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Learning Targets on Parade

Susan M. Brookhart and Connie M. Moss

When daily learning targets add up to larger learning goals, instruction sticks.

An 8th grade math teacher is introducing a lesson on exponents, and we're watching a video of her class. The purpose of her lesson, according to the material that accompanies the video, is for students to discover and then describe the rules for multiplying exponents. But you'd never know it from the lesson. The teacher defines exponents and illustrates exponential growth with cubes and then with a graph. Students get excited about this and begin to ask questions about exponential growth, only to be told that's not what their lesson is about today.

On the board, the teacher shows students how to multiply exponents and then tells them to begin work on a worksheet. By the time the students actually start doing their work, most of us watching the video feel misled. First we thought the students were going to learn about growth, and then we thought they were going to discover their own principles for multiplying exponents. When it's all said and done, all they got to do was reproduce the teacher's logic on a worksheet.

This video is a great argument for the importance of learning targets. Teachers who watch it can see that students have a hard time figuring out what they're supposed to be learning and why. For example, one student excitedly asks, "Oh, would that be a parabola?" and the teacher replies that they'll talk about that in a future lesson. (If you want to see for yourself, watch the first 10 minutes of the [video](#).)

What the Research Says

Clear learning goals help students learn better (Seidel, Rimmale, & Prenzel, 2005). When students understand exactly what they're supposed to learn and what their work will look like when they learn it, they're better able to monitor and adjust their work, select effective strategies, and connect current work to prior learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2004; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011). This point has been demonstrated for all age groups, from young children (Higgins, Harris, & Kuehn, 1994) through high school students (Ross & Starling, 2008); and in a variety of subjects—in writing (Andrade, Du, & Mycek, 2010); mathematics (Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Rolheiser, 2002); and social studies (Ross & Starling, 2008).

The important point here is that *students* should have clear goals. If the teacher is the only one who understands where learning should be headed, students are flying blind. In all the studies we just cited, students were taught the learning goals and criteria for success, and that's what made the difference.

It's not enough for a teacher to plan a learning target and tell students about it once. Writing a learning target on the board but not having students do anything with it during the lesson won't harness the learning energy these studies describe. This sort of lip service to learning targets is what Marshall and Drummond (2006) call conforming only to the

"letter" and not the "spirit" of assessment for learning. A learning target theory of action calls for teachers to design the right target for the day's lesson and use it *along with their students* to aim for and assess understanding. Students have the learning target in mind as they do their work, and they filter what they do during a lesson by asking themselves how this activity or assignment will help them hit that target.

Having a learning goal for students means more than just having a great learning target for today's lesson. All the learning targets from a sequence of lessons must add up to a larger unit goal or state standard. It's also not enough to have only the larger goal. Students experience learning one lesson at a time, so they need to know what they're supposed to be learning during each lesson. Each daily learning target needs to add a subsequent level of challenge or increase students' understanding or skill from the previous lesson and prepare them for the lesson that follows.

What Are Learning Targets?

A learning target describes, in language students can understand, what students will learn in today's lesson. That description can be accomplished through words, pictures, demonstrations, or other experiences; it doesn't have to be in an "I can" statement. A learning target should

1. Describe for students exactly what they're going to learn by the end of the day's lesson.
2. Be in language students can understand.
3. Be stated from the point of view of a student who has yet to master the knowledge or skill that's the focus of the day's lesson.
4. Be embodied in a performance of understanding—what the students will do, make, say, or write during the lesson—that translates the description into action. A performance of understanding shows students what the learning target looks like, helps them get there, and provides evidence of how well they're doing.
5. Include student *look fors* (sometimes called criteria for success) in terms that describe mastery of the learning target rather than in terms of a score or grade.

Learning targets should describe learning, not activities. If you find yourself describing an activity (*Students will write five sentences*), ask yourself, "What will the students learn by doing that?" (*I can write sentences that tell complete thoughts*).

Also, because teachers are so used to thinking in terms of unit goals or other "chunks" of the curriculum (learning long division, learning how to do persuasive writing, learning about photosynthesis), they sometimes repeat the same learning target day after day to give students more practice with the skill or concept. To plan a series of lessons in which *students* see where they're going and help you get them there, you need more than that.

Each day, students should know what new content they're learning and how they're sharpening their skills. Are they learning a new concept? Extending understanding by building on a previous concept? Combining concepts to form more sophisticated understandings? Practicing a skill for accuracy or fluency? Applying a skill they already know to new content? Clarifying the target helps students understand exactly what they're supposed to focus on, helps them monitor their learning, and—because autonomy and control are major motivators—makes learning and practice more engaging.

Learning—Or Doing?

