DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

So what do you want your students to learn? A simple question, perhaps, but it is **key**.

As faculty, we have a tendency to focus on the course content we will be teaching. HOWEVER, in designing your course, it is critical that you identify what the students will be able to know, do, or value by the end of your class. These student learning outcomes will provide the direction and core of your course.

**Old Teaching Paradigm**
A faculty member was assigned a course, he/she would select a textbook, and then plan the course.

**New focus on a Learning Paradigm**
The students should be able to know...
The students should be able to do...
The students should be able to value...
by the end of my class

**Quote attributed to John Wooden**
You haven’t taught until they have learned.”

NOTE: In some programs—especially those programs that are reviewed by an external accreditation agency—student learning outcomes already may have been identified by course. You should check with your department or program chair first. If student learning outcomes are not developed, this should be your first step, but HOW do you do this?
Step One is easy. The **audience** must be identified and that is always the students. So your learning outcomes always will begin, “By the end of this course (or module) the students will be able to…”

Step Two is more involved. **Behavior** identifies what you want your students to gain from this course. Key is that the verb in the statement must be measurable (terms like “learn” or “understand” are nebulous; select action verbs that reflect measurable performance). Cognitive outcomes are common—

- Students will be able to list ...
- Students will be able to define...
- Students will be able to analyze in writing...
- Students will be able to create...

But consider psychomotor ones, for instance, in terms of lab techniques or medical procedures:

- Students will be able to administer subcutaneous or intramuscular injections...

And affective, social, and/or ethical ones:

- Students will be able to work collaboratively in a group

To help you select measurable terms, there are lists of action verbs available linked to Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy and also ones linked to Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning Experiences that incorporate psychomotor and affective dimensions. Here are two links that can connect you with these resources:

- Bloom’s Taxonomy verbs
- Fink’s Taxonomy verbs
Step Three specifies if there are any conditions under which the student demonstrates the outcome. Such as if they can use a calculator you would specify “with a calculator” or if in a clinical setting you would specify “in a clinical setting.” You may not have any specific conditions that need to be named, so a condition may not need to be present.

Step Four indicates the degree to which the outcome will be measured. Such as “without error,” “without prompting,” “at least 3 differences.”

Altogether—Audience, behavior, condition, degree generates a clear learning outcome. As mentioned under conditions, sometimes there are no special conditions that need to be specified and some departments/programs will feel degree need not be included in the course learning outcome since the degree will be specified later in the course syllabus or a rubric will be utilized that clearly identifies the level at which the learning outcome should be achieved. Thus, course learning objectives at the very least must specify the audience and the behavior. Also rule of thumb is that most courses need no more than 4 to 7 learning objectives.

Please feel free to contact the Center if you want help in developing your course’s program’s or department’s student learning outcomes.
Also please check out these books on developing student learning outcomes available from the Center’s lending library:


