LEARNING INTENTIONS AND SUCCESS CRITERIA IN YOUR CLASSROOM

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When we make it clear what the essential learning is to students, students are more likely to learn.

What are they learning?

Recently my eight-year-old niece told me about a learning activity she had undertaken that day at school. The class had first read *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and then in groups they had measured cereal into bowls that were small, medium and large. As I talked with my niece, I tried to work out what the purpose of the learning was for that activity. I considered several options. Perhaps it was a literacy activity and pouring cereal into bowls was a way of demonstrating an understanding of the key points of the narrative. Perhaps it was a numeracy activity, helping students to understand measurement and ratio, or possibly the teacher had something entirely different in mind. Maybe the key learning was around active listening, group work or the importance of a nutritional breakfast. While I am certain the teacher had a clear understanding of the purpose of the learning, from questioning my niece, it was clear that she had very little understanding of what this was. Since my niece was not clear about the purpose of the learning, she also had little understanding of whether or not she had made a good attempt at the activity.

Clarity is critical

Without clarity, students are often just having a stab in the dark as to what is expected of them.

Learning intentions and success criteria bring clarity to the learning, and the research is clear that this clarity makes a significant difference. Carol Ann Tomlinson writes, 'A fuzzy sense of the essentials results in fuzzy activities, which in turn results in fuzzy student understanding. That's the barrier to high-quality teaching and learning' (2014, p.62). When used together, learning intentions and success criteria bring both purpose and clarity to our lessons. When done well, they are game changers.

As teachers, we know why we are doing certain things in the classroom. We make decisions every session about what we will ask our students to do, and which learning activities we will have them engage in, and we make each of these decisions with the core purpose in mind. What has become increasingly obvious is that students lack this same understanding, and therefore do not make the gains we would expect to see.

The High Impact Teaching Strategies HITS (Department of Education and Training, 2018) have learning intentions and success criteria as key elements. Underpinning these strategies are Hattie's (2009) research-determined effect sizes of 0.75 for Teacher Clarity and 0.56 for Goals.

I have set out below the process I use in my classroom.

Determining learning intentions

A learning intention is a clear statement describing what we want students to know, understand and be able to do as a result of a lesson or learning activity.

Examples might include:

- we are learning how to design enquiry questions for research
- we are learning how to construct a pie graph
- we are considering how politicians use social media to influence voters
- we are learning how to solve quadratic equations.

For a learning intention to be effective it should be:

- Reflective of the essential learning. It is not a description of what will take place in the lesson, or a set of instructions. It is a statement that captures the core knowledge or skill we want students to have mastery of in the lesson. Once we define in a very succinct statement the key learning for the session, we plan and implement lessons with greater clarity
- Shared. When students know the essential learning, they know where to focus their efforts. The learning intention cannot just be in the teacher's head
- Visible and referenced. In the course of a lesson or lessons, we might ask students to do multiple things – some independent and some collaborative. We need to constantly bring all things back to the core learning.

Provide success criteria to help students achieve the learning intentions

A learning intention on its own will not dramatically change the course of a lesson. Success criteria need to accompany it: 'The purpose of the success criteria, or "What are we looking for?" is to make students understand what the teacher is using as the criteria for judging their work, and, of

course to ensure that the teacher is clear about the criteria that will determine if the learning intentions have been successfully achieved'. (Hattie, 2009, p.169)

The relationship between learning intentions and success criteria, is fundamental to explicit teaching. The success criteria demonstrate how the learning intention can be met. It says to students, 'this is what it would look like if you did this well'. Without success criteria, the learning intention is limited.

Three ways that success criteria can be made clear

1. Written success criteria

When we write success criteria, we are putting together a clearly stated set of standards and all students will know what these standards look like if the learning was achieved. It is really as simple as imagining a student asked you: 'what can I do today that will show I've met the learning intention?' and then providing those written statements for the students.

Example one

Learning intention: We are learning how to write an introduction to an essay.

Success criteria: I can write an introduction that:

- engages the reader with a hook
- includes a statement of contention that is responsive to the essay question
- succinctly summarises the key points made in the essay.

Example two

Learning intention: We are learning how federal parliament operates in Australia

Success criteria: I can accurately explain how people are elected to the House of Representatives and I can determine which party/coalition forms government in a range of election scenarios.

2. Models of work

A second way we can demonstrate success is to provide students with models of work. This is a powerful way to help students understand what the expectations look like in practice. Often when we are describing for students what we want them to do, or how we want them to approach the task, we have a clear vision in our heads of what it would look like. Students often do not have this

same vision. If they do not have a good grasp of what needs to be done, then they are highly unlikely to successfully complete the task.

When we are designing learning experiences, we want to be asking ourselves the question: 'What can I provide to students that will show them what is expected?' If you are asking students to write a practical report, have they seen a model of a high level practical report? If you are asking students to write an essay, have they seen a model of a high level essay? If you're asking students to produce a PowerPoint presentation, have they seen a model of an excellent PowerPoint presentation? Providing a high-level model or exemplar is a very powerful way to show students the goal.

If we are concerned that students will simply copy, we can be creative about what parts of the task or learning experience we choose to model. If, for example, students are learning to write an introduction then we can show them a model introduction on an entirely different topic. The success criteria make no reference to the topic of the essay and so any introduction can serve as a model. If we are asking students to create a poster, brochure, video or speech, we can show them a model based on other content areas. If we are modelling a short answer response in a Science subject, we might choose to show an unsuccessful model first and discuss what is missing, rather than show them a correct answer they might copy.

3. Worked examples

The High Impact Teaching Strategy, Worked Examples, highlights a third way in which we can help students understand success. With an effect size of 0.57 (Hattie, 2009), a worked example is a demonstration of the approach to the task. It is demonstrating the process the students need to undertake in order to successfully complete the task. This is a technique we see frequently in the teaching of mathematics. Teachers regularly model for students the process they need to go through in order to complete the task. However, we see it far less often in other learning areas. When we incorporate worked examples into our lessons, we are asking ourselves the question, 'How can I demonstrate to students what they need to do in order to successfully complete the task?'

In the same way that we might provide a worked example of a mathematics equation on the whiteboard, we can also provide a worked example of writing a response to a short answer question. We can demonstrate how we might select a quote or construct a topic sentence.

Using learning intentions and success criteria throughout the lesson for feedback

Providing learning intentions and success criteria at the commencement of learning enables students to see the gap between their current and intended learning and provides them with the impetus to bridge the gap. In order to get the maximum effect of learning intentions and success

criteria, we want to be using them all the way through the lesson. There are several ways teachers can be doing this.

Facilitating feedback to self

When written success criteria, models, or worked examples are present in a classroom, students can use these at any point during the lesson to check their own progress, and they should be encouraged to do this. One way to achieve this is to have students:

- work independently or collaboratively for a period of time and then stop the class
- instruct them to look at the criteria, model or example
- spend a few minutes comparing that to their own work.

This need not take more than a few minutes. Many students will identify elements of their own work that are missing, incorrect, off track or need further development. As a result, they are instantly on a better course with their learning. This can be done many times throughout a lesson and before any task is concluded.

Facilitating peer to peer feedback

Peer to peer feedback is easily achieved with clear criteria. As with self-feedback we can:

- stop the class at any point and ask students to look at the work of the person next to them
- ask them to give feedback statements only related to the success criteria.

Students do not need to give evaluative statements such as 'it's good', but rather descriptive statements related to the task, e.g. 'you have included a hook, but you are missing the contention'. Many students will quickly identify areas of the criteria to be worked on or changed. Peer to peer feedback is more effective and efficient than a teacher attempting to try and read all students' work.

Focus teacher feedback

A final way we can use the established success criteria is to focus our own feedback comments. We often find ourselves across the course of a lesson going around the classroom giving feedback related to students' efforts, the amount of work they have completed, their behaviour, their spelling, the neatness of their handwriting, the pace at which they're working etc. While there is a time and place for each of these feedback comments, they are rarely related to the core learning. When we have clearly defined success criteria, these should be a basis for most of the comments we make to students. As teachers, we can be asking ourselves, 'Am I making comments that lead students towards achieving the learning intention today?'

Key takeaways for graduate teachers

At every point in the teaching sequence, from the planning to the evaluation of learning, we should consider learning intentions and success criteria as essential elements to any good lesson. Use the following reflection questions regularly when planning your work, when in the classroom and when evaluating your own teaching:

- how can I build the regular use of learning intentions and success criteria into my planning processes?
- how can I provide helpful success criteria in the form of written statements, models and worked examples?
- how can I use the learning intention and success criteria throughout the lesson to guide student progress and provide self, peer and teacher feedback?

References

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