Learning Objectives & Learning Outcomes

Mission and Goals

The ***goals*** of a program or course, are created to serve the achievement of a ***mission*** set forth by a University, program, and/or department. These *goals* are typically broad and lay out what the program or course intends to achieve. For example, the *goal* of a risk management class may be to produce students who are aware and able to plan for potential risks in the workplace.

Learning Objectives

Goals are supported by the *course* (or *learning*) ***objectives***. These objectives briefly (and clearly) describe what students *should be able* to know, do, and think or care about after completing a course (Colburn, 2003). These statements are generally broad, as they span the entire course, but measurable and specific. For example, a statistics course may have the learning objective "By the end of the course, students should be able to perform, interpret, and criticize the results of a hypothesis test"; this learning objective does not specify the type of hypothesis test, but it does tell students what they will be able to do (perform), know (interpret), and think about (criticize) by the end of the course. The CTL has produced a short video on course objectives, available here.

Learning Outcomes

Learning ***outcomes*** are similar to learning objectives in the way they are written, but they are used at a module, unit, daily or weekly level. Learning *outcomes* are used to support and measure the learning *objectives* of a course. For example, consider the objective example of a hypothesis test, this course objective could be supported by outcomes such as "Students should be able to *perform* and *interpret* a single sample t-test"; this outcome is much more specific, but still supports the objective of hypothesis testing. Also notice, this is easily measureable on assessments *and* students can self-evaluate as to whether or not they have achieved this learning outcome; it is for this reason, we suggest writers of outcomes (and objectives) use measureable verbs instead of vague terms such as understand. For more information on *learning outcomes*, please see this information sheet from the CTL.

Connecting the Terms

As shown by the figure at the top of this page, the focus of each item narrows as we progress from the mission of a department to the outcomes of a course, but for a program to be aligned all of these items need to support and inform each other. The *learning outcomes* of a course support (and measure) the *course objectives*, which fulfill the *goals* of a course, which support the *mission* of the faculty, department or university. Hence, it is important to align your course from both the top down and the bottom up!

A Disclaimer

It should be noted that the terms learning *objective* and learning *outcome* are often interchanged or used variably in literature. The definitions and descriptions given here are meant to reflect the use of these terms by the University of Alberta Center for Teaching and Learning as well as the policy documents on Teaching and Learning defined by the University of Alberta.

Colburn, A. (2003). *The lingo of learning: 88 education terms every science teacher should know*. Arlington, VA: NSTA Press.