Guidelines for Thinking about and Writing Learning Outcomes

What are learning outcomes? [1]

Learning outcomes are statements that specify what learners will know or be able to do as a result of a learning activity. Outcomes are usually expressed as knowledge, skills, or attitudes…. Learning outcomes are statements which describe a desired condition – that is, the needed knowledge, skills, or attitudes. Learning outcomes provide direction in the planning of a learning activity. They help to:

- Focus on learner’s behavior that is to be changed
- Serve as guidelines for content, instruction, and evaluation
- Identify specifically what should be learned
- Convey to learners exactly what is to be accomplished

What are some key questions that I should ask myself before writing learning outcomes?

Before outcome statements are written, the [faculty] should answer key questions [such as]…

- What are the most essential things they need to know or be able to do?
- What specific skills or strategies do they need?
- Are there things they need to unlearn?
- What are the most important things they need to be able to do when they finish?

What are the characteristics of good learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes have three distinguishing characteristics.

1. The specified action by the learners must be observable.
2. The specified action by the learners must be measurable.
3. The specified action must be done by the learners.
The ultimate test when writing a learning outcome is whether or not the action taken by the participants can be assessed. If not, the outcome probably does not meet all three of the characteristics.

1. who is to perform;
2. what action they are to take;
3. some result that must come from their action.

**How do you fix an unclear outcome?**

Many program brochures include learning outcomes which are unclear or represent elements of curriculum rather than some action the participants will demonstrate. Note the following examples:

[Students will…]

*Understand the nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.*

*Develop an appreciation of cultural diversity in the workplace.*

If you ask a simple question ("Can it be measured?") , you see readily that these learning outcomes have shortcomings. They are not measurable. The same outcomes can be modified by changing the action verbs.

[Students will…]

*List nine reasons for conducting a needs assessment.*

*Summarize in writing their feelings about cultural diversity in the workplace.*

Learners now have a much better idea of what is expected of them.

**What is the importance of action verbs?**

Since the learner's performance should be observable and measurable, the verb chosen for each outcome statement should be an action verb which results in overt behavior that can be observed and measured.
Sample action verbs are: compile, create, plan, revise, analyze, design, select, utilize, apply, demonstrate, prepare, use, compute, discuss, explain, predict assess, compare, rate, critique

Certain verbs are unclear and subject to different interpretations in terms of what action they are specifying. Such verbs call for covert behavior which cannot be observed or measured. These types of verbs should be avoided: know, become aware of, appreciate, learn, understand, become familiar with


From:
http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/outcomes.asp
American Association of Law Libraries
Accessed October 13, 2008
Articulating Learning Outcomes:

Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes/Values/Predispositions

Learning Outcomes at Different Levels

• **Course Session Level**: At the end of class today, students can calculate and interpret correlation coefficients.

• **Course Level**: Students who complete this course can calculate and interpret a variety of descriptive and inferential statistics.

• **Program Level**: Students who complete the Psychology program can use statistical tools to analyze and interpret data from psychological studies.

• **Institutional Level**: Graduates from our campus can apply quantitative reasoning to real world problems.

Program Learning Outcomes:

• Focus on what students will learn, rather than on what faculty will “cover.”

• Should be widely distributed – in the catalog, on the Web, in department newsletters, and on syllabi.

• Should be known by all major stakeholders, including regular and adjunct faculty, fieldwork supervisors, student support personnel, and students.

• Guide course and curriculum planning so that students experience a cohesive curriculum.

• Encourage students to be intentional learners who direct and monitor their own learning.

• Focus assessment efforts and faculty and staff conversations on student learning.
Mission, Goals, and Outcomes

Mission: a holistic vision of the values and philosophy of the department

Goals: general statements about knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values expected in graduates

Outcomes: clear, concise statements that describe how students can demonstrate their mastery of program goals

Example of a Mission Statement

“The mission of the College of Agriculture is to provide students with the educational experiences and environment that promote discipline competence; the capacity to attain career success in agriculture, food, or related professions; and a sense of civic responsibility.” (University of Minnesota, from Diamond, Designing & Assessing Courses & Curricula, p. 72).

Examples of Program Goals

Knowledge

- Students know basic biological principles and concepts.
- Students understand the major theoretical approaches for explaining economic phenomena.

Skill

- Students can use appropriate technology tools.
- Students have effective interpersonal and leadership skills.

Value

- Students respect the professional code of ethics for nursing professionals.
- Students value the scientific approach to understanding natural phenomena.
Examples of Learning Outcomes

• Students can analyze experimental results and draw reasonable conclusions from them.

• Students can use arithmetical, algebraic, geometric, and statistical methods to solve problems.

• Students can locate appropriate sources by searching electronic and traditional databases.

• Students can analyze the quality of the argumentation provided in support of a position.

• Students can describe the major factors that influenced the development of the American political system.

• Students can distinguish between science and pseudo-science.

• Students can collaborate with others effectively.

From:
http://www.csub.edu/TLC/options/resources/handouts/AllenWorkshopHandoutJan06.pdf
Assessment Workshop Materials, Mary Allen (mallen@csub.edu)
CSUB, January 2006