

Learning Intentions with Success Criteria

Learning intentions (which some people call objectives, learning goals, learning targets, or purpose statements) are where teacher planning begins. **Learning intention** is the statement of what students are expected to learn from the lesson. Learning intentions are different from standards. Standards are statements for teachers that identify what students should know and be able to do at a given point in time. Learning intentions are more than a standard. There have been far too many misguided efforts that mandated teachers to post the standards on the wall. Learning intentions are based on the standard, but are chunked into learning bites. In too many cases, the standards are not understandable to students. Learning intentions, if they are to be effective, have to be understood and accepted by students. Simply writing a target on the dry-erase board and then reading it aloud waters down the power of a learning intention, which should focus the entire lesson and serve as an organizing feature of the learning students do.

Standards are tough for yet-to-be educated students to understand, and they are too broad for students to master in a single lesson. Effective teachers start with a standard, break the learning that standard requires into lesson-sized chunks, and then phrase these chunks so that students will be able to understand them. Each of these chunked phrases- a daily statement of what a student is expected to learn in a given lesson- is a learning intention. Learning intentions can focus on knowledge, skills, or concepts, and should be aligned to the standards and to the learning intentions of related lessons.

At minimum learning intentions should bookend lessons with clear communication about the learning target. In addition, teachers can remind students of the learning intention at each transition point throughout the lesson. In this way, the learning intention drives the lesson, and students will develop a better understanding of how close they are to mastering the expectations.

Every lesson, irrespective of whether it focuses on surface learning, deep learning, or transfer learning, needs to have clearly articulated the learning intention and success criteria. We believe that students should be able to answer, and ask these questions of each lesson:

1. What am I learning today?
2. Why am I learning this?
3. How will I know that I learned it?

The first question requires deep understanding of the learning intention. The second question begs for relevance, and the third question focuses on the success criteria. Neglecting any of these question compromises student's learning. In fact, we argue that these questions compose part of the **Learner's Bill of Rights**. Given that teachers (And the public at large) judge students based on their performance, it seems only fair that students should know what they are expected to learn, why they are learning that, and how success will be determined. The marks teachers make on report cards and transcripts become part of the permanent record that follows students around. Those documents have the power to change parents' perceptions of their child, determine future placements in school and open college doors.

Stated simply, when one knows what the target is, there is an increased likelihood that the target will be achieved. Knowing one's learning destination is crucial for students.

There are a few hallmarks of good learning intentions that Clarke, Timperley, and Hattie have identified:

- Learning intentions should be shared with students, so that students understand them and what success looks like. Recognize that not all students in the class will be working at the same rate or starting from the same place, so it's important to adapt the plan relating to the intentions to make it clear to all students.
- Learning does not happen in a neat, linear sequence; therefore, the cascade from the curriculum aim (the standard) through the achievement objective (big ideas or units goals) to the learning intentions (for a specific lesson) is sometimes complex.
- Learning intentions and activities can be grouped if one activity can contribute to more than one learning intention, or one learning intention may need several activities for students to understand it fully.

- Learning intentions are what we intend students to learn, but it is important to realize students may learn other things not planned for, so teachers need to be aware of unintended consequences.

Learning intentions are more than just statements to convey to students what the learning is composed of: they are a means for building positive relationships with students. Teacher-student and student-student relationships are foundational to learning. Learning intentions that are intentionally inviting, are aligned to current student learning, are designed to advance students from surface to deeper learning, and set high expectation targets deliver positive results that accelerate learning. (Hattie, 2012).

Figure 1.7 in *Visible Learning for Literacy* and Figure 2.1 in *Visible Learning for Mathematics* contain some poorly written or less inviting learning intentions and some improvements that teachers made collaboratively as they explored the value of this approach. Note that the intentions became longer, more specific, and more interesting. The improved versions invite students into learning.

| Improving Learning Intentions | |
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| Poor Example | Improved Version |
| Compare the experience of character in two stories | Today, we'll read two stories. One is about city life and one is about country life. We are going to look closely at one character who lives in the city and another character who lives in the country. We are going to learn how to compare the differences in their lives based on where they live. |
| Determine the central idea of a text | Each group has a different article, and our learning today is going to focus on locating the central or controlling idea, the idea that the author uses to hold the entire text together. |
| Compare two texts for different themes | Compare how two texts from the same point in U.S. history address a common theme and figure out what each author is trying to say in response to the theme. |
| We have a test on Friday, so we need to review place value. | I was thinking about our work together, and I noticed that many of us still need to think about place value. We will spend some time reviewing place value so that we know how to determine which number is greater. |
| Today we are going to continue our work with statistics. We will focus on learning on scatter plots for bivariate measurement data so that we can see if there are patterns of association. | Have you ever wondered if the relationship between two things was really significant? For example, I was wondering if the number of students in a class was related to their overall scores on a test. I'm sure you all can think of things you'd like to compare. Remember we learned that correlations don't mean cause, but that there is a relationship with the numbers. Today, we get to explore scatter plots as one tool to look for associations. |

Following are some examples of learning intentions seen in mathematics classrooms.

