



Pedagogical Course Goals? Their Purpose and Formulation

Michael J. V. Woolcock, Ph.D.

Graduate Teaching Fellow (Social Sciences)

When you sign up for a Sheridan Center Individual Teaching Consultation (ITC), the first question on the form you will have to answer is:

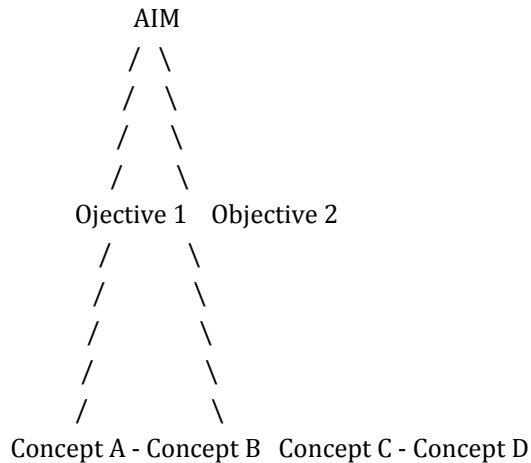
"What are your pedagogical goals for the course/seminar/journal club, i.e. How do you intend to help students learn the content of the course, not What the content is."

Veteran teachers and newcomers alike are often confused about what course goals are, why they are important, and how to go about setting them. In this edition of Teaching Tips, we try to clarify the subject of course goals and address these concerns. The process of identifying course goals is the fundamental element of creating a syllabus which promotes student learning. Carefully and thoughtfully articulated course goals provide the foundation for the conduct of a course, establish criteria for assessment of faculty teaching performance, and identify the educational outcomes which students may expect. [A more complete discussion of these issues can be found in the Sheridan Center's handbook, [Constructing a Syllabus](#), also available in hard copy from the Center]

Foundations: Aims and Objectives

Clearly stated course goals, which are usually subdivided into aims and objectives, are the foundation stone upon which the content of a course is then constructed. Importantly, they are also the basis for assessment of student performance, in that it is the instructor's task to evaluate the extent to which each student has achieved the course objectives. Aims are

broad statements identifying the general educational outcomes you want a graduate of your course to be able to display, while objectives are the concrete measures by which these aims will be realized, and are usually expressed as relationships between specific concepts (see Figure 1).



As such, course goals are not so much content based, as some might think; rather, they are an explicit effort to articulate the outcomes - skills, knowledge, attributes, dispositions, etc. - a graduate of your course will be expected to display.

One of the aims of a course in Development Studies, for example, might be to examine the role of the state in different developing countries. A corresponding objective might be to explore the conditions under which industrial policies help or hinder economic growth. Objectives should be set explicitly for the course as a whole, but it is also helpful for instructors to think of corresponding (complementary) objectives for each class during the semester: ask, "What outcomes do I hope to see displayed in my students after this class?," not, "I must cover the section on cell division."

Faculty Teaching Assessment

The extent to which students achieve the course objectives is the extent to which they realize the aims of the course, and is the measure of your teaching effectiveness.

Clearly articulating your aims and objectives is a deceptively simple task, but should take several hours, since everything else in your course is determined by it. Content, method of

instruction, reading material, lab exercises, and forms of assessment are all derived from working out what end result, or outcome, you desire for those who complete your course.

This does not mean that you are necessarily "imposing" your agenda on students or stultifying their creative powers; it does mean that even the most open-ended approach to teaching - where students themselves decide upon the curriculum and forms of assessment - contains at least two implicit course objectives, and that students and faculty alike are all better off when these are stated clearly and explicitly.

Some instructors are reluctant to set aims and objectives because they fear that doing so will give their course an overly behaviorist or positivist stance; they fear that all objectives have to be measurable in some quantifiable amount, or that students will focus exclusively on "jumping through the hoops" at the expense of developing a love for the material itself and wrestling with its complexities. These are reasonable fears only if one has a very narrow view of what constitutes a legitimate course objective. If you think it is important for students to develop a love of poetry, an appreciation of the complexity of the universe, or the wonders of the human body, then say so!

There may not be any statistical test that can demonstrate whether a "significant difference" has been attained over the semester in these matters, but that's what your professional judgment is for. The best strategy, of course, is to incorporate a range of quantitative and qualitative objectives so that together you have a holistic set of expectations.

Educational Outcomes for the Course

As part of the process of formally expressing your aims and objectives, it is helpful to begin by asking yourself a simple question: What educational outcomes do I want a graduate of this course to display? By beginning at the end, you start the process of trying to work out what you want students to learn, which in turn enables you to decide upon the most effective means of helping students attain it.

The list of verbs which can be used to help construct concrete objectives for your class is included in [Constructing a Syllabus](#), also available in hard cover from the Center (see p.15). Note that they cover the full spectrum of quantitative and qualitative measures. Five or six sentences beginning with these verbs provides a reasonable range within which you can work; this number forces you to be precise but comprehensive about the range of

objectives. Again, though it may only take a paragraph in your final document it will - and should - be by far the most time-consuming element to actually articulate: everything else in your course is shaped by it!

We hope that this edition of Teaching Tips will help next time you sign up for a [Sheridan Center ITC!](#)