Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching
by Robyn R. Jackson

Know Where Your Students Are Going

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
>
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
>
> "I don't much care where—" said Alice.
>
> "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

I stopped by Kristine's class one day to conduct a formal observation. I arrived a few minutes early, chose a seat near the back of the classroom, and watched the students file in. When the bell rang, Kristine walked to the front of the room and pointed to the objectives on the board. "Good morning class," she began. "Our objectives for today are SWBAT: One, complete the warm-up problem on the board. Next, you and your lab partner will go to your microscopes where you will find instructions for today's amoeba lab. You will complete the lab according to the instructions and then write up your findings in your lab notebooks. Make sure that when you are finished, you clean up your lab area according to the clean-up procedures posted at the back of the classroom. Tonight's homework is to read the chapter on cell respiration. Are there any questions?"

Later, when Kristine and I met for the post observation conference, I asked her, "What were your objectives for the day's lesson?"

"Well," she began nervously, "I wanted students to complete the amoeba lab according to the lab procedures we have been going over in class."

"So the objective was that students use the lab procedures?" I asked.

"Well that and I wanted students to understand that amoebas are unicellular organisms."

"Why?" I asked, genuinely interested as I thought back to my own science classes.

Kristine shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "Because we have just started studying cells and most cells are not visible to the naked eye. I wanted them to see a cell and how it could function as an organism and identify the various parts of the cell. It was all in the lab instructions I gave them."

"That's different from the objectives you posted on the board," I pointed out. Kristine's face fell.

"But I thought I *had* posted the objectives," she protested. "I phrased them the way they taught us in school. I started with "Students will be able to do" and listed all the things that I wanted students to do by the end of the period. What's wrong with that?"

"Kristine, you listed what you wanted students to do but not what you wanted students to learn. I think it's great that you gave students a list of what activities you wanted them to accomplish in the classroom today. But it is also important to help students understand why they are completing those activities and how they, and you for that matter, will know whether they learned what you intended them to learn."

Kristine looked at the lab handout. "Well, I kind of tell them the point in the directions. They have to label these parts of the cell and they have to answer the question about single cell organisms."

I shifted tacks. "Kristine, why are you supposed to post objectives for students?"

"Because it helps students know what they are supposed to be learning?" she said, fidgeting nervously.

"Why is that important?"

Kristine paused for a moment. "I think it is so that students can know why they are completing their assignments and how to reach the objective."

I smiled at Kristine. "So, why don't we look at how you can help students understand your objectives and how they can reach them?"

Common Practice

I have a confession to make. When I first started teaching, I planned my lessons and *then* I wrote behavioral objectives to match whatever activities I had planned. After I wrote them, I never thought about those objectives again.

I am not alone. Many of us do the same thing or something similar. We write objectives, sure. We even post them in our classrooms and review them at the beginning of the period with students. But when we select which text we will use, what worksheets will require, what homework we will assign, and what tests and quizzes we will give, are we really doing so with our learning objectives in mind?

How we communicate these objectives is also of concern. Some school districts go so far as to require that objectives be written on the board. The reasoning behind such mandates makes sense. Teachers should communicate the objectives to students. But, few teachers go beyond posting their objectives each day. In school they teach us how to write objectives, but the emphasis is often more on how the objectives are worded than on the quality of the objective itself.

Another pitfall many of us face is that we really don't distinguish between learning goals and the activities we plan. Many times what we call mastery objectives are really learning activities or agenda items that outline what we plan to teach that day, not what we want students to learn. We think that by placing the ubiquitous phrase "Students will be able to" (or SWBAT) in front each activity, we have created an objective, but "SWBAT create a diorama of an African game reserve," is vastly different from "SWBAT understand the principle of conservation." One objective focuses on an activity—what the teacher will teach that day. The other focuses on what students will be learning.

Much has been written on objectives. Some theorists spend time identifying the different types of objectives that are possible and their various uses. Others point out the distinguishing features of a "good" objective. Given all the information and opinions out there, it's hard to figure out whether you should create behavioral objectives, mastery objectives, essential questions, thinking objectives, understanding goals, performance objectives, criterion-referenced objectives, or some combination of all of the above. The problem is that all of them make some sense and there are compelling reasons for each of them.

So what's a teacher to do? We all know that objectives are important, but how to create objectives and how to determine whether or not our students have achieved these objectives remains for many of us a fuzzy science.

The Principle

Imagine that you needed to drive from California to New York by next Friday. What steps would you take? Perhaps you would start by taking out your map and planning your route. I imagine that you would decide how far you needed to go each day in order to make your deadline. You would probably need to figure out where you would stop each night to rest. And, you would have to decide where to eat, how much money you will need, and what you will pack.

Now, imagine that your students had to reach certain standards and benchmarks by the end of the year. What steps would you take? Perhaps you would start by examining your curriculum and checking to see what would be the best route to help students achieve the standards and benchmarks. You would also decide what would be the checkpoints

along the way and when and how you will periodically check student progress. Finally, you would need to decide what resources you will need to make students' achievement of the standards more likely.

It is helpful to think of the standards as your final destination. They represent what students need to know or be able to do by the end of their time with you. They are your learning goals. But, because mastery of the standards does not happen all at once, you will need to break these standards down into smaller objectives that will guide your day-to-day interactions with students. These objectives represent the various steps towards mastery and the criteria and evidence you will collect to ensure that students are indeed making progress.

Thinking about planning this way—learning goals that lead to objectives that lead to assessments that lead to learning activities—helps you make sense out of both your curriculum and your state and district mandates. And it helps you plan lessons, units, and semesters that are more likely to help your students meet the learning standards of your grade level or course.

Practicing the Principle

Master teachers spend more time unpacking standards and objectives than they do planning learning activities because they understand that clear learning goals will drive everything else they do. They begin by determining whether the standard emphasizes learning content or a process. They also look to see what other knowledge and skills are implied by the standard. From there, master teachers try to state the goal as concretely as possible in terms of what students should know or be able to do and the criteria for mastery of the goal. They then break these goals down into steps towards mastery that become their daily learning objectives. While master teachers hold all their students to rigorous standards, they state goals in terms of minimal rather than maximum acceptable performance. In that way, they challenge their students to exceed the standards and provide room for differentiation. Finally, master teachers effectively communicate these goals to students and parents and hold students accountable for achieving them.

Unpack the Standards

In many instances, the state or the school district has determined standards that students must reach by the end of the semester, year, or course. But, simply adopting these standards is not enough. If we are going to use these standards to guide our planning, assessments, and our teaching, we need to understand just what they are asking students to know or do.

The first step in developing appropriate and effective learning goals is to unpack the standards. There are two types of learning goals that are implied in any standard. The first type of goal is a content goal. Content goals emphasize content knowledge. Their main focus is on what students need to know or understand. The second type of goal is a process goal. Process goals focus on students' learning or developing a skill. For example, knowing the meaning of irony is a content goal. Knowing how to explain how an author uses irony to strengthen her argument is a process goal.

How do you determine whether a standard implies a content or procedural goal? The first clue is the verb that introduces the goal. If the goal begins with "students will understand or know," then it is likely the goal's focus is on content knowledge. If the goal outlines something that students will be able to do (i.e. write, compute, use, create, etc.), then the goal is likely a process goal.

Yes, but... I don't have time to unpack the standards. I am too busy trying to get my students

ready for the big test.

As important as it is, unpacking the standards does take some time. But once you determine whether a standard is asking for content or procedural mastery, you can actually save yourself time because you will only focus on the skills or knowledge that is required by the standard. You will inevitably find that some of the things that you are doing to get your students ready to pass the big test are not actually moving students towards mastery of the standards on which they will be tested. So taking time to unpack the standards will actually help you be more efficient in your preparation for the test.

You don't have to unpack them all at once. Start by going one unit at a time. Even if you don't significantly alter your lesson planning at first, at least by unpacking the standards you can start to think differently and more strategically about how you teach and the learning activities you use.

Making the distinction between process and content goals is not easy. There is a high degree of overlap. Many processes support content learning, and some content makes learning a process easier. For instance, the standard might be that students know how to analyze the geographic, political, religious, social, and economic structures in Northern China, which is a process goal. But in order to analyze these structures, students need to know what these structures are, which relates to content. Although the goal's emphasis is on process, knowing the content is crucial for students to engage in that process. Thus, there will be times when distinguishing between a content or process goal will feel artificial. But there are three reasons why making this distinction is important even when it seems as if you are splitting hairs.