Let's start with a counterexample. One teacher we know started a unit on literary language with this goal: "Students will learn that point of view and figurative language help tell a story." In her mind, that became the learning target for *all* the lessons in the unit. So the daily learning targets she presented to students were statements like these: *The students will put examples of figurative language on cards and sort them according to type*, *The students will identify two examples of simile and two examples of metaphor in Jean Craighead George's Julie of the Wolves*, and so on.

This teacher had some good ideas for potential performances of understanding. The part she skipped was showing students what all this activity would help them learn so they'd see the purpose in the activities and know what to focus on. The *real* learning targets could be summarized like this:

- I can define simile and recognize examples in literature.
- I can define metaphor and recognize examples in literature.
- I can distinguish metaphors from similes.
- I can explain how metaphors and similes enhanced the storytelling.
- I can describe and identify examples of different points of view.
- I can explain how the point of view affected the story.

One or two such targets add concepts and skills in small increments each day.

There are several advantages to spelling out learning targets by describing what students are going to *learn* and then embodying them with plans for what students will *do*, rather than rolling them all into one. When students have learning targets articulated in this way, they can answer the question, "What are you trying to learn?" They begin to see learning as growing a body of knowledge and skills, rather than checking off a series of assignments.

As for the teachers, they begin to see the activities they select as samples from among all the other possible things

students could do to learn today's lesson, rather than as the purpose for the lesson itself. This helps with all sorts of instructional moves, including differentiation for various learners' needs and extension of learning for those who can already do the day's activity.

What It *Should* Look Like

The two examples that follow show how a parade of learning targets builds a learning trajectory that leads students to a larger instructional goal. Moreover, they clarify the difference between what students will *learn* and what they will *do*.

In an Elementary Classroom

Ben Golab teaches 2nd grade at Lenape Elementary School in Ford City, Pennsylvania. His mathematics unit on subtracting with double digits consisted of a series of five lessons. The first lesson's learning target was, *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number without regrouping (borrowing), using cubes*. The performance of understanding included modeling subtraction problems of this type with math cubes.

The discussion and questioning focused on concepts of numbers and operations—for example, that no regrouping was needed because the cubes representing the top number were numerous enough to take away the number of cubes representing the bottom number. Mr. Golab also told his students how what they were doing with cubes today would lead to what they would do with pencil and paper tomorrow.

The learning target for Lesson 2 was, *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number without regrouping, without using cubes*.

Lesson 3's target was, *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping, using cubes*. During this lesson, as for the others, the teacher circulated around the room and gave students feedback. He used strategic questioning to help students see that regrouping using cubes in subtraction worked in the opposite way from how they regrouped using cubes in addition, emphasizing mathematical reasoning. He said, "Remember for subtraction we start at the *top* of the problem to decide about regrouping, not at the bottom like we do for addition. Which number is bigger here, top or bottom? Do you need to regroup?"

For Lesson 3, the teacher focused especially on one of the criteria for success—*I use regrouping when the problem needs it, and I don't use regrouping if it doesn't*. When students couldn't make this distinction, the teacher pulled them aside and worked with them on problems that didn't require regrouping until they were ready to move on to problems that required regrouping.

Lesson 4's learning target was, *I can subtract a one-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping, without using cubes*. Again, students realized that they were building on their concrete learning from the previous lesson to learn how to subtract using paper and pencil. Most of them came to this realization on their own, because moving from Lesson 3 to 4 followed the same pattern they used to move from Lesson 1 to 2—from cubes to paper.

Lesson 5's learning target was, *I can subtract a two-digit number from a two-digit number with regrouping*. Students applied what they had learned about subtracting two-digit numbers that required regrouping in the ones place; they were just adding one more piece—subtracting in the tens place.

These learning targets moved students step-by-step from readiness—they already knew about one-digit subtraction and how to represent numbers with math cubes—to the larger learning goal of two-digit subtraction. This learning goal was the *destination* for the parade, not the learning target for each lesson. Each lesson took the students one step farther down the road.

In a Secondary Classroom

Joe Cali's 10th grade government class at Ford City High School in Pennsylvania was studying a unit on the federal bureaucracy. The teacher planned a series of eight lessons. In previous units, the students had examined the powers of the president of the United States and how they carry into the three branches of government. They had examined the checks and balances designed into that structure and their relationship with presidential power.

In this unit, students were going to learn how to categorize the federal bureaucracy into three subunits (the executive office of the president, the cabinet departments, and the independent agencies).

The teacher had three goals for the unit. Students would

- Have a better understanding of the complexity of the federal bureaucracy.
- Realize that the design of bureaucracy puts some agencies within the reach of partisan politics and some theoretically outside that reach, although still subject to some political pressure because they were created by either the president or Congress.
- Be able to identify the various workers' roles and the budget involved in each type of agency and, by doing so, come to a better understanding of where federal taxes go.

