

Objectives That Students Understand

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Although hundreds of studies have shown that clearly communicating instructional objectives has a positive effect on student achievement, not all techniques for doing so have the same beneficial effects. In a series of studies we conducted at Marzano Research Laboratory, we found that some approaches had no effect on student achievement and that others actually produced negative results—that is, students would have been better off if the teacher had *not* provided an objective.

The following approaches can either hinder or help teachers as they design and communicate instructional objectives.

Ineffective Approaches

Writing the instructional objective on the board and assuming students will pay attention to it. All too often, a teacher will simply write an objective on the whiteboard, call students' attention to it at the beginning of class, and never return to it after that. An instructional objective should frame a class period; discussing it should be one of the first orders of business. The teacher should help students understand what the objective requires of them and why it's important—how it fits into the broader standard. The lesson should end with a return to the objective. The teacher might ask students to reflect on their progress in meeting the objective and to indicate content they're still having difficulty with.

Confusing instructional objectives with instructional activities. Instructional objectives go hand in glove with instructional activities, but sometimes teachers confuse the two. For example, "Students will practice solving 10 equations in cooperative groups" is an instructional activity. Conversely, "Students will be able to solve equations with one variable" is an instructional objective. Teachers assign an activity to help students meet an objective; practicing 10 equations in cooperative groups is a means to an end. When teachers present instructional activities as objectives, they send the message that learning is about completing activities and assignments instead of understanding information or acquiring skills.

Writing instructional objectives that are too broad. Instructional objectives must be specific enough for students to understand exactly what the teacher expects of them. For example, the following objective is too broad: "Students will be able to write effective persuasive essays." Because this requires so many important skills, the objective offers little guidance. The teacher should break it down into more focused objectives that are at the right level of specificity. The following objective is much more focused: "While writing persuasive essays, students will be able to generate effective transitions between paragraphs."

Effective Approaches

Having students translate the instructional objective into their own words. This clarifies for students what the teacher expects them to know or be able to do. For example, if a teacher gives the following objective—"Students will be able to write effective transitions between paragraphs"—a student might paraphrase this to read, "I have to make sure that each paragraph is related to the one before it and the one after it. I need to write sentences that link my paragraphs together." This restatement helps the student translate the objective into specific actions.

Writing objectives at multiple levels. A common convention is to present students with a single objective for a lesson or set of lessons. For example, a social studies teacher might write the following instructional objective for a unit on Napoleon: "Students will be able to create a time line that depicts Napoleon's rise and fall." This would be the target objective. However, the teacher could, in addition, write two other objectives, one that's simpler and one that's more

complex. A simpler objective might be, "Students will recall accurate information about the rise and fall of Napoleon, such as his nationality at birth, how well he spoke French, his first significant military position, and his imprisonment and exile." A more complex objective is, "Students will compare and contrast the rise and fall of Napoleon with that of other military leaders."

These three types of objectives provide students with a scaffold for different levels of understanding. Instead of perceiving attainment of a target instructional objective as an all-or-nothing proposition, students can observe their progress over time. In the beginning of the unit, some students may have difficulty with the target objective but may be able to experience success with the simpler objective. At the end of the unit, many students may have attained the target objective but may still be challenged by the more complex objective.

Straightforward but Not Simple

Even seemingly straightforward classroom strategies like providing students with instructional objectives can be executed more or less effectively. By avoiding common pitfalls and implementing effective approaches, teachers can more clearly communicate their instructional objectives and promote greater student understanding.

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