The first reason is that it helps you think through the learning goal and figure out what is really important. Many standards and objectives are written in a way that obfuscates the distinction between content and process and, if we are not careful, we can become so distracted by the process involved that we fail to see that the main point of the goal is content, or vice versa. One of my favorite examples of this is the common English standard that students will be able to analyze the plot structure of a play. Many teachers think that in order to analyze the plot, students have to read the entire play. But, students can effectively analyze the plot by reading a really good plot summary. Or, they can be given an outline of the plot structure and use that to analyze the plot. Or, they can read key scenes rather than the entire play. But, when I suggest this to many English teachers, they get upset. They believe that the students must read the entire play. Perhaps it is important that students read the entire play in order to absorb the language of the playwright or to gain the experience of reading a play from start to finish, but reading the entire play is not required by the standard.

The second important reason for determining whether a goal is a content or process goal is that making this determination can help you find ways to differentiate your instruction so that more of your students can access the curriculum and achieve the learning goal. If the goal is asking students to master content, then you have quite a bit of flexibility on how students learn that content. If the goal is asking students to master a process, you have flexibility in the content you can use.

Third, determining whether a standard implies a process or content goal will help you determine what knowledge or skills are implied by a standard. Once you know that a standard requires that students master a process, you can also think about what steps students will have to take in order to master that process and what other knowledge or skills that process will require. If the standard emphasizes content knowledge, you can start to think about what processes students will need to use in order to acquire and retain that content knowledge.

Unpacking the standards and using them to develop learning goals will help focus your instructional planning. Not only will it help you determine what exactly students should learn, it will help you select learning activities that are well-matched to the learning goals and to students' individual needs.

Try This

- Examine your state or district standards for an upcoming unit of study. Determine whether each is a process or content goal. One way to help distinguish a content goal from a process goal is to look at the verbs used. Content goals typically use the words "know" and "understand." Process goals typically use action verbs such as "analyze," "conduct," "multiply," and "write."
- For each content goal, look to see what processes are implied. For each process goal, look to see what content is implied. Make sure that students know the implied content or skill before you expect them to master the learning goal.

Make Learning Goals Concrete

Even after we unpack the standards and create learning goals, there are times when our learning goals are much too abstract. We say we want students to become "lifelong learners" or to "think like scientists" or to "write persuasively." But what is a "lifelong learner"? *How* does a scientist think? How do we know what "persuasively" means? These goals are difficult to understand and, because they are vague, they are almost impossible to assess. Our goals need to be concrete and clear to students. The goals should lay out exactly what students need to know and what you want them to do with that knowledge.

One way to make sure your learning goals are concrete is to think about how you will measure whether or not students have achieved the goal. If you are having trouble determining how you will measure whether a student has achieved a learning goal, that is a good clue that your learning goal is too broad and too abstract. If for example, your goal is that students will "write for a variety of purposes," how will you know when students have achieved this goal? If students write a persuasive letter and a narrative, will they have achieved the goal? If they write a poem and a letter to a pen pal, will that demonstrate that they have reached this goal? What about if they write in any genre they choose? Will that do it? As you can see, this learning goal is too abstract. It can be interpreted in a variety of ways and it isn't clear how you will be able to assess students' mastery. A more concrete learning goal might be that "students will write to persuade, to inform, and to explain." You will need to be careful not to make your learning goals too specific however, because doing so will put you in danger of listing activities or assignments rather than overarching objectives.

It is also important that you build your criteria for mastery into your learning goals. Effective learning goals will articulate the learning target and will also spell out for students what mastery looks like. Rather than tell students to think like scientists, we tell students to apply the scientific method to successfully solve a problem. In that way, we are helping them understand what they are expected to do, and we are making concrete those implied knowledge and skills that lie beneath our goals.

A third way to make your learning goals more concrete is to break them down into smaller learning objectives that map out the steps to mastery. It is often unreasonable to expect students to master a learning goal all at once. Breaking the learning goal down into manageable parts helps students focus on the *next* step rather than get overwhelmed by the amount of work it will take to achieve mastery. They may not be able to envision the final goal at first, but the next step is something concrete towards which they can work. Students need to know what the steps are towards mastery so that they can understand how to master the learning goal and so that they (and you) have clear checkpoints to assess their progress along the way.

By making goals concrete for both you and your students, you make it more likely that students will understand and ultimately achieve the learning goals, and you build in mechanisms that help you track their progress towards mastery.

