

The Role of Learning Targets in Raising Student Achievement

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Motto: *We think in generalities, but we live in details.*
(Whitehead, 1943: 26)

Abstract:

Student achievement is not so much a goal in itself, but rather a process which starts with today's lesson. When learners have a clear idea of what they are expected to know at the end of the lesson, in other words, when they know exactly what success looks like, they are aiming for something specific and are more likely to engage in learning, take responsibility of their performance, and accept feedback. The overall aim of this paper is to present the benefits of using learning targets in the classroom. We shall start by clarifying what learning targets are, and then investigate ways of designing and implementing them in the classroom. The conclusion is that, when used effectively, learning targets have a major role in improving student outcomes.

Keywords: *feedback, learning targets, motivation, student achievement*

Rezumat

Performanța studenților nu este atât un scop în sine, cât un proces care începe cu lecția de zi. Când cursanții au o idee clară în legătură cu ceea ce trebuie să cunoască la finalul lecției, cu alte cuvinte, când știu exact ce reprezintă succesul, ei se orientează către ceva specific și au șanse mai mari să se implice în procesul de învățare, să își asume responsabilitatea propriei performanțe și să accepte feedback-ul. Scopul lucrării de față este de a prezenta beneficiile folosirii țintelor specifice de învățare în clasă. Vom începe prin a clarifica ce sunt „țintele specifice de învățare”, apoi vom investiga modalități de a le crea și de a le implementa la curs. Concluzia este că, atunci când sunt folosite într-un mod eficient, țintele specifice au un rol major în îmbunătățirea performanțelor studenților.

Cuvinte-cheie: *feedback, ținte specifice de învățare, motivație, performanța studenților*

Introduction

Studying, like any journey, implies first of all a clear description of the destination. Students learn in order to get somewhere; therefore, it is essential that they should know where they are heading. As it is often the



case, teachers decide what students need to learn, but learning does not take place until students understand what is expected of them, and set their mind on achieving it. As Moss, Brookhart and Long explain, „unless all students see, recognise, and understand the learning target from the very beginning of the lesson, one factor will remain constant: the teacher will always be the only one providing the direction, focusing on getting students to meet the instructional objectives” (Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2011: 66). In effect, instead of focusing on learning, students will only pay attention to do the tasks indicated by the teacher, a fact which lowers motivation and impedes self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2001).

When students are clear on teachers’ expectations, they can assess their current performance and efficiently make use of the feedback given. This aspect comes close to John Hattie’s concept of „visible teaching and learning” which occurs when both teachers and students „seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained”, when tasks are designed and carried out with the aim of mastering the goal, when feedback is provided and sought, when students ultimately acquire „self-regulatory” skills (Hattie, 2009: 22). The clarity of the learning goal and the visibility of the entire process of reaching that goal obviously lead to students’ increased performance and ongoing learning.

Research therefore shows that learning targets are instrumental to effective teaching and learning. In their absence, students lack the map of their road to progress, and learning is somehow hazardous. Having established the importance of pursuing learning targets, we shall present what they really are, how they should be developed, and how they can be introduced in today’s lesson.

Understanding learning targets

Learning targets refer to concrete goals that describe explicitly what students are supposed to know at the end of the class, the unit, the semester, or the entire course. We shall focus our discussion on the learning targets of today’s lesson, starting from the assumption that „improving student learning and achievement happens in the immediacy of an individual lesson [...], or it doesn’t happen at all” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 2). Today’s lesson is a brick in the construction of learning, that is added to, and will be followed by, other bricks. In other words, the learning targets that teachers design for today’s lesson build on the targets from previous lessons, and should constitute the foundation for future targets. Therefore, when formulating today’s learning targets, teachers should pay attention to the entire learning trajectory that students need to follow in order to achieve the expected results which are described in the curriculum.



In practice, learning targets are explicit statements that describe what students will learn in a given lesson; therefore, it is advisable that they should be written in student-friendly language. They usually begin with „I can”, followed by verbs of taxonomies of learning. The Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching presents Bloom’s taxonomy for categorising educational goals (Armstrong, 2010).

