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Spotlight On...Formative Assessment: Learning Intentions & Success Criteria

If you don't know where you're going,
you might end up some place else.

~Yogi Bera

Stating a learning intention fosters the possibility of reaching that goal, but stating an intention for a learning activity takes finesse and a careful consideration of the journey. Creating a learning intention is a multi-layered process and must include the success relative to that intention. Note that a learning intention is not exactly the same as a learning outcome. While outcomes often describe a product, a learning intention includes the students experience as s/he develops that product. For example, you may take a car trip to Florida with your family. Your outcome, the destination, is Florida. The experience you want your children to appreciate is recording information about each state along the way and reflecting on key characteristics of each one. The intention is to better understand geography, climate, and regional culture.

It is not always beneficial to state a specific destination before the journey begins. Consider the dog that loves riding in the car but recognizes the word "vet." Perhaps it is better not to name the destination at the beginning of that journey. According to William and Leahy in *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K-12 Classrooms*, there are three good reasons to be very judicious in stating learning intentions (i.e. content standards) before the lesson.

1. Sometimes you don't know exactly where the lesson is going.
2. Sometimes telling the students where you are going spoils the journey.
3. Starting every lesson with a learning outcome is a recipe for uninspired and uninspiring teaching.

Teachers need to plan their classroom activities backward from the

By being clear about what it is we want students to learn – in Stephen Covey's words, by "starting with the end in mind" – it is more likely that our students will learn what we need them to learn. (William and Leahy, 2015)



learning goals, but these cannot always be specified in advance. Some activities are designed to provide a critical experience and others are intended to lead to a tangible product. When the experience is key, stating the learning goal may inhibit the natural discovery process at the center of the learning experience.

Techniques for Stating Learning Intentions

Consider the term *learning outcomes* as a way to think about stating what the students will be able to do as a result of engaging in the planned educational activities. Teachers want to effect a change in their students; what students learn is not always the same as what we *intend* to have them learn. Therefore, stating *learning intentions* to describe what we want our students to learn and determining *success criteria* that we use to judge the success of a learning activity reflects the unpredictable aspects of student learning while honoring need to reach academic goals.

We often begin introducing students to a learning intention and success criteria by presenting the rubric aligned to the outcome. Consider instead starting with a mentor text (e.g. sample of student work), an example of something you want students to experience or produce that reflects the learning intention. Analyze the qualities of the text and determine its quality criteria. In this way, you can develop the success criteria collaboratively with students and, from that, create a rubric that students will understand.

Determine Success Criteria: focus on the learning intention independent of the context

You may be asking students to read *The Great Gatsby* and analyze the symbolism of the green light at the end of the dock and the eyes on the billboard, but your goal is to have students learn to recognize and analyze symbols in various contexts. State your outcome in a way that can be applied to various contexts. Consider this: you may ask students to identify a theme in a particular story then recognize that same theme in several different stories. In this same manner, state a learning intention general enough to be applied to several assignments so that students have multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate growth leading to proficiency. The learning intention must also be specific enough to be meaningful. For example, *students will use credible, reliable evidence to support analysis of text* can be applied to a response to nearly any text while *students will use evidence from at least three different, nonconsecutive chapters of The Great Gatsby to support an analysis of symbolism* is too specific and text dependent.

Use the same learning intention in a different context

To help foster the transfer of the learning intention, provide a

Students can hit any target they can see that holds still for them.

~Stiggins, et al, 2006



When we invest time up front to build the vision (of what students are to be learning), we gain it back later in increased student motivation and the resulting higher-quality work.

~ Chappuis, 2009



different context for the students to practice and demonstrate learning. If the learning intention is neither text nor context dependent, you can repeat it and provide students another opportunity to demonstrate success. The success criteria may also remain essentially the same or gradually increase in rigor.

Differentiate success criteria, not learning intention

State success criteria as product or process criteria, a reflection of the learning intention without getting too detailed about the parts. Be careful not to create checklists which inhibit learning transfer.

Digital Resources

[Formative Assessment for Primary Classrooms](#)

This informative site includes a number of useful tools for utilizing formative assessment practices in elementary level classrooms; including a section devoted to identifying learning intentions and helping students develop success criteria.

[EduGains Video Library](#)

As part of an assessment system developed for schools in Ontario, Canada, this resource is a collection 6 videos (6-8 minutes each in length) and a viewing guide that detail how to help students set learning goals and success criteria.

Professional Texts

[Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom: A Guide for Instructional Leaders](#)

Connie Moss and Susan Brookhardt

In this practical guide, Moss and Brookhardt define formative assessment as an active, continual process in which teachers and students work together--every day, every minute--to gather evidence of learning, always keeping in mind three guiding questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? What strategy or strategies can help me get to where I need to go? Chapters focus on the six elements of formative assessment: (1) sharing learning targets and criteria for success, (2) feedback that feeds forward, (3) student goal setting, (4) student self-assessment, (5) strategic teacher questioning, and (6) engaging students in asking effective questions. (Amazon Review)

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Setting clear targets for student learning involves more than posting an instructional goal for students to see. It also requires elaboration of the criteria by which student work will be judged.

~Shepard, et al, 2005

Teaching for Transfer

Peter Dewitz and Michael Graves

In this engaging article, Dewitz and Graves describe how focusing on learning transfer is key to scaffolding students to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes in school and beyond. The authors explore types of learning transfer and provide clear examples of how teachers can help students transfer learning across multiple contexts.

Literature for Children and Adolescents

A Passion for Elephants: The Real Life Adventure of Field Scientist Cynthia Moss

Toni Buzzeo

Scientist, photographer and animal-rights activist, Cynthia Moss was never afraid of BIG things. As a kid, she loved to ride through the countryside on her tall horse, visit faraway places and learn about the world around her. So when Cynthia traveled to Africa and met the world's most ENORMOUS land animal, the African elephant, she knew she had found her life's work. This accessible picture book gives kids a glimpse of what scientists do in the real world and inspires them to dream of accomplishing BIG things. (Amazon Review)

Out of Nowhere

Maria Padian

Sentenced to community service for pulling a stupid prank against a rival high school, soccer star Tom tutors a Somali refugee with soccer dreams of his own. This story is set in Maine and while it is fiction, it may sound very familiar.

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