



PAIDEIA

TEACHING & LEARNING AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY
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WHAT ARE LEARNING OUTCOMES?

When we plan our courses, we should have a clear idea of what we want our students to learn as a result of taking them. Simply put, that result is the learning outcome. But before we discuss what learning outcomes are, let's first address what we do NOT mean by learning outcomes at Mount Allison University.

- **Learning outcomes are not an inventory of employability skills.**
- **Learning outcomes are not a litany of workplace credentials.**
- **Learning outcomes are neither a contract with students nor a guarantee to prospective employers concerning our graduates.**
- **Learning outcomes are not a means of diminishing or devaluing the importance of the critical thinking or open-ended enquiry that characterize a university education.**
- **Learning outcomes, as described in the Mount Allison *Academic Renewal Plan* and *Strategic Statement*, are not to be confused with 'degree-level expectations,' a term coined in Ontario.**

In a nutshell, at Mount Allison learning outcomes describe in simple terms the minimum 'change' or result in a student who fulfills all of the course requirements. Furthermore, outcomes describe what a student will be able to do in order to demonstrate understanding of the content. John Biggs (2003) tells us that "All teachers have an overall aim or goal: 'to teach for understanding.'" Learning outcomes describe how the students' understanding is reified.

William Spady (1994), an educational researcher often credited with the development of outcomes-based education, emphasizes that, while knowledge of the content is an essential prerequisite to performing well in any course, *content alone is insufficient as an outcome*. Instead, knowledge of content must be manifested through a significant demonstration of some kind—the form of that demonstration will, to a very large extent, depend on the discipline.

By creating learning outcomes, we determine what the content actually helps the students to **do**: acquire more knowledge; develop skills such as problem-solving, analysis, enhanced writing or presentation; and cultivate enriched or more mature values such as integrity, compassion, understanding, or tolerance. A consideration of learning outcomes statements also helps professors to discern for themselves where a particular course, unit or lesson best fits (contd.)



within the larger departmental or institutional curriculum. Finally, once you know what the desired outcome is, you can devise the most appropriate method of assessing whether the students have fulfilled it.

Learning is more than remembering content

Most professors already know the answers to the question “What do I want my students to get out of the course?” And most professors already agree that mere acquisition of content is insufficient for a university education. Professors find it lamentable when students believe that merely regurgitating memorized material is enough to pass the course—when they present plot summaries instead of character analyses, chronologies instead of plausible causalities, and so on.

Learning is more than recall of facts or accumulation of credits; Peggy Maki (2004) defines learning as a “complex and dynamic” process composed of many facets:

- Constructing meaning
- Framing issues
- Drawing on strategies and abilities *that are honed over time*
- Re-conceptualizing one’s understanding
- Repositioning oneself in relation to a problem or issue
- Connecting thinking and knowing to action (p. 32).

Given the complexity of learning, then, it is necessary to articulate our expectations clearly and to allow for a range of ways for students to demonstrate their learning.

John Biggs (2007) encourages us to differentiate between what he calls *declarative knowledge* and *functioning knowledge*. An essential, but only the first, part of learning, declarative knowledge is what has been discovered by others, understood by the learner, and recalled and ‘declared’ by him or her in writing or presentations. Functioning knowledge is declarative knowledge put to work, to solve problems, and to see the world differently. Biggs says:

“We don’t acquire knowledge only so that we can tell other people about it; more specifically, so that our students can tell us—in their own words of course—what we have recently been telling them. Our students need to put that knowledge to work, to make it function.”

Developing outcomes: Some helpful approaches

As a professor, you might consider the following questions, individually and with departmental colleagues, to help you develop your learning outcomes:

- Now that I have chosen the content to teach, what do I want the students to learn in my courses using that content?
- How are they going to learn it (teaching/learning activities)?
- How will I assess their learning (tests, assignments, etc)?
- How does my course fit with others in the department or program?
- What constraints face me (e.g., class size, level of course, resources, classroom configuration)?

Discussing these questions with colleagues and focusing on the characteristics we would (contd.)

like to see in our graduates is especially useful in encouraging us to find curricular coherence. Collegial discussion helps us to clarify the extent of content mastery we expect at each level, the skills necessary to complement and apply that content knowledge, and the values, attitudes and intellectual traits that underpin all.

Finally, discussing learning outcomes with colleagues helps us to achieve our pedagogical goals in a sustainable way, making the best use of learning time and resources, and using the best teaching strategies, content delivery methods, and learning assessments, and at the same time eliminating repetition of content or assessments while remediating gaps in the curriculum.

Clear, learning-focused outcomes statements are important because they help us to clarify what we expect from students, the levels of understanding, and the means of demonstration. In other words, they are the explicit statements of what professors have at the back of their minds anyway when designing courses. I often refer to the creation of learning outcomes as a way to transform the endoskeleton of a course into an exoskeleton, thus making the structure clear to students.

Among other benefits, clear outcomes statements can

- Help professors organize their goals for a course;
- Articulate for the students the learning and methodologies valued not only in the course but by the discipline;
- Enable professors to see whether the course has been effective;
- Provide guidelines for student assessment by outlining the learning that can be tested/measured;
- Inform colleagues about how courses connect;
- In professional courses, such as medicine or nursing, relate to criteria essential for professional accreditation.

*Learning outcomes do not promise what you will 'deliver' to the student—
a university education is not a transaction of that kind. The emphasis on action and evidence
in the outcome statement communicates the expectation that
a) students share responsibility for their learning and
b) will do the work necessary to achieve it.*

*If you would like to discuss learning outcomes—for your own courses or for your department's
curriculum—please contact Eileen at pctc@mta.ca*

Writing learning outcomes statements

Learning outcomes focus on demonstrable results:

*How will the students be different after this course or degree program in terms of
knowledge, skills, values and attitudes?*

Learning outcomes also indicate the assessment to be used:

How will the students demonstrate that they have achieved the necessary learning?

Learning outcomes should be **C-L-E-A-R**: (contd.)



Comprehensible to the student
Learning-Focused rather than focused only on content
Evident in achievement and in significance
Attainable
Related to the content, relevant to the student's state of development, and replicable

Tips for course-level learning outcomes

Limit the course-level learning outcomes to 5-10 statements that

- Reflect the over-arching concepts and essential knowledge, skills, values;
- Describe the desired results of the learning experience, not the means or the process;
- Represent the *minimum* needed to succeed in a course or program.

Learning outcomes statements on a course syllabus are only part of the equation. Biggs reminds us that teaching and learning take place within a system that includes many levels: the classroom, lab or studio; the department/program; and the institution. Therefore, it is essential to integrate and align our expectations of students system-wide. This process of “constructive alignment” means that our instructional strategies and assessment techniques complement and facilitate the fulfillment of the intended learning outcomes.

Other benefits of learning outcomes statements

- By focusing on the required learning, rather than only the content, learning outcomes make it easier for students to transfer from one institution to another.
- By clarifying the outcomes for their own courses and discussing them with departmental colleagues, professors can reflect upon and even gauge the success of their own teaching and plan future modifications which may result in enhancements to individual courses or even entire curricula.
- By emphasizing learning outcomes, rather than teaching objectives, we remind students that learning is *their* responsibility, as Shuell says in *Cognitive Conceptions of Learning*:

“It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.” (Shuell: 1986; quoted in Biggs: 2007)

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