In the next unit, the students were going to study federal taxes.

Mr. Cali didn't use "I can" statements for his learning targets. Rather, he focused on a clear definition of the content that

he coordinated with performances of understanding, activities that the students engaged in for each lesson that translated the content into action (see "Learning Targets and Performances of Understanding for a 10th Grade Government Class").

This parade of lessons and learning targets led to the larger goals of understanding the federal bureaucracy and the various agencies' relationships with politics and taxes.

One way Mr. Cali kept the lessons coherent and unified was to continually explain how each lesson fit into the bigger picture. For example, he pointed out how students' previous learning about the powers of the president and Congress was part of the background they needed to understand why different federal agencies were created, how their learning about the responsibilities of the different agencies was part of the background they needed to understand the agencies' funding requirements, and how their learning about funding requirements would be part of the background they would need to understand federal taxes in the next unit.

Notice, too, that some of the daily learning targets called on students' reasoning skills to put some of these pieces together themselves. Using learning targets in these ways, in lesson-sized steps, helped students reach a larger understanding of the federal bureaucracy.

More Than Fanfare

Every lesson needs its own reason to live. One of those reasons is that today's lesson builds on the learning from yesterday's lesson and leads to the learning in tomorrow's lesson so that the learning targets form a parade that leads to the achievement of larger curricular goals and state standards.

Some authors call those larger goals learning targets, too. We prefer to save the term *learning target* for individual lessons, for two reasons. One, using *target* for the lesson-sized learning goals and *goals* or *standards* for the larger learning goals avoids the confusion that comes with calling two different things by the same name. Two, having a special name for the lesson-sized learning goal emphasizes the idea that every lesson needs one. Students should never feel as though they're simply repeating the same thing today that they did yesterday.

When the learning target for today's lesson builds on yesterday's learning and leads to tomorrow's learning, and when all the learning targets in a sequence of lessons lead students to achieve a curricular goal or standard, learning will stick.

Learning Targets and Performances of Understanding for a 10th Grade Government Class

These lessons were part of a unit on the U.S. federal bureaucracy.

Lesson 1

Target: Students will learn the characteristics of a bureaucracy and three agencies or subunits of the federal government.

Performance of understanding: Students read and discuss scenarios (for example, a Gulf War veteran has a question about his or her benefits) and then determine which agency they would contact, explaining their reasoning.

Lesson 2

Target: Students will learn the makeup and responsibilities of the Executive Office of the President.

Performance of understanding: Students are given a chart of the three departments of the Executive Office of the President (the White House, National Security Council, and Office of Management and Budget); they fill in agency specifics, such as director/head, key members, purpose of the agency, and the agency's major activities.

Lesson 3

Target: Students will learn the makeup and responsibilities of the cabinet departments and their relationship to the Executive Office of the President.

Performance of understanding: Students answer four questions: (1) How are the executive departments organized? (2) What is the cabinet, and how are cabinet members organized? (3) What are the two main responsibilities of cabinet members? (4) What is the link between the cabinet departments and the Executive Office of the President?

Lesson 4

Target: Students will learn the makeup and responsibilities of three types of independent agencies.

Performance of understanding: Students make a chart with the three types of independent agencies, including defining characteristics and examples for each.

Lesson 5

Target: Students will learn how to analyze certain issues facing the United States and relate them to the appropriate type of independent agency.

Performance of understanding: Students are given four scenarios, and they determine which type of independent agency they would contact in each case. Then they search in the local phone book (or online) and find out where the local agencies for these services are located.

Lesson 6

Target: Students will compare and contrast private business management with the management of federal agencies.

Performance of understanding: Students are given the business management flow chart for Walmart or McDonalds and compare that to a similar flow chart for the U.S. presidency and cabinet. Students compare and contrast the charts and analyze where they see more effective management, with supporting written arguments.

Lesson 7

Target: Students will extend those ideas by evaluating whether bureaucracy is the most effective way to organize and manage government functions.

Performance of understanding: Students write a five-paragraph essay that answers the question, Is federal bureaucracy essential to good government?

Lesson 8

Target: Students will learn that various taxes are levied to fund various parts of the federal bureaucracy.

Performance of understanding: Students make a chart that lists three types of taxes (individual income, corporate income, and social insurance), with a detailed description of each, including whether the tax is progressive or regressive.

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Susan M. Brookhart is an education consultant and a senior research associate in the School of Education at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Connie M. Moss is an associate professor in the School of Education and director of the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning at Duquesne University. They are coauthors of Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson (ASCD, 2012).

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