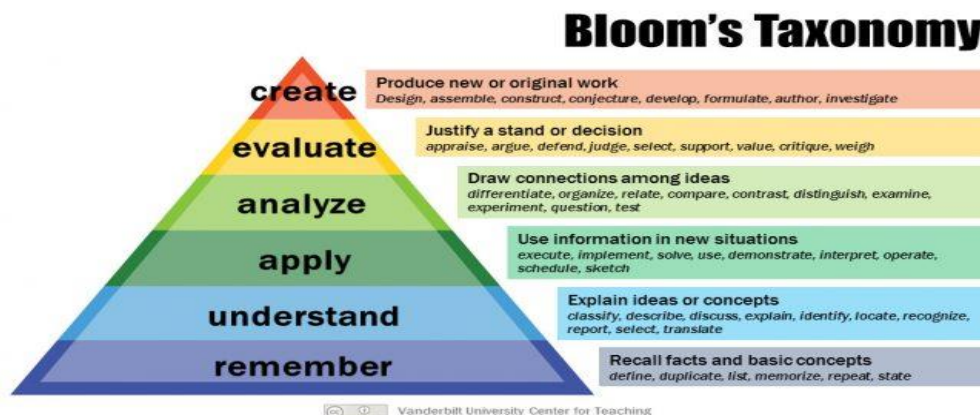


Fig. 1 Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956)

This is useful resource for teachers who can select the right verb to indicate the level of performance that the student should reach, and describe the skill that will be formed and later assessed. Thus, a learning target states how well students are supposed to master a certain piece of knowledge and how they are expected to demonstrate that learning.

At this point, it is worth making a distinction between learning targets and instructional/ learning objectives. The latter guide teaching across a series of lessons, and are written from the teacher’s perspective, in a more technical, formal language. They are meant for teachers and they usually exceed the goal of today’s lesson. By contrast, learning targets guide learning, are written from the students’ point of view, in a rather informal language. While the instructional objectives stay with the teacher, the learning targets are shared with the students who use them to guide their own learning (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 3).

- Instructional objectives: *I am going to teach subject/verb agreement in complex sentences.*
- Learning targets: *I can understand subject/verb agreement in complex sentences.*

The benefits of using learning targets

Research has shown that using learning targets for today’s lesson has a number of advantages for both teachers and students. Apart from



the above mentioned connection between learning targets and performance, the benefits include:

- **increased student motivation.** The strength of students' motivation is definitely a factor which determines „how seriously they approach the work, how much time they set aside for it, how hard they push themselves” (Scrivener, 2005: 63). When students have a clear goal, they get involved in their learning, and consequently they are more likely to achieve good results. The learning targets of today's lesson represent a short-term goal which, according to research, „provide immediate incentives and guides for performance” (Bandura & Schunk, 1981: 587), being thus far more motivating and engaging than long-term goals which are often perceived as „mirages in the desert, appearing and disappearing at random” (Harmer, 2001: 53). On the other hand, improved student engagement is an indicator of the fact that they care, and students' interest and perseverance correlate with academic success. Moreover, as Moss and Brookhart mention, active engagement does not necessarily mean solving a lot of tasks in class: „It is what students actively think about – what their minds are on, rather than what their hands are on – that determines active engagement.” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 43)

- **student ownership of learning.** Once students understand why they have to learn something, they know exactly what it takes to be successful, and are therefore more willing to work in order to reach the goal. Students are also empowered to monitor and self-assess their own progress, rather than relying solely on teacher's evaluation.

- **enhanced communication.** Due to the fact that learning targets are visible and shared with all the students, they work to create a positive atmosphere of learning through communication. Students acquire knowledge through discussion and the sharing of ideas with their colleagues and the teacher. The learning targets thus contribute to the creation of a culture of collaboration and trust.

- **improved day-to-day teaching practice.** The transparency and visibility of learning targets make lessons more meaningful. As Marcu underlines „the role of the teacher/trainer is fundamental in setting the goals and reaching the target” (Marcu, 2020: 122). Setting clear goals helps teachers focus on the important aspects to teach. By measuring performance levels against the set targets, they have the possibility to identify the problem areas and adapt their teaching accordingly, so that activities and assessment are aligned. The learning target gives them an understanding of students' progress, and also an easiness to communicate with the learners, the parents, or the school.

- **greater institution effectiveness.** It is obvious that institution goals and targets are closely connected to students' performance in



national exams, for instance. Institution goals and targets are best incorporated at the classroom level. Moss and Brookhart underline the idea that „learning targets provide a common focus for the decisions that schools make about what works, what doesn't work, and what could work better” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 3).

Perhaps the greatest benefit of using learning targets resides in the fact that it offers students the possibility of learning through teachers' eyes, and teachers the opportunity of learning teaching through students' eyes.

The implementation of learning targets in the classroom

Moss and Brookhart has put forth a theory of action based on the learning targets in the classroom. According to them: „The most effective teaching and the most meaningful student learning happen when teachers design the right learning target for today's lesson and use it along with their students to aim for and assess understanding.” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 2). This definition emphasises two essential steps – designing and sharing – that lead to the desired end of helping students become assessment-capable learners.

