

## EDUCATION & TRAINING

### Learning Objectives



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The great baseball philosopher, Yogi Berra, is quoted as saying, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll wind up somewhere else.” Learning objectives specify where you’re going. Just as writing a paper is facilitated by preparing an outline first, designing a training session, course, or curriculum is facilitated by preparing a short list of learning objectives. A goal is a broad aim indicating where the instructor is headed, but not necessarily a plan for how to achieve it (Stone, 1999). Goals are often written in global terms, while an objective is a measurable statement of exactly what the learners will be able to do after the course or training session.

Requests for workshop proposals typically require inclusion of learning objectives, and most academic settings expect learning objectives to be included in a course syllabus. For example, a training program giving an overview of psychiatric rehabilitation, whether through a one-hour in-service session or a semester-long academic course, has the goal of improving the learners’ understanding of the philosophy, principles, and practices of psychiatric rehabilitation. Objectives indicate more specific anticipated accomplishments, such as, “At the end of the session/course, participants will be able to list six key values underlying the psychiatric rehabilitation approach.”

The objective also suggests how to evaluate the training and provides some guidance for selecting the training methods and activities that are likely to achieve the desired outcome (McKeachie, 1986; Stone, 1999). If the objective is for the student to be able to list six values, then the evaluation should include asking the student to list six values—pretty straightforward! As for relevant training methods, if the goal is to have someone learn a list, then repetition of the list throughout the training increases the likelihood of success, so the instructor will want to consider introducing the list through various media, such as naming aloud, posting on a blackboard, including in a handout, and frequently quizzing the learners.

Many educators and trainers make the error of using the objectives to identify what the instructor will do, such as, “present the principles of psychiatric rehabilitation” or “describe the essential components of the clubhouse model.” However, anyone who has done training (and probably anyone who has attended training) knows that the message sent by the instructor is not necessarily the message received by the learner. A primary focus on what the *instructor* will do puts the emphasis on the wrong thing (what do I want to tell them?). Conceptualizing what the *learner* should be able to do after

the training leads to asking what the instructor needs to do to help the learners learn (what do I need to do to help them do this?)

Limiting the number of objectives helps guide the instructor in organizing the training; too many objectives lead to a choppy patchwork of material. When preparing for a course with multiple classes or training sessions, both general and specific objectives can be used (Fletcher & Patrick, 1999). The general objectives for the course (limited to three to five) capture the broad aims for the course. The general objectives then help guide the design of the various classes or sessions—each having its own specific learning objectives (again limited to about three or four). Ideally, each of the specific objectives relates back to the goal of the training, and to the general objectives of the course.

The training sessions or topic sections represent important components of the overall course or training program, but are not the same as objectives. Topic selection for training may be dictated by logical clustering and sequencing of information, and/or by academic accreditation requirements or licensing regulations related to staff orientation. Learning objectives for each topic help the instructor determine whether a learner has mastered the training content.

Some objectives are end-points in themselves (“terminal” objectives), while others are necessary to move on to other objectives (“enabling” objectives)—part of a process rather than an outcome (Stone, 1999). An objective might be both a terminal objective and an enabling objective. The earlier example of the terminal objective of “listening six values” also could be viewed as an enabling objective—knowing the list of values is necessary to achieve another related objective, such as “par-

ticipants will be able to identify which psych rehab values are relevant to situations that occur in a real-life program environment.” Enabling objectives, then, are related to prerequisites. When a training session or course nests into a larger curriculum, objectives need to take into account the requirements and objectives for other sessions or courses. For example, if one training session is designed to accomplish a particular objective, and that objective is a prerequisite for another training session, then the curriculum design requires completion of the training sessions in order.

Stone (1999) recommends a specific process for preparing objectives for a course. First, identify the overall goal that the instruction will achieve (not necessarily a measurable statement). Next, write down examples of what people will know or will be able to do once the goal has been achieved. Review the list and rank the desired outcomes by importance to set your priorities, and identify related objectives. Once the list is organized in a logical manner, write the objectives by describing in precise and measurable terms what learners need to be able to do. Lastly, test the objectives for measurability.

Specifying meaningful and measurable learning objectives takes a bit of work, and is worth the effort. McKeachie (1986), well-known through his writings on “teaching tips,” reminds instructors not to leave out important objectives “simply because you can’t think of good ways to convert them to behavioral language.... Behavioral objectives may help, but there is no evidence that they are better for student learning than other statements of objectives” (p. 8). Additionally, don’t focus on the petty details to the exclusion of the big picture, even if the petty details are easy to measure. Keep relating the specific objectives back to the

overall goal of the course or training program.

Adult learners learn best through “doing” rather than listening (Knowles, 1970; Naylor, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1999). Therefore, effective training methods for adults require them to actively use their new knowledge and to practice their developing competencies. Objectives that focus on what someone will be able to *do* remind instructors to have the learners practice that particular “doing” in the training session. Because adult learners are most interested in things that they see as directly relevant to their lives (Knowles, 1970; Wlodkowski, 1999), the instructor should present each objective, along with the rationale for that objective, and make use of practices and evaluations during the training that simulate the environment in which the learner is expected to apply the new learning.

A learning objective implies that the learner is *not* currently able to do something, but will be able to do it following the lesson. Of course, training groups often include one or more learners who have already made progress towards one of the learning objectives. A pre/post measure establishes learner baselines, and will show that change or improvement occurred during the training period. Using only a post-test can show that learners have achieved an objective but, without a pre-test, there is no way of knowing whether these same learners had already achieved that objective prior to any training. For any lengthy training, pre-test baseline measures can help an instructor modify the training content and process to meet learners’ needs and interests. If a few learners are “advanced” in some areas, while others are “beginners,” the instructor can draw on the more advanced learners for contributions, which keeps them engaged rather than lost to boredom or annoyance.

Improving your ability to write learning objectives will improve the quality of your next workshop proposal or academic syllabus. Additionally, the framework of the objectives will improve the organization of your preparation and, ultimately, your delivery. If you know exactly where you're going, you're less likely to end up somewhere else, and you will be able to make any necessary corrections to achieve your desired end point. Then you will know, as Yogi Berra would advise, that if you come to a fork in the road, you should take it.

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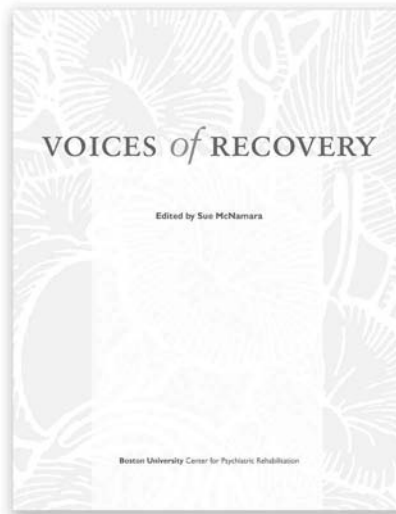
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