2

WRITING COURSE GOALS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

With Danny Fontaine

What Do We Know About Writing Course Goals and Learning Objectives?

Writing course goals and learning objectives is a foundational step in backward design that helps instructors establish the intended outcomes of their students' learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). As introduced in Chapter 1, backward design is an approach to compiling a course that starts with the desired results, your goals, and what you want your students to learn or to become. Providing course goals and learning objectives gives students the organizational structure of your course and can help to hold instructors accountable to what they want to prioritize for student learning. Both goals and objectives should be student-centered rather than course-centered. Additionally, both course goals and learning objectives should reflect successful student performance.

The process of backward design is a helpful way to ensure that your intended outcomes, assessments (see Chapters 3 and 4 for more about assessing student learning), and learning activities are intentionally aligned (see Chapter 5).

The following are detailed descriptions of course goals and learning objectives that pay particular attention to the relationship among them.

Course Goals

1. Course goals reflect the larger ideas of what you want your students *to know and understand* through your course and are most successful when they are aligned with larger program goals, disciplinary goals, or professional standards.
2. Course goals are frequently not measurable and use verbs like "know" or "understand"; because they represent big ideas, they can be broad and vague.
3. Course goals reflect essential questions for your course and/or discipline.

Learning Objectives

1. Each learning objective should be connected to or stem from a course goal; in other words, course goals and learning objectives should be intentionally aligned.
2. Each learning objective should reflect what you want your students *to be able to do.*
3. Each learning objective should be measureable.

4. Each learning objective should be observable.
5. Each learning objective should target one specific aspect of student performance.

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BOX 2.1
Best Practice Tip

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Do: Upon successful completion of this course, students will know/understand/be able to . . .

Don't: This course will offer students . . . This course will provide students with . . .

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BOX 2.2
Course Goal Examples

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Upon successful completion of this course, students will *understand* the scientific method.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will *know* the components that comprise a successful marketing campaign.

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BOX 2.3
Learning Objective Examples

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Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *evaluate* sources of information.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *take a position* on a debatable historical issue.

Every course goal should have multiple learning objectives assigned to it. Course goals are measured through the assessments tied to learning objectives. Writing course goals is one way of connecting specific, measurable learning objectives back to the larger curriculum of your department. By assessing whether a student can complete or demonstrate different tasks and skills, you can evaluate their overall knowledge and understanding of the course material and the broader aims of your program or major. (See Boxes 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 for a best practice tip and examples of course goals and learning objectives.)

Intended outcomes, assessments, and learning activities work together to help you measure student learning (see Figure 2.1).

Some extra tips:

1. Try not to list multiple verbs in one objective—since each skill will be measured and assessed in a different way, each verb should be a separate objective.
WRONG: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *read* and *write* with a critical perspective.

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BOX 2.4
Example of Course Goal and Accompanying Learning Objectives
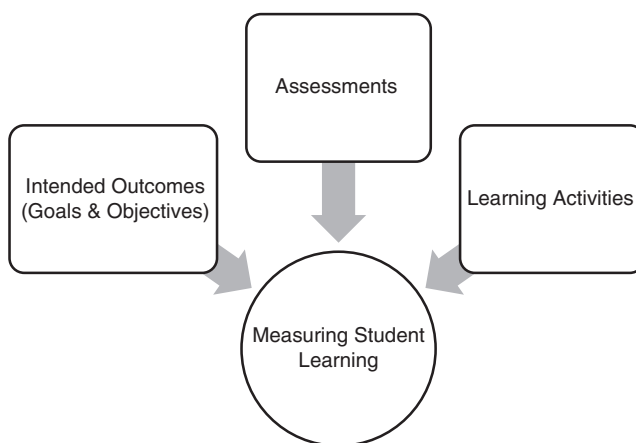
</div>

Goal: Upon successful completion of this course, students will *know* the scientific method.

Objective 1: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *list* the components of the scientific method.

Objective 2: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *apply* the scientific method to a real-world question or problem.

Objective 3: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *describe* their use of the scientific method to a nonscientist.

Figure 2.1. Components of measuring student learning.

RIGHT: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *read* from a critical perspective.

2. Do not use your assignments for your objectives. An assignment provides the evidence of a student's success with the objectives. Ideally, objectives should be measurable by more than one method, so if your objective can only be measured in one way, it is probably an assignment.
   WRONG: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *write a 20-page paper*.
   RIGHT: Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to *construct a thesis statement* with a clear and persuasive claim.

In the step-by-step guide that follows, you will have the opportunity to draft some essential questions for your course, as well as your course goals and learning objectives. The activities in the remainder of the chapter encourage reflection and

iteration. You may need to complete multiple drafts before you feel satisfied with the goals and objectives that you articulate for your blended course.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Course Goals and Learning Objectives

Step 1: Alignment With Department and Program Goals

As you begin the process of drafting goals and objectives, especially for a new course, your department-level program goals can be an excellent starting point. Program goals are typically those understandings and skills that your department has agreed students should graduate with after completing your program. Consider meeting with your department chair to discuss how the blended course you are designing fits into the larger curriculum to ensure alignment with larger goals. It can also be helpful to look at the prerequisites for the course you are designing as well as the courses that follow yours, and for which your course may serve as a prerequisite. If you are teaching a course that is part of a sequence, meeting with the colleagues who teach the other courses connected to yours can also help to shape and hone the goals and objectives you are drafting.