In order to design the right learning target, teachers should „begin with the end in mind” (Rutherford, 2002: 5). They need to determine the knowledge, skills, and reasoning for that lesson, bearing in mind what students learned in the previous lesson, and thinking about what they are going to study in the subsequent lessons. The learning target of today's lesson is therefore part of a sequential planning based on short-term and long-term goals. The important questions would be:

1. What did students learn yesterday?
2. How well did they learn it?
3. Are there any issues which are not clear?
4. What are they going to study in the following lesson?

Teachers should clearly delimitate the lesson-sized chunk of learning and never ask students to do more of the same; that is, every time a new concept or skill need to be introduced, or a previously acquired concept needs to be applied to a new context. The performance to be achieved at the end of the lesson should have the right degree of difficulty, so that students feel challenged, not overwhelmed by the levels of thinking that are required. At the same time, each lesson should have a specific purpose that needs to be understood and shared by both teachers and students. Moss and Brookhart stress the idea that „If neither half of the learning team – students nor teachers – knows where the learning is headed, then neither one can make informed decisions about how to get there” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 17). In order to write the „I can...”



statements, teachers need to formulate a series of questions from the students' point of view:

1. What will I be able to do at the end of this lesson?
2. What idea, topic, or subject should I understand and learn so that I can do this?
3. How will I show that I can do this, and how well will I have to do it? (Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2011: 68)

Once the learning targets are formulated, the teacher needs to share them with the students. As mentioned above, the targets should be written in a language that students understand, and should be made visible to students. Thus, the teacher can write them on the board at the beginning of the class, post them on bulletin boards, homework assignments, or assessments. The students need to see them at least once during the class, but ideally they should be brought up at least once during a lesson.

Making learning targets visible does not necessarily mean that the students understand them, therefore they have to be explained. When introducing the lesson, the teacher should present the learning target to the students, and explain how each task connects to that target, and how it will eventually lead them to reach the goal. In order to ensure that the learning targets are properly shared, that is, understood by everybody, the teacher may ask the students to „verbalise the intended learning in their own words either individually, in partners, or in small groups” (Clayton, 2017: 3).

In order to know whether they have reached the goal or not, or to what extent, or to estimate how far they are from the target, students need clearly established criteria for success which make the learning goal measurable and more concrete. The often used „Try harder!” is a trap that teachers must avoid falling into. Moss, Brookhart and Long explain that: „Success criteria are developmentally appropriate descriptions and concrete examples of what success in a lesson looks like. They are not the grades students should earn, the number of problems they must get right, or the number of times they should include something in a performance or product.” (Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2011: 69) In other words, they do not indicate quantity, but what it means to do quality work.

The first criterion of success is provided by the „I can” statements which indicate from the very beginning what students are expected to do. Another useful strategy is to provide students with work samples of different levels of quality. The teacher can ask students to analyse the samples, and decide what makes one sample better or worse than the others, based on the learning target. Alternatively, teachers can give students success criteria organised in rubrics which indicate the elements of a successful work and define different levels of quality for each element



(Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2011: 69). The students can use the rubrics to analyse the work samples provided by the teacher, or to assess their own work. It is essential for students to be able to conclude that: „If I can do this, then I will know I’ve reached my learning target” (Moss and Brookhart, 2012: 44). Being familiar with success criteria, students should be able to answer questions like:

1. What does quality look like with this task?
2. Where am I relative to success with the learning target?
3. What are my next steps?
4. Do I understand what proficiency and mastery of knowledge looks like?
5. How can I use the target to assess and monitor my own progress and set further goals? (Clayton, 2017: 3)

When students understand the learning target and the success criteria, then they will be able not only to assess the quality of their own work, but also to monitor their own progress, reflect on their progress, and envisage methods/strategies to remediate unsuccessful performance. In order to do this, students can use a table with the learning targets, and next to each of these targets they can reflect on their progress by writing „not yet”, „almost there”, or „got it” (Clayton, 2017: 3). Learning targets thus represent not only an aim, but a tool for reflection. A self-regulated learner becomes an empowered student who will take learning into his or her own hands, and do whatever it is necessary in order to maximise success.

Conclusion

As the saying goes, we don’t know what we don’t know; therefore, we need the „not known” part explained, so that we can turn it into our learning goal. This is precisely the role of learning targets. Written in easy-to-understand language, they show the students what they need to learn, how to do it, and how to determine if, or to what extent, they reached the goal. When shared and implemented correctly, learning targets have the power to transform student learning altogether. Students will no longer entirely depend on their teachers’ guidance and assessment; instead, they will get the power to regulate their own learning, by setting their own learning goals. Consequently, goal-setting is a skill that both teachers and students need to acquire in the paradigm of lessons articulated by learning targets. Once students are in charge of their own learning, their motivation increases, a fact which guarantees higher levels of performance.



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