Try This

- Create a rubric or scale for each learning goal as a way of providing students (and you) with a clear description of what mastery of the goal will look like and the stages of mastery along the way.
- Articulate the specific behaviors you expect students to exhibit when they are completing a task.
- Break your learning goals down into discrete steps students can take towards mastery. Present these steps to students along with a visual way (such as a chart, checklist, or graphic organizer) to track their progress towards the learning goal.
- For each learning goal, decide how you will know when students have achieved that goal and how you will know when students are on the right track. Explain these indicators to students.

Set Goals in Terms of Minimum Performance

A big mistake many of us make is that we set learning targets that represent maximum instead of minimum standards of proficiency. Instead, our learning goals should represent the floor, not the ceiling.

Sounds counterintuitive doesn't it? Shouldn't learning targets be pretty high so that our students have something to shoot for?

Yes, and no. Our learning targets should be rigorous and challenging so that our students can stretch themselves to learn and grow. But, they should not be so rigorous and challenging that few of our students are likely to ever reach them.

Yes, but... this sounds a lot like low expectations to me.

Thinking of the standard as minimum rather than the maximum performance does not mean lowering expectations; it actually ensures that more students will be challenged. If you see the standard as the maximum performance, you set limits on what your students can do. You leave them nowhere else to go. But, if you see the standard as just the beginning, not only does it not seem as daunting, but it also presents a challenge to all of your students by setting the expectation that they will *exceed* the standards.

Thinking about our learning goals this way requires that we re-examine what we mean by mastery. Does mastery mean that students are performing at the level of an expert? Does it mean that students are doing what we would expect for a similar student in that grade level? What exactly do we mean when we say that a student has mastered something, and is that kind of mastery a reasonable expectation?

Often, we will find that our expectations for what students should know and be able to do represent an ideal—an ideal not necessarily required by the standards of our course or grade level. Thus, while we would love for students to write like Pulitzer Prize winners, the standards only require that they write like highly proficient third-graders. While we would love for our students to conduct experiments worthy of a Nobel Prize, the standards only ask that they conduct an experiment according to the scientific method.

Thinking in terms of minimum versus maximum performance also allows you to differentiate your instruction both for students who are struggling and for students who need more challenge and enrichment without teaching two curricula. Imagine that you had a class full of students and they were all required to jump over a string that was two feet high. Some of your students are great jumpers and jump over the string easily. Others cannot jump over the string no matter how hard they try. How do you help everyone meet the standard and remain challenged?

One solution is to keep the string at a maximum height of two feet for every student. Those students who can jump it, do, and those students who can't, fail at the task. For some students the task remains impossible, for some, it is just the right amount of challenge, and for others, it is so easy that they soon become bored.

Another solution is to move the string up and down based on the students' individual jumping abilities. For the students who have difficulty jumping over the string, you can lower the string to a more comfortable jumping height. For the students who can easily jump it at two feet, you raise the string to a more challenging height. While this approach will make sure that every student is successful jumping over the string, not every student will do so according to the two-foot-high standard.

The third choice is to anchor the string at two feet high on one end and slant it upward to a height of eight or even ten feet at the other end. Then, line up all the students along the string at a height that is challenging for them and allow them to jump. As soon as jumping becomes too easy for them, they can move up to a higher part of the string. In the meantime you work with those students who cannot even jump the string at the two-foot-high height to develop their jumping skills. In this way, every student is challenged and the standard is not compromised.

It is the same way in teaching. If you see the standard as the maximum performance for students, then the students who have already mastered the standard have nothing else to shoot for and soon become bored. If you see the standard as contingent upon the abilities of the students in your class, then not only do you wear yourself out moving the standard for each student, but the students who might struggle are never asked to meet the standard.

But, when you think of the standard as the minimum that students are required to master, and see that it does not change regardless of where students are, then you not only challenge those students who have already mastered the standard, you also support those students who struggle meeting the standard on their own. In the end, more of your students are likely to meet the learning goals and to be continually challenged while doing so.

Try This

- Examine each standard and decide the minimum evidence that students have achieved mastery of the standard. Then decide what the maximum evidence is. Use this range as the parameters for your differentiation activities with students so that you are differentiating *up* from the standard rather than down.
- Create a learning contract. List the minimum amount of work students will need to complete in order to demonstrate mastery of the standard. Require this work of all students in order for them to receive credit and a *C* grade. Then add other work that represents enrichment or reinforcement activities. If students complete two extra activities, they can earn a *B*. If students complete four extra activities, then they earn an *A*. For more on how to create learning contracts, visit www.masterteachermindset.com.

