What are Learning Outcomes?

The terms, “learning outcomes,” “learning objectives,” and “learning goals” are often used interchangeably in the field of education. For purposes of this document, we will use the term “learning outcomes.” Learning outcomes are used within a learning experience to define what skills or competencies students should achieve throughout a given unit or course. They are typically presented in the course/unit syllabus so your students clearly understand what is expected of them. Regardless of whether the outcomes are for a course or unit, it is important to have measurable learning outcomes and that they are determined before creating the course/unit content.
Why are Learning Outcomes Important?

Without clearly defined and measurable outcomes, student learning at the end of your course/unit may be different than the intended purpose. Clear, measurable, and observable outcomes allow students to understand their faculty’s expectations throughout the course/unit. Additionally, measurable outcomes guide the creation of the evaluations that take place throughout the learning experience. The evaluations ensure that your students are held accountable for their learning, and for you to understand if your course is actually structured in such a way for students to be successful.

As a faculty member, measurable outcomes enable you to help your students achieve the intended learning and can also assist you in identifying which students may be at risk. The use of appropriate learning outcomes allows you and your administrators to continuously assess and improve your learning experiences. Learning outcomes are not only important for when you are designing a course/unit, but also for other faculty members who might later teach the course you are creating.

What do I do to Create Measurable and Effective Outcomes?

Learning outcomes should be **SMART**: Specific/simple, Measurable, Achievable/attainable, Realistic/relevant/results, and Time-bound/targeted. You should ask yourself **SMART** questions for each learning outcome you create.

**S**pecific and Simple:
What exactly is it that students should achieve or accomplish? Can this outcome be evaluated?

**M**easurable:
How will faculty and students know when goals have been achieved? Use an appropriate action verb for your outcome based on Cognitive Taxonomy.

**A**chievable:
Is achieving this goal realistic with effort and commitment? Have the students been provided the resources to achieve this goal?

**R**ealistic:
Why are we doing this? Is it important for students to develop this skill or knowledge for the course and the program to succeed?

**T**ime-bound:
When will students specifically achieve this goal? Is it feasible for students to achieve the goal in the timeframe provided?

Example of **SMART** and **not-SMART** outcome:

**SMART**=
Students will evaluate distinctions among theories of human development

**Not-SMART**=
Students will learn about biological principles
Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) and Miller’s Pyramid (1990) are examples of two popular models for developing measurable learning outcomes based on Cognitive Learning. These models should serve as a guide for creating SMART learning outcomes. Within the HBO Toolkit, you can find more information on the Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning to reference when developing learning outcomes.

When creating measurable learning outcomes, start with these guidelines:

- Limit course/unit outcomes to no more than 6-8
- Align your course/unit outcomes with the program/course outcomes
- Use learning outcomes to build on your students’ prior knowledge
- Ensure the level of cognitive learning is at the correct level; e.g. undergraduate vs graduate level
- Ensure your learning outcomes are measurable and can be evaluated

References:


