2. the important condition under which the performance is to occur (e.g.: in a clinical setting...), and what tools or assistance will be provided (using a stethoscope...); and
3. the standard - what will constitute acceptable performance (e.g.: 98% of the time...).

Avoid vague and hard to measure phrasing like: understand, know or learn about, and try to use more specific language such as: identify, construct, compare and contrast, interpret, diagram, translate, predict, analyze.

Other articles / resources you might want to read


For some examples of key words to use when writing learning objectives and some concrete examples developed by Maria Blanco, Assistant Dean for Faculty Development at Tufts School of Medicine click on “TUSM Writing Learning Objectives Handout” under the tab "Teaching Tip Sheets" on our website.