Design Appropriate Assessments

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998) point out in their book *Understanding by Design* that an integral part of designing effective learning goals is to determine when we will know students have mastered the learning objectives, what evidence we will use, and how we will collect that evidence over time. In other words, once we have determined what students should know, how will we know that they know it?

Again, it sounds easier than it is.

After we have determined the acceptable evidence of mastery, we have to figure out by what criteria we will judge mastery. This distinction is often difficult to grasp because once we have determined what mastery will look like, we think we are done. But, we also have to figure out how we will know when students have mastered a particular concept or skill. How will students show us that they have reached or exceeded the learning goal?

Once we have crafted our learning goals, the best way to determine both evidence of mastery and the criteria by which we will judge mastery is to design a summative assessment. Jonathan Saphier and Robert Gower (1997) argue in *The Skillful Teacher* that "The clearest articulation of the objective appears in the assessment task and its criteria for success." (p. 509). It is not until you define your assessment instrument that you have clearly spelled out what your true objective is.

Yes, but... teaching to the final test misses all the steps in between.

Mastery does not happen all at once. While you will start with designing the summative assessment, you cannot stop there. There are different stages or steps to get to the point of mastery and it is useful for both us and our students to identify the points along the way. You will need to break down complex learning goals into smaller, more manageable learning objectives. One way to do this is to create an analytic rubric to go along with the assessment so that you can describe the steps towards mastery along the way. (An example of an analytic rubric can be found on page 206). Another way is to assign points for each step in the process so that students can both focus on each individual step and see how all of the steps come together to make the final process work. The point is to start with the summative assessment as the final evidence of mastery and then identify the evidence that students are moving towards mastery.

For one, how well does the assessment match what you are teaching? Are you trying to see if students can recall information they have learned? Are you looking to see if students have learned information well enough to apply it in new ways? Are you testing to see if students have learned a procedure to the level of automaticity? Are you looking to see if students have reached certain benchmarks? Determine what it is you really want students to know or be able to do and then look for an assessment that will give you the best information.

Yes, but... I don't have time to create all these assessments.

You don't have time not to. Assessments save you time because they let you know what you need to teach and what you can afford to skip. They tell you when you can move on and when you need to spend more time. They allow you a chance be more creative with the time you do have.

In designing appropriate assessments there are two things to consider. The first is whether the assessment gives you an accurate picture of how close the students are to mastery. The second is how well the assessment will allow you

to provide students with the feedback they will need in order to improve. In other words, you have to consider how well the assessment is going to give you feedback and how well it will allow you to give feedback to your students.

I remember giving a test once on the different types of sentences. We drilled the types of sentences and on test day, my students were ready. When I graded those tests, I was so proud of the progress my students had made. They knew those sentence types backward and forward. I had few grades below a *C* and I felt my students had mastered the material.

So why was it, I wondered a few weeks later, that their essays still lacked sentence variety? Sure, my students knew what the different types of sentences were and how to identify those sentences when they saw them. They even knew how to take a sample sentence and transform it into a different kind of sentence. But, they didn't know how to use the different types of sentences in their own writing. I'd taught them how to pass the test but I hadn't taught them how to write.

What good was their knowledge of the different types of sentences if they didn't know how to apply it to their own writing? Because I had failed to align my assessment to my objective, I wasted a week of instruction teaching my students something that was immaterial to what I really wanted them to learn.

So often, we undermine our own goals as teachers because we send students mixed messages about what we want them to learn and why. What we assess and how we assess it is different from what it is we really want students to learn. Do you really want students to learn the important dates leading up to World War II or do you want them to know these dates because the sequence of events tells us about the context that created an environment which created a war? Aligning your assessments to your learning goals helps you clarify your objectives and makes it more likely that your students will meet those learning objectives.

Try This

- Consider the following questions when designing your assessments: Does the test measure what you are trying to measure? In other words, is the test designed to tell you what it is you want to know about students' learning? Does the test ask students to provide information in a way that is compatible with how they learned the information?
- For your next unit, decide in advance what will be acceptable evidence of student mastery of the unit objectives. Then design an analytic rubric that describes the various stages of progress towards mastery. Use this rubric to evaluate your assessment and to help students see exactly where they are in relationship to where they need to be.
- Take a look at your grade book. Does it provide you with an accurate assessment of where students are in relation to the objectives of your course or does it record points for completing tasks or completing them accurately?

