Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding In Today’s Lesson

ASCD Webinar
17 July 2012

Connie M. Moss, Ed.D.
Director, Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL)
Associate Professor, Duquesne University School of Education
406 Canevin Hall • Pittsburgh, PA 15282 • 412-396-4778 • moss@castl.duq.edu
Learning Targets, Student Look-Fors, Performance of Understanding, Formative Learning Cycle

1. **Learning Targets**
   - If students are not using it (aiming for understanding of important concepts and becoming more proficient in targeted skills) they are not engaged in the formative assessment process, and your learning intention is NOT a learning target.
   - Students must know what good work means in today's lesson:
     - What they are expected to learn.
     - How well they are expected to learn it.
     - What they will be asked to do to demonstrate their learning.
     - How well they will have to do it.

2. **Student Look Fors (Success Criteria)**
   - Criteria the students can use to judge how close they have come to the target in language that describes mastery of the target, rather than in grading or scoring language (letters, points, numbers, percentage right, number correct, etc.).

3. **Every Lesson Needs a Performance of Understanding:**
   - Perfect fit for the learning target and makes it crystal clear to everyone.
   - Deepens students understanding of important content.
   - Opportunity for students to try out the learning target and apply their student look-fors.
   - Helps students aim for understanding and assess what they know and what they need to learn more about.
   - Produces compelling and undeniable evidence of student learning through what students do, say, make or write.
   - Students conclude: *If I can do this, then I will know that I have reached my learning target.*
   - Teacher concludes: *If my students can do this, then I will have strong evidence that they've mastered the learning target.*

4. **A Formative Learning Cycle That Feeds Students and Learning Forward.**
   - In today’s lesson, students and teachers partner during a formative learning cycle that makes learning visible and maximizes opportunities to feed students and their learning forward.
   - It provides a “golden second chance” that encourages, expects, and teaches students to improve their work as part of today’s lesson.
   - Without a learning target, student look-fors, and a performance of understanding, feedback is just advice—someone telling you what to do—and has no formative value.
The Role of Learning Targets and Success Criteria “Student Look-Fors”

1. **Formative assessment is the Means not the Ends.** Unless students see, recognize and understand what they are learning and how they will know when they reach mastery, they will never become independent, self-directed, assessment capable learners. Remember the goal here is to produce competent, self-regulated, and motivated learners who can set goals and assess their own progress.

2. **Instructional objectives are too broad and too impersonal to guide learning.** Students need teachers to describe for them in student friendly and age appropriate terms (language they can understand) exactly what is important to learn (not what is important to do or to score) in the lesson/activity at hand. This description should be framed from the point of view of a student who has yet to master the content.

3. **Learning targets describe what the student will come to know or be able to do as a result of today’s lesson.** They do not describe what they will score or do. Learning targets are not “directions for an activity”. They are an exact description of what students will learn. They usually begin with a phrase like: *Today we are learning...*

4. It is not enough for students to hear what they are going to learn, they must understand how teachers will assess the quality of their work and how they can assess the quality of their own work. Teachers should share success criteria (student look fors) students can use as they are learning and working that answer the question: *How will I know when I am producing quality work?*

5. The purpose of sharing learning targets and success criteria (student look fors) is to guide the learning of the students, the actions of the teacher, and the evidence that the classroom learning team will collect to support an assumption that learning has occurred. Work that students do should provide teachers and students with strong evidence of their standing in relation to mastery of the learning target for today’s lesson.

6. The best way to share a learning target is to design activities and assignments—performances of understanding—that provide the strongest evidence of where each student is in relation to today’s learning target (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). What are students actually doing during today’s lesson to: deepen their understanding of content (knowledge and skills), assess the quality of their work as they are learning, provide evidence of what they know and can do and how well they know it and can do it.

7. To raise student achievement, you must be very clear about what achievement actually means! Achievement means that you are looking for evidence of “something”. Teachers and students should know EXACTLY what that “something” is for today’s lesson, and gather compelling evidence to determine if students have “achieved” that exact “something”. Raising student achievement during TODAY’s lesson and every lesson means that so students achieve short terms (lesson-sized) goals that add up to long-term achievement goals. The key to raising student achievement is to have a learning target for today’s lesson!
Building a Learning Target

Characteristics of a Learning Target (Moss & Brookhart, 2012)

• A learning target describes for the students exactly what they are going to learn by the end of today’s lesson.
• It describes learning in developmentally appropriate language that the student can understand.
• It is stated from the point of view of a student who has yet to master the content, skill or process that makes up the target.
• The learning target is connected to the specific performance of understanding for today’s lesson—what you will ask your students to do, make, say, or write that will deepen their understanding, help them aim for mastery of the target, allow them to self-assess the quality of their learning, and will provide you and the student with evidence of what the student’s level of understanding?
• A high-quality learning target contains student look-fors—criteria the students can use to judge how close they have come to the target in language that describes mastery of the target, rather than in grading or scoring language (letters, points, numbers, percentage right, number correct, etc.).

