

Writing Student Friendly Learning Goals

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One of my all-time favorite throw-downs here at school happened a few years back when my principal---who I respected and enjoyed---insisted that we post learning goals on our boards for every class period. "Posting goals," he argued, "keeps students informed about exactly what it is that they are supposed to be learning in class each day."

And you know something: He was right. Experts from Rick Stiggins and Larry Ainsworth to Bob Marzano have proven time and again that engaging students in their own learning by posting objectives in class is a practice worth pursuing.



The problem was that our principal had decided on a particular format for posting learning goals that didn't make any sense to me. Known as SWBAT objectives, we were supposed to write statements that described what "*Students would be able to do*" in measurable terms. Now, the math teachers didn't have any troubles at all. They instantly started posting objectives that looked like this:

"The students will be able to divide two decimal numbers with 80% accuracy."

For us language arts and social studies teachers, though, the process wasn't nearly as clean cut. The first challenge was that our objectives aren't always the kinds of objectives that you can learn in one class period---and more importantly, it's difficult to measure some of the open-ended objectives that comprise our curriculum.

So the members of my learning team *who chose to play along* would have confusing objectives like this posted on their boards:

"The students will be able to self-select reading materials with 80% accuracy."

OR

"The students will be able to make meaningful contributions to classroom conversations with 80% accuracy."

These kinds of statements didn't make sense to me or to my students, so I didn't play along---and I got in trouble for it! I'll never forget the first time that one of our assistant principals came in, observed one of my best lessons of the year, and left me a note with nothing else written on it than, "You need to start posting your objectives daily." I called it a "Parking Ticket," tore it up and forgot about it.

My frustration level peaked, though, when my principal called me to the office over the whole deal. "Bill, what's the big deal?" he said, "Writing the objective on the board will take you ten minutes.

"Just do it, huh?"

Never being a Nike-kind-a-guy, I decided---with my principal's permission---to do as much research as I could about posting objectives in class. "As long as you find some way to post objectives in your room, Bill, I don't care what it looks like. But I am going to expect you to come up with something."

What I quickly found out didn't surprise me at all: Most assessment experts argue that it's not the act of posting objectives that has a positive impact on student learning.

Instead, it's the act of ***posting objectives in student friendly language that matters.***

Consider this quote from assessment expert Rick Stiggins:

Explaining the intended learning in student-friendly terms at the outset of a lesson is the critical first step in helping students know where they are going...Students cannot assess their own learning or set goals to work toward without a clear vision of the intended learning. When they do try to assess their own achievement without understanding the learning targets they have been working toward, their conclusions are vague and unhelpful.

(Stiggins, Arter, Cahappuis & Chappius, 2004, pp. 58-59)

So I started working to polish a system for identifying essential outcomes and posting learning targets in student friendly language. For me, that involved a few steps:

Deconstructing my standards: It's amazing how complex state standards really are! Oftentimes, one standard can include several different skills that students are supposed to master. Don't believe me? Then check out this standard from my social studies curriculum:

Objective 4.03: *The learner will examine key ethical ideas and values deriving from religious, artistic, political, economic and educational traditions, as well as their*

diffusion over time, and assess their influence on the development of selected societies and regions in South America and Europe.

This one standard expects students to do a thousand different things, doesn't it?

They're supposed to examine ethical ideas and values that derive from religious, artistic, political, economic and educational traditions. Then, they're supposed to examine how these traditions have changed over time. Finally, they're supposed to assess how these traditions have influenced the development of Europe and South America.

Each of those skills require different styles of instruction and different methods of assessment---and written as is, ***there ain't a twelve year old in the world*** that is going to be able to figure out exactly what it is that they're supposed to learn!

Creating I Can Statements: Student-friendli-fying deconstructed learning targets for me began by writing I Can Statements. Rick Stiggins, among others, push I Can Statements because they are worded in a way that encourages students to measure their own learning. Consider the following deconstructed learning target from my social studies curriculum:

202.3: The learner will evaluate the impact of changing distribution patterns in population, resources and climate on the environment in South America and Europe.

Written as an I Can Statement, it would look like this:

202.3: I can judge how changes in population, resources and climate effect the environment of South America and Europe.

Which do you think my twelve year old students will understand better?

Defining a specific task: Once I'd deconstructed my standards and written I Can Statements, I decided to define a specific learning task that parents and students could use to measure their mastery of content. This defined learning task was added to the end of each I Can statement. Here's an example:

202.3: I can judge how changes in population, resources and climate effect the environment of South America and Europe. This means that I can make predictions about what might happen to the environment in places where populations rise, resources fall, or the climate changes.

Defining a specific task has even helped ME with my planning and instructional delivery. Now, when working with an objective, I know exactly what kinds of activities to engage my kids in because I've detailed the specific outcome that they are supposed to achieve.

Communicating with parents and students: The final step in the process for me has been to create unit overview sheets detailing the specific learning targets that we're focusing on for each unit. These unit overview sheets go home at the beginning of each new topic of study, allowing parents to keep up with what we're studying in class.

They're also included in student notebooks and are referred to constantly in class. There is a place for students to record the scores of classroom assessments and to rate their own mastery of learning. (See the attached example.)

Now, I won't lie to you: This entire process has completely kicked my behind! In fact, I've been working at this for the better part of two years now. Crazy how long it takes to revise and edit an instructional practice, huh?

I've read constantly about assessment, looking for new ideas about communicating standards to parents and students. I've muddled through two incredible curriculums, deconstructing standards. I've debated with colleagues about the learning targets that are the most appropriate for each unit that we study, revised my tracking sheets and unit overviews a dozen times, and reminded myself every day for the past two months to write objectives on the board.

I've started to revise my warehouse of lesson plans to align with individual learning targets and begun to design assessment questions for each I Can Statement. My next step will be to start recording student learning in my gradebook by I Can Statement so that I can start tracking mastery at the learning target level. More than once, I've wished that all of this work had been done for me at the Central Office level. "Why in the world do they give us objectives written in language that we can't even understand?" I've complained.

"Who's got the time to deconstruct and rewrite their curriculum before they even start to teach it?"

But now that I've gotten this far, I'm proud of what I've accomplished. I now post objectives every day, knowing that my kids will understand them---and knowing that my assessments and instruction are aligned with required elements of the curriculum. Parents seem to appreciate having something tangible and concrete to hold on to, and students can actually tell ME when THEY'VE mastered their own learning.

So whaddya' think? Does my process make any sense? What should I do differently?

Work cited:

Stiggins, R., Arter, J., Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S. (2006). *Classroom assessment for student learning: doing it right---using it well.* Upper Saddle River, NJ : Pearson Education.