Match Activities to Learning Goals

All too often, we become enamored with activities without asking whether those activities actually help our students master the objective.

Recently, I was working with a group of sixth-grade math teachers who were planning a lesson that introduced geometric concepts. I had given them a unit planning template to use (see www.masterteachermindset.com for a copy of this template) and they were brainstorming ideas. They began well enough with the lesson objective but after they wrote the objective, they immediately began flipping though the textbook and the district guide looking for activities.

"Hey, we could do a treasure hunt with the kids," one teacher exclaimed. "I did one with my students last week and they really liked it."

"Great idea," another agreed. "And for the warm up, they could list the different shapes like triangle, square, and circle."

"Oooh, I like that," beamed a third.

"There is a worksheet in the workbook on shapes," someone added. "Wait, I found two worksheets."

I interrupted. "What do any of these activities have to do with your objective?" The teachers paused and thought for a moment.

"Well, the objective is that students will represent and analyze shapes using coordinate geometry," one teacher explained.

"Okay." I nodded. "But how do these activities help students get to the point where they can do that?"

"This worksheet right here is about shapes," another teacher pointed out.

"Does the worksheet help students understand how to represent and analyze shapes using coordinate geometry?" I asked. "And, is this worksheet the best way to help students understand and apply that concept?"

The teachers paused. "Well . . . not really. This worksheet is more about helping students identify the different types of shapes."

"What about the treasure hunt?" I asked. "How does that help students understand and apply coordinate geometry to shapes?"

"It really doesn't," they conceded.

"So why don't we refocus," I suggested. "In order to reach the objective, what do students have to do?"

"Well, they have to recognize the different shapes," one teacher offered.

"Okay. What else?"

They looked at the objective. "They have to both represent and analyze shapes. And, they have to do all of this using coordinate geometry."

"What do they have to know in order to be able to use coordinate geometry?" I asked.

The teachers began listing the skills. When they were done, I asked, "Which of these skills do your students have already and how will you know that?"

"I am pretty sure that the students have many of these skills already but we could use the warm-up as a way to review the skills and also informally assess which skills the students have and which we will need to review more," one teacher offered.

And they were off. Once the focus shifted from activities to learning experiences, the entire tone of the conversation changed. Now, the teachers were more concerned with helping the students master the objective than they were with what specific activities they would do. And that is the point, really.

Yes, but... does each activity have to be matched to a learning goal? Aren't some activities inherently good without being directly tied to a standard?

We all have activities that we want to use with students because they are fun or because we see some inherent merit in the activity. But, when these activities do not match your learning goals, you have to consider carefully whether you can afford to spend time on them rather than on those activities that will best help your students meet the standards of your course or your grade level. Although they may be fun or interesting or help students meet universal goals not represented by the standards, if you are in a high stakes environment or if taking time away from the standards will somehow place students behind where they should be and endanger their meeting the benchmarks, then the activity should be considered a nice-to-know rather than a need-to-know.

When students are presented with a series of activities without a clear learning goal, then each activity can appear to be of equal value. Because the activities do not ask students to demonstrate their emerging understanding of some larger concept, the students are more likely to participate in those activities that seem most engaging without making the connection between what they are doing and what they should be learning. They are merely going through the motions. But when activities are clearly connected to the learning goals, when there is indeed an appropriate match between the activity and the learning goal, students can engage in the activity with a clear purpose in mind and can see how the activity is moving them towards the learning goal.

Try This

- Plan your next lesson by first looking at your objective. Then, only select activities that will help you reach your objective.
- Take a look at the activities that you are currently using in your class and determine what the ultimate learning goal is for each. If you cannot articulate the learning goal implied in each activity in one sentence, consider whether or not the activity is best suited to helping you achieve your learning goals.

Communicate Goals Effectively

Designing effective learning goals is the first step. You must also communicate these goals effectively both to students and to their parents. Doing so will help them understand the connection between the daily assignments and the learning targets, and will also shift the accountability for students' reaching those targets from solely your shoulders to every member of the learning community.