- Know that a ten is really just a group of ten ones.
- Learn to add two fraction with like denominator by modeling on a number line
- Examine a given data set to determine if the function that it describes is linear or exponential by assessing the way the function changes over equal intervals and relating this change to students' knowledge of a given context.

Some mathematics teachers might be concerned that statements such as these can rob students of a period of investigation and inquiry. Learning intentions don't have to be used at the onset of the lesson and may be revisited over time. Teachers can withhold their learning intentions until after an exploration has occurred in the lesson. And teachers can invite students to explain what they have learned from the lesson and compare that with the initial learning intention for the lesson. Interesting class discussions about the alignment (or lack of alignment) can provide a great deal of insight on student understanding.

As stated, learning intentions can be grouped. Sometimes an activity can contribute to several learning intentions, and other times a learning intention requires several activities. However, when learning intentions spread over many days, student interest will wane, and motivation will decrease. When teachers plan a unit of study and clearly identify the learning intentions required for mastery of the content, most times they can identify daily targets. In doing so, they can also identify the success criteria, which will allow for checking for understanding and targeted feedback.

If learning intentions serve as one bookend for learning, the other bookend consists of the criteria used to measure success. How do you know whether your students are successful at learning what you wanted them to? How do they know whether they're successful? How can they know whether or not they've met the intended learning intentions, or whether they're making progress toward doing so? With success criteria. **Success criteria** are statements that describe what success looks like when the learning goal is reached. They are specific, concrete, and measureable. It is important to know and communicate learning intentions and success criteria to students. When success criteria are communicated clearly, and teachers and students are actively looking for evidence of learning, learners understand the importance of the lesson. Even better, strategic use of learning intentions and success criteria promote student self-reflection and metacognition- that is thinking about their own thinking. These are two essential

yet often overlooked lesson outcomes. For students, this means knowing what they are expected to learn (Learning Intentions) and what the learning goal looks like when they have learned it (Success Criteria).

The success criteria must be directly linked with learning intentions to have any impact. The success criteria describe how students will be expected to demonstrate their learning based on the learning intention. That's not to say that success criteria are just a culminating activity, but it can be. Consider the following ways that students may demonstrate success based on the learning intention that read, "*Analyze visual images presented in the text and determine how this information contributes to and clarifies information.*"

- Discuss with a partner the way the author used visuals and how they helped you understand the text.
- Identify one place in the text that was confusing and how one of the visuals helped you understand that information.
- In your annotations, make sure to include situation where the visual information helped you understand the text itself.
- Create a visual that will help another person understand the words in the text.

All of these work, in different situations. Clarity is important here.

Most critical, the learning intention should clearly lead to the criteria of success- and if you had to use only one of these, we would recommend focusing on being more explicit about the success criteria. Both help, but the judgement about the standard of work desired is more important than explanation about the particular task we ask students to do. It is the height of the bar, not the bar, that matters. What is it that students should be learning and how will they know (not to mention how will the teacher know) if they learned? That's the power of learning intentions and success criteria.

Hattie, J., Fisher, D., Frey, N., (2017). *Visible Learning for Mathematic, What Works Best To Optimize Student Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Fisher, D., Frey, N., Hattie, J., (2016). *Visible Learning for Literacy, implementing the Practices That Work Best to Accelerate Student Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

A high school principal describes an “aha moment” he had while observing an English literature lesson:

I walked into the classroom and sat down. I found the room organized and attractive. I felt that the content was important and appropriate. The teacher was passionate and captivating, and his students sat in rapt attention as he talked about the essential content for the lesson: understanding the role of the “senex figure” in Shakespeare’s plays. He had a PowerPoint presentation and used the SMART Board to share important vocabulary he was using. His lecture was interesting, and he even did voices for characters. He was really into it. The lesson unfolded at a comfortable pace. Every so often he stopped and asked his students, “Are you with me?” And each time, the students would nod their heads or say, “Yes.”

Suddenly it hit me. The students quite literally were doing nothing to build understanding, try out the concept, or demonstrate whether they actually understood or could apply the concept. The teacher was the only one performing. All he required students to do was to be a faithful audience and respond in the affirmative that they were with him. There was no way he or his students had a clue whether student could identify and describe the role of the senex figure in Shakespeare’s play, or how well they could do it. There was no way to know if the students were actually learning. Just a few months ago, I would have described the students as highly engaged. How could I have not seen this before? This time, I looked for what the students were actually doing to pursue the learning target, (The success criteria) I tried to find evidence of their understanding. I couldn’t! I was stunned! For me it was like that moment when the villagers realize that the emperor isn’t wearing any clothes. Here was an obvious truth that I never saw before.

Moss, C., Brookhart, S., (2012). *Learning Targets helping Student Aim for Understanding in Today’s Lesson*, Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Questions:

1. Do the students in our schools consistently know
 - What they are learning today?
 - Why they are learning this?
 - How they will know they have learned it?
2. What are the barriers that are hindering these Learner’s Bill of Rights?
3. What are the first steps that I need to take to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum and the Learner’s Bill of Rights?