

## Articulating Course Learning Goals

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Fordham's Undergraduate Faculty Handbook specifies that every course have a syllabus and that "the specific learning objectives of the course [be] explicitly listed" in the course syllabus<sup>i</sup>. Accrediting organizations and government agencies also directly or indirectly require syllabi, with stated course objectives. It's clear, from an administrative perspective, that having course objectives in syllabi helps communicate course content to those who aren't in the course, providing straight-forward documentation of the academic offerings of the course and the achievements of the students who satisfactorily complete the course. But I couldn't help but wonder whether there were reasons that the objectives should be put in the syllabus, as opposed to some report to the administration. Does including course objectives in the syllabus benefit students in any way?

There is, I was surprised to learn, a lot written about syllabi themselves, some of it prescriptive, some of it descriptive, much of it informed by professional experience, little of it informed by empirical research. Syllabi are used to inform students, motivate them, guide them. Some faculty regard them as contracts, others as agendas, others as a summary of logistic details. Every writer who outlined the elements of a good syllabus included some way of telling the students what they should expect to learn, that is what the course objectives (also known as "course-level student learning objectives") are.

### **Sharing course objectives with students can offer several benefits.**

First, course objectives can provide students a framework through which they can understand the relationships between parts of the course---discrete topics, class activities, assignments, exams, lectures, and so forth. As reflected in a question on the SEEQs, express objectives could help the student know "where the class was going," and thus contribute to the clarity of the organization of the course. Consider, for example, a syllabus that lists only topics for each week of the semester: Review of basic music theory, principles of notation, vocal range, tonic and dominant function, etc. The course is rich in material for the student to learn but what of it? A student will be much more excited to know that, at the end of the semester, he will be able to produce four-part chorale style harmonic arrangements common in Western classical tradition. A course objective glues topics and activities together and helps sustain the student's interest through the dry parts.

Decades of research on cognition and learning suggest a number of ways in which the information expressed in course objectives may aid student learning. Knowledge of a domain affects what learners notice in new information, how they interpret that information, and how they organize and represent it. Course objectives can express key ideas, topics, or skills, allowing the students to focus on those. For example, if students know that one objective of a research methods course is to prepare them to decide which of a range of research designs would be appropriate for a problem, they can attend deliberately to the instructor as she models that kind of reasoning. If a course objective indicates that students will learn common characteristics of art during the classical, medieval, renaissance, and

modern eras, then you have, in that objective, provided a framework for organizing some of the information they obtain during the course.

Finally, many of us would like our students to become more independent, more self-regulating. Research suggests that clear goals support self-regulation and that students who direct and monitor their own efforts, toward clear goals, reinforce their sense of efficacy and sustain their motivation.

Objectives stated in the syllabus have to be consonant with the actual content of the course. Several authors noted that when course objectives are not related to course content and student evaluation as the course unfolds, students will ignore the course objectives in the syllabus. So, really, doesn't that mean that putting the course objectives on record in the syllabus is superfluous? Don't faculty communicate the course objectives continuously throughout the course?

Ideally, yes. And, ideally, the course objectives are discussed during the first week of class, as faculty share their excitement about their disciplines and set out the path the course will take during the term. So, perhaps only administrators gain from having course objectives actually IN the syllabus. I must confess that personally I found putting them in the syllabus a boon. I told my students that there would be times when they would probably lose sight of why they were working so hard on something that might seem, at that moment, disconnected from anything useful or interesting and that if they ever felt that way, they should re-read the beginning of the syllabus. It helped make us all happier.

### **Some Notes about Course Objectives and their Expression**

We all think about course objectives when we plan a course, but articulating those objectives can leave us fumbling for words. For those of us unaccustomed to articulating course objectives, there are tricks that can help. A typical trick is to complete the statement, "At the completion of this course, you will....". I find that prompt too unstructured and uninspiring. I prefer an exercise suggested by Diamond (2008): Ask yourself, "What would a student have to do to demonstrate that she had satisfactorily mastered this course?" Identify the likely place and time an unfamiliar painting was created? Arrange a piece of music in 4-part harmony? Value biodiversity? Provide a list of possible funding sources appropriate for a local non-profit organization? Design a stable foundation for Hughes Hall? Identify a metaphor in a novel? Determine what evidence would be needed to support a thesis? Complete a substantial research or oral history project? Design a computer program to monitor the newsfeeds for mention of Fordham? Sing with gusto? Your answers to that question are your course objectives.

If your aim is to take students on a journey rather than get them to a destination, the same thought experiment can be useful. How would you know that a student has truly engaged in the journey? Will they emerge as more engaged citizens? Will their attitudes be better informed? Will they exhibit more self-awareness or be more articulate? How will the journey change the student?

Conveying learning objectives to students is different from telling them the course topics. The objectives tell them what you expect they will get out of the combination of topics and experiences.

Perhaps they will study cultures from southern Asia (a topic). What you expect them to get is both knowledge of and respect for those cultures and an appreciation for cultural diversity (objectives).

Conveying learning objectives is also different from telling them what you (or “the course”) will do. You will lecture, cover material, introduce them to analytic techniques, demonstrate problem solving strategies elegantly, etc. They will do none of that, during the course or soon after it.

There is considerable debate about the proper formulation of course objectives. Authors differ about how best to formulate student learning objectives. Diamond (2008) argues that course objectives should specify precise behaviors students must exhibit while Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) employ a more relaxed approach wherein general language can be appropriate. I would argue that the specificity of a statement about an objective should be adjusted to the audience. If a faculty member is attempting to communicate to a colleague about student performance, exactness may be very useful. When communicating with students however you want to excite and guide them, not bore and overwhelm them.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks\\_publicati/undergraduate\\_facult\\_30155.asp#2](http://www.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks_publicati/undergraduate_facult_30155.asp#2)

Diamond, R. (2008). *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Wiley.

Svinicki, M. & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (13<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.