Early in my career, I noticed that my students completed work regardless of whether they understood why I assigned it. I would introduce a new activity and they dutifully got to work even when they did not understand how what I was asking them to do connected to the objectives. Finally, one day I stopped them and asked, "Why am I asking you to do this?" They looked at me blankly. Some shrugged. "If you don't understand why you are doing this assignment, why are you doing it?" I asked. They were silent. Finally, one student said, "Because you asked us to?" At that, I laughed and my students looked at me as if I were a crazy woman. What followed was a five minute conversation about the current learning goals of the course and an explanation of how the assignment they were completing would help them reach their learning goals. I will admit, some of my students didn't seem to care. They just wanted me to stop talking so that they could get their work done before the bell rang. I began to wonder if I was indeed wasting my students' time. Did it really matter why they were completing the work?

Then, Damon raised his hand. "Dr. Jackson, if the goal of this assignment is really to help us learn how to identify the tone, this assignment isn't going to help us."

A minute ago, I was all aglow with the satisfaction that I was demystifying the process for my students. I was being a democratic teacher first rate. Now, I began to think that students completing assignments just because I told them to wasn't such a bad idea. The class waited to see how I would handle Damon's impertinent remark.

"Okay, Damon," I said cautiously. "Why not?"

"Well this exercise asks us to think of different words to describe tone and tells us what tone means but it really doesn't help us practice identifying the tone of a passage. If that is the objective, then I need practice trying to figure out tone with real stuff."

The other students began to nod in agreement. I looked at the worksheet and realized that Damon was right. "Class, Damon's right. Let's put this worksheet away and take out your anthologies. We can look at a few passages and practice identifying tone."

That wasn't easy for me. When I reflected on the incident later, I realized that the moment I took time to communicate to my students what the objectives were and explained how the work we were doing at any given moment related to the objectives, two things happened: I gave up some of the control I had in the classroom and I was now accountable to the students to make sure that the work I assigned was meaningful. But the benefit of taking such a risk was that once my students saw the connection between the goal and the work, they shared some of the ownership over their own learning and could be actively involved in reaching the objectives. I wasn't comfortable with Damon's comments—it was downright embarrassing to realize in front of my students that I had given them work that wasn't very useful to their learning—but because I was willing to admit and correct that mistake, my students became partners in their own learning.

In the same way, it is also important to communicate your goals to parents so that they too can become partners by supporting your efforts at home. I began to send home assignment packets with the learning goals written on the front. As students completed the steps towards mastery, I recorded their progress on the front of their packets. Parents began to call me not to discuss grades, but to discuss what they could do to help their student reach the next learning objective. Letting parents know what the overall goal is for each unit allows them to understand the point of the homework you send home and helps them monitor their students' progress toward the learning objectives.

Try This

- Periodically stop students and ask them to explain in their own words why they are completing a particular assignment. Make sure that they can connect the assignment to the objective.
- Do more than just post objectives on the board. Discuss with students what the objectives mean and ask for their opinions about the best way to help them reach the objectives. Adjust your planning to reflect the outcomes of this conversation.
- Explain to students how they will use what they are learning before they learn something new. Make an explicit connection between what they are currently learning and what they have already learned so students can see the relevance of any new activity. If you cannot explain to students how they will use what they are learning, question whether or not they really need to learn it.
- At the beginning of each new unit, send parents an e-mail or a letter home explaining what the learning goals will be for that unit and how they can track their child's progress towards mastering these learning goals.
- Have students chart their own progress towards mastery of the learning goals. Give students a blank graph. After they take the pre-assessment, have them chart their score on the graph. Then ask students to set a goal for where they would like to be by the end of the unit. After each formative assessment, have students chart their progress and set goals for the next learning cycle. Discuss with students their progress and provide them with specific feedback that will help them achieve their goal. In this way, you help students make the learning goals personal to them and take ownership over achieving these goals.

The Principle in Action

Lesson planning had always been fun for me. I loved dreaming up new activities for my students and creating interesting units. But lesson delivery was another story. Those lovely lessons I had planned at home often didn't translate to great lessons in the classroom.

One year, I attended a summer conference and the speaker discussed the idea of unit design. He suggested that we plan units first rather than individual lessons. Now, I realize that this isn't radical stuff here—I had been taught the very same thing in my methods courses—but something about the presentation inspired me to take a different approach to my planning.

That summer, instead of planning my lessons based on what I wanted to teach, I started with the learning standards. Not only did I look at the general standards for the course, I also spent several days analyzing old exams and listing the skills and competencies I thought students would need in order to answer each question. Then I looked at my master list and began grouping similar or related skills. Next, I looked at the groupings and tried to determine a logical sequence for those skills. Should they learn to write a clear thesis before they learn to write well-ordered paragraphs? Could they analyze a text for rhetorical strategies before they had learned to use those strategies in their writing?