A 4-Step Framework for Verbally Sharing the Learning Target:
To share the learning target with your students at the beginning of a lesson, ask yourself the following three questions from the students’ point of view:

1. What will I be able to do when I finish today’s lesson?
2. What idea, topic, subject is important for me to learn and understand so I can use this information to do it?
3. How will I be asked to show that I can do this? And,
4. How well will I have to do it?

What is the purpose of sharing the target verbally?
Your mission is to help students aim for understanding in today’s lesson. It is the “WHY” of the lesson. It answers for students why you are asking them to learn this chunk of information, on this day, so that they can deepen their understanding, show what they have learned in this way, and describe for them exactly how well they will be expected to demonstrate their new learning.
Elementary Level Example

Lesson on Question Marks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will I be able to do when I finish today’s lesson?</th>
<th>What idea, topic, subject is important for me to learn and understand so I can use this information to do it?</th>
<th>How will I be asked to show that I can do this? (Performance of Understanding?)</th>
<th>How well will I have to do it? (Student Look-Fors?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Yesterday, we learned about the question mark, what it looks like and that it comes at the end of an asking sentence. Today we are learning to write an asking sentence that has a question mark at the end. | To be able to do this we must learn and understand that some asking sentences begin with a “question” word like: Who, what, where, when, why or how. | You will show that you can do this by rewriting a list of telling sentences as asking sentences and ending each one with a question mark. | You will know that you have hit the learning target when you are able to say:  
  • I can use one of the asking words to change my telling sentence into a question.  
  • I can place a question mark at the end of my asking sentence.  
  • I can answer my new asking sentence by using my “telling” sentence. |

* After telling the students about the target, share it in other ways like giving students examples and non-examples to examine and assess using the student look-fors as part of their guided practice.
## Middle Level Example

### Lesson on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will I be able to do when I finish today’s lesson?</th>
<th>What idea, topic, subject is important for me to learn and understand so I can use this information to do it?</th>
<th>How will I be asked to show that I can do this? (Performance of Understanding?)</th>
<th>How well will I have to do it? (Student Look-Fors?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yesterday, we learned how to perform an historical investigation and practiced the steps that we should use to find out what happened and why it happened.</td>
<td>To be able to do this we must learn and understand that even when an historical event is documented in a variety of ways, people can still question the event and look at it from differing points of view.</td>
<td>You will show that you can do this in two phases.</td>
<td>You will know that you have hit the learning target when you are able to say:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today we are learning to look closely at an historical event that people disagree about to this day—they disagree about what happened and why it happened.</td>
<td></td>
<td>First you will work in your groups to examine the historical documents I have chosen for you and decide what we know for sure and what we do not know for certain. Then each of you will write a short 2-paragraph statement that explains one disagreement that people have about this event.</td>
<td>• I can briefly describe a specific disagreement that people have about the assassination of President Kennedy. • I can describe specific pieces of evidence that exist to support the two sides of the disagreement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* After sharing verbally the teacher can share in other ways like giving students a checklist of their “look fors” so they can self-assess as they are producing their short 2-paragraph statement.
### High School Example

#### Lesson on the Countries of Western Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will I be able to do when I finish today’s lesson?</th>
<th>What idea, topic, subject is important for me to learn and understand so I can use this information to do it?</th>
<th>How will I be asked to show that I can do this? (Performance of Understanding?)</th>
<th>How well will I have to do it? (Student Look-Fors?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Yesterday, we learned that migration patterns impacted the political, social, and economic development of the countries in Western Europe. Today we are learning to evaluate the impact that migration had on Switzerland in 2008. | To be able to do this we will study what happened during the 2008 election in Switzerland and pay particular attention to the “Black Sheep” posters used to protest against foreigners moving into Switzerland from other nations. | After our discussion you will be asked to outline a well-supported opinion in favor of, or opposed to, Switzerland’s strong stance against immigrants from other nations. | You will know that you have hit the learning target when you are able to say: I can create an outline that:  
• Begins with an introduction that states my position, provides some background information and presents a thesis statement.  
• Presents my three strongest points, one by one, supporting each point with concrete evidence. |

After sharing the target verbally, teachers can share it in other ways like:  
• providing students with examples of the outline for them to compare with the look-fors as part of guided practice,  
• giving students a template for creating the outline,  
• supplying a descriptive, analytical rubric students can use to judge the quality of their outline as they are producing it.