Step 2: Essential Questions

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) recommend locating the essential questions of a course as part of backward design; these questions "explicitly focus on the big ideas that connect and bring meaning to all the discrete facts and skills" (p. 105). Box 2.5 offers some examples of essential questions.

Essential questions for my blended course:

- _____
  _____
  _____

- _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- _____
  _____
  _____

- _____
  _____
  _____

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BOX 2.5
Essential Question Examples

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How does constitutional law impact the day-to-day life of U.S. citizens?

What impact can one person have through the implementation of sustainable consumerism?

What is the relationship between culture and education?

Does global warming exist?

How does space influence the making of place?

Step 3: Questions for Writing Course Goals

Consider the following questions and choose two or three to respond to in the space provided on the following page. These questions should help bring the larger themes of your course and discipline closer to the surface as you prepare to draft your course goals.

1. Imagine what a group of graduating students (i.e., beginner, master level) who have taken your course would say. If they thought it was among the most valuable courses they have ever taken, what would they be saying about the course?
2. What do you want to provide for your students, what should they know/do/care about?
3. How is technology used by professionals trained in your discipline?
4. What is the appropriate level for your students to be able to function in the skill-sets offered by your course?
5. Do you need to take into account any general education curriculum goals that pertain to this course?
6. Do you need to take into account any licensure or accreditation goals that pertain to this course?
7. What areas of content should students be able to easily remember upon finishing this course?
8. What technology-related tools or skills should students be able to easily remember upon finishing this course?
9. What do you want students to get out of this blended course experience in addition to learning course content?

Pick two or three of the most relevant questions for writing course goals and respond to them in the space provided:

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BOX 2.6
Example Learning Objectives for a Blended Course

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Upon successfully completing this course, students will be able to do the following:

- Communicate effectively via email or discussion board
- Demonstrate an ability to persuade in an online environment
- Work with others in virtual settings
- Demonstrate proficiency with particular technologies important to a discipline or career
- Read about and understand research using online tools (e.g., surveys)
- Conduct research using online tools (e.g., surveys)
- Analyze online documents and/or situations (e.g., medical diagnoses, historical analyses)
- Negotiate in virtual settings
- Demonstrate competency with team-building skills such as cooperation, communication, and building trust in an online environment
- Access online information efficiently
- Evaluate sources (both primary and secondary) in an online environment

Step 4: Drafting Technology-Specific Learning Objectives

Consider the components of your course, any technologies you already plan to use, and the different ways that you would like students to communicate with one another in the course. Are there specific skills or attitudes that you want students to have in relation to technology? Look over the examples provided in Box 2.6 and write down any technology-specific learning objectives you plan to use in your course in the space provided. While technology-specific objectives are not a mandatory component of blended classrooms, they can be helpful if there are technology-specific skills that students will be expected to learn in order to be successful.

Technology-specific learning objectives for my blended course:

- _____
  _____

- _____
  _____

Step 5: Drafting Course Goals and Learning Objectives

Using Table 2.1, begin to write down your course goals and learning objectives for your blended course. (See Box 2.7 for a recommendation related to Table 2.1.) Do not feel like you have to fill all the open slots for potential course goals; usually three to five goals are sufficient for a three- to four-credit course (especially given

BOX 2.7
Course Design Recommendation

Photocopy Table 2.1 or download the digital template from www.bcdworkbook.com so that you can create multiple drafts of your course goals and learning objectives.

that each goal needs to be connected to multiple learning objectives). You will want to consider the appropriate number of learning objectives for your course given the level of your student population and what you think can reasonably be accomplished in the time that you have with those students. In my experience, instructors tend to overfill courses with learning objectives and content, so consider whether everything you plan to include is absolutely necessary. Remember that just because something is covered in a course does not mean that a student has learned it.

Also, keep in mind that drafting course goals and learning objectives can take time. Course goals and learning objectives can go through several iterations as you complete the rest of your course design, so do not feel like you need to have perfect goals and objectives before you continue on with your course design process.

To help you in the drafting process, please also refer to Box 2.8, which provides a sample list of verbs for writing learning objectives. This list of verbs is organized according to Bloom's Taxonomy, which offers a structured way of understanding the stages of cognition. The verbs associated with lower-order thinking skills are the easiest tasks, and the verbs associated with higher-order thinking skills are more difficult. If you would like to see additional examples of course goals and learning objectives, see the example syllabi included in Appendix C.

Your Course Goals and Learning Objectives

Use Table 2.1 to fill in the course goals and accompanying learning objectives for your blended course. Once you have a complete draft of your course goals and learning objectives, set them aside for a while and then revisit them with Table 2.2 as a guide for self-critique.

Chapter 12 will offer additional guidance for building your blended course syllabus and how you should include your goals and objectives. However, the syllabus is not the only place for goals and objectives to be communicated to students. As you complete the remaining chapters in the workbook consider the different places where you would like to communicate your course goals and learning objectives to your students throughout the course. In addition to the syllabus, you might also consider listing goals and objectives on assignments or including them in grading rubrics (see Chapter 3), creating a check-in conversation regarding goals and objectives for the course at mid-semester (consider including this in the course map you will

build in Chapter 6), or collecting formative feedback from students regarding their self-assessment of their own progress regarding the course goals and objectives (see additional ideas for student self-assessment in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5).

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BOX 2.8
What Is Bloom's Taxonomy?

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The original draft of Bloom's Taxonomy was published in 1956 and was initially devised to help create a bank of test questions across a range of faculty who were trying to measure similar learning objectives. Educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom led this effort and, although the publication of *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* did not receive much attention at the time, Bloom's work is now one of the most widely used and cited taxonomies of student learning.

Bloom's Taxonomy is "a multi-tiered model of classifying thinking according to six cognitive levels of complexity" (Forehand, 2005). The taxonomy is meant to be applied in order, from lower levels of cognitive thinking in a step-by-step process toward higher levels of cognition. In the 1990s, a former student of Bloom, Lorin Anderson, revised the Taxonomy to include different terminology as well as a different order of the stages.

	Old Version (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956)	**New Version** (with sample verbs) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)
Higher Order Thinking Skills - - - **Lower Order Thinking Skills**	Evaluation	Creating: producing, planning, designing
	Synthesis	Evaluating: critiquing, judging, testing
	Analysis	Analyzing: comparing, deconstructing, integrating
	Application	Applying: using, implementing, deploying
	Comprehension	Understanding: summarizing, explaining, classifying
	Knowledge	Remembering: listing, describing, identifying

Bloom's Taxonomy has also undergone revision as new technologies have changed student learning goals and objectives. Additional revisions of the Taxonomy have incorporated expanded definitions of *knowledge* and *cognitive process dimensions* to help illustrate how *what* is to be learned and *how* it will be learned are related (Heer, 2011).

When writing the learning objectives for your blended course, consider how an understanding of Bloom's Taxonomy can help you assess the level at which students need to learn in the course and the different processes (verbs) of learning that you want them to engage with in both online and face-to-face environments.

TABLE 2.1.
Your Course Goals and Learning Objectives

Course: _____	
Course Goal	*Learning Objective(s)*
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	

(Continues)

TABLE 2.1. *(Continued)*

Course: _____	
Course Goal	*Learning Objective(s)*
7.	
8.	

TABLE 2.2.
Characteristics of Course Goals and Learning Objectives

	Course Goals	*Learning Objectives*
Measureable and observable		✓
Student-centered rather than course-centered	✓	✓
Reflects what you want your students to *be able to do*		✓
Connects to or stems from a course goal		✓
Reflects successful student performance	✓	✓
Uses broad language with verbs like *know* or *understand*	✓	
Reflects essential questions for your course and/or discipline	✓	
Targets one specific aspect of student performance		✓
Uses an appropriate action verb that targets the desired level of performance		✓

Key Ideas From Chapter 2

- Course goals and learning objectives represent the intended outcomes of your course.
- Course goals and learning objectives are foundational to an aligned course.
- Course goals and learning objectives are dependent on one another to ensure assessment of student learning.

- Learning objectives can reflect specific technologically-oriented skills in a blended course.
- Creating course goals and learning objectives is an iterative process that can take multiple drafts.

Questions for Faculty

- How are the goals and objectives that you drafted using this chapter different from or similar to those that you have used previously in your courses?
- Can you connect your course goals and learning objectives to your department's program goals or curricular objectives?
- How will you communicate your course goals and learning objectives to your students throughout the course (i.e., on the syllabus, listed on assignments, included in grading rubrics, a check-in conversation at mid-semester, formative feedback from students, etc.)?

Questions for Administrators

- Do you require faculty to provide course goals and learning objectives on a syllabus or other course document for students to access at the beginning of the term?
- What support does your institution have in place to help faculty write and revise their course goals and learning objectives each term (faculty development office, teaching and learning center, online resources, syllabus template, model examples, etc.)?

Documenting Your Course Design Progress

TABLE 2.3.
Documenting Your Course Design Progress

Course Design Steps	*In Your LMS Sandbox*
• Find a copy of your department's program goals and/or discuss the alignment of the program goals and your course with your department chair. • Brainstorm the essential questions for your course. • Decide whether your course will have technology-specific learning objectives. • Complete an initial draft of your course goals and learning objectives.	• Think about how and where you plan to communicate your course goals and learning objectives to students in your LMS sandbox.

NOTES