Once I had a logical sequence, I began to plan my units. For each unit, I listed the skills or knowledge I wanted my students to know by the end of the unit. Then, I created an end-of-the-unit assessment that would tell me whether students had mastered the required knowledge and skills. Sometimes this assessment was a paper and pencil test, but often it was an essay or a project or a Socratic discussion. I chose the final assessment based on what I thought would best allow my students to demonstrate that they had mastered a skill or concept.

After I created the assessment, I created an analytic rubric that not only defined mastery, but also delineated the various stages that approached mastery. This was in many ways my hardest step. While I could define mastery pretty easily, it was a lot harder to define what students would look like when they were in need of more work or when they were almost there. Still, this exercise gave me clarity about what I wanted students to know or be able to do. In the end, I had a very clear picture for me and for my students about what was important and the steps that would get them to mastery.

Now it was time to plan my activities. As I selected books to read or assignments to give, I constantly asked myself how this book or that assignment would help my students acquire an understanding of the skills and concepts I was teaching. My goal was more than just rote memorization. I wanted students to interact with what they were learning and integrate it into their repertoire of skills.

I went through a certain amount of grieving at this stage. I had to give up a few of my favorite activities because I realized that while they were fun and engaging, they didn't allow my students the opportunity to move beyond a surface understanding of the topic. So, they had to go.

I didn't just grieve for the loss of some of my favorite assignments, I also grieved for my former students. There were times when I had to admit that I could have done better by them. I began to notice places where I had missed opportunities to really challenge my students and other places where I expected too much from them too soon. I cringed at the times when I hadn't given them the proper foundation to do the work I later required. I vowed to do better this time.

Finally, I inventoried what I had on hand and what I would need to get or create in order to make the units work. I also developed a plan for how I would prepare for the rest of the year.

In the end, I had a pretty comprehensive plan of action. I hadn't planned every unit for the year, but I had a general idea of my scope and sequence and I knew what work I would need to do to get those units properly prepared in time to teach the students. I also saw what resources I would need. I walked into school on day one with the first six weeks planned and the entire year mapped out. What a difference it made!

My students noticed the difference immediately. Instead of spending the first day playing a get-to-know-you game, we started working right away. They could tell that I had a vision for the year already.

We quickly settled into a rhythm, my kids and I. After two weeks of class, I was amazed at how much farther we were along than my classes in previous years had been. It seemed that because we knew where we were going, we had a much easier time getting there.

There were missteps sure. Lessons that I thought would fly never left the ground. There were days when my kids were not as enthusiastic about a lesson as I had hoped or when I would give an assessment only to discover that they were still not getting it. There were times when my students questioned why we were doing a particular assignment and I couldn't give them an answer. I didn't know myself. On those days, we chucked the assignment, switched gears, and moved on.

I had to let go of a lot that first year. I had to let go of my idea that I was supposed to be the smartest person in the room. I had to let go of my control of the classroom. I had to let go of my notions about what a teacher should do and what students should do. I used to run a pretty tight ship and now I had to share the wheel with 28 16-year-olds. There were times when I didn't want to cede control. There were days when my students would question something we were doing and I wanted to snap back, "because I'm the teacher!" There were days when my students were frustrated because I didn't seem to have the answers. It wasn't always comfortable and it wasn't always fun. Some days, it was just a lot of hard work.

But the end result was that my students were learning more and at a deeper level than my classes in previous years. They were mastering more challenging material and they were more engaged.

Because I had invested the time up front to unpack my standards, define mastery and the steps towards mastery, and identify how I would determine whether my students had reached mastery, I had more time during the year to relax and teach. My lessons were much more focused, my activities were more relevant, and my students were much more invested in their own learning because they could see the connection between what they were being asked to do and the learning goals they were trying to reach.

Getting Started

1. Unpack the standards and objectives of your course by first determining whether they require that students learn content or processes.
2. Then look for what other content or processes are implied by the standard or learning goal.
3. Next, break the goal down into smaller learning segments and more manageable chunks. In other words, chart the trajectory to achieving mastery of the goal and identify checkpoints along the way.
4. Match all of your learning activities to the goal.
5. Make the goal the floor rather than the ceiling and differentiate up from the goal.
6. Clearly communicate learning goals to parents and students.