



Writing Effective Learning Objectives

Margaret J. Naumes, University of New Hampshire

One of the biggest challenges that a case writer faces when writing an Instructors' Manual (IM) is the section on "Learning Objectives." It's not that you don't have objectives—your reasons for writing and using the case. The challenge is to make those objectives useful and workable, in short "effective," both for other instructors who use the case and also for yourself in writing the case.

The standards for effective learning objectives are continuing to evolve. Originally this section in our IMs was titled "Teaching Objectives," and was a list of concepts that could be explored using that case. Now, editors and reviewers prefer the term "Learning Objectives," putting the focus on what students should learn rather than on what we are trying to teach them (or the topics we will "cover"). Learning objectives therefore can be prefaced with a phrase like, "After studying this case, students will be able to . . ."

Objectives now also focus on the skills that students should be developing, as well as (or maybe, more important than) specific concepts. The transferability of the specific knowledge from a case discussion may be limited. Students should be able, however, to apply their new skills to new problems in new settings.

WHY "LEARNING OBJECTIVES"?

The good news is that you already know at least one of your case's objectives. It is the reason why you wanted to write *this* case. It may illustrate a concept that you want your students to understand and apply. It may present an interesting dilemma for your students to wrestle with. This objective is likely to be the most complex and demand the highest level of skills.

The objectives will help you to develop the discussion questions. In return, the discussion responses need to demonstrate how those objectives are being achieved in the context of the case. Your learning objectives will also help you fine-tune your case. As you develop the discussion questions and analysis, you may discover that students will need more information to be able to give a full answer.

Finally, the objectives section of the instructors' manual helps to market your case. It gives other instructors a quick look at whether the case would fit into their course and how it could be used. They can see what concepts could be applied, and how their

students might be challenged to learn new skills. If the degree of difficulty is too high or too low, or if they already have sufficient teaching materials relating to those objectives, then they don't need to read any further in the IM, much less the case itself.

TYPES OF LEARNING

To create effective learning objectives, we need to know something about “learning.” Learning is the knowledge that students will have at the end of the class discussion that they did not have before. Knowledge, however, is not simple to define. According to the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence there are two categories: declarative knowledge, which is described as “knowing what,” and procedural knowledge, which is described as “knowing how and knowing when to apply various procedures, methods, theories, styles, or approaches” (Eberly Center, n.d.). Cases can provide both types of knowledge. They allow students to learn about a particular industry or thought process or model. They also give your students the opportunity to practice a variety of learning skills.

Two useful but different approaches to categorizing types of learning are described by Bloom and colleagues (1956) and Fink (2003). Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy (1956) includes six types of processes, arranged as a hierarchy. The lowest level, Knowledge, is primarily content-oriented and consists of three subcategories: knowledge of specifics, knowledge of ways and means of dealing with specifics, and knowledge of universals and abstractions in a field. Subsequent categories are Comprehension (characterized by question cues such as “describe,” “discuss,” and “summarize”), Application (for example, “apply,” “classify,” and “calculate”), Analysis (“analyze,” “explain,” or “compare”), Synthesis (“combine,” “plan,” or “generalize”), and Evaluation (“assess,” “decide,” “support”). The underlying assumption is that acquisition of these skills is cumulative; that is, students master one level of skills before taking on the next.

Table: Comparison of Taxonomies of Bloom (1956) and Fink (2003)	
Bloom’s Taxonomy¹	Fink’s Taxonomy²
Knowledge	Foundational knowledge
Comprehension	
Application	Application
Analysis	
Synthesis	Integration
Evaluation	
	Human dimension
	Caring
Metacognition ³	Learning how to learn
¹ Hierarchical ² Non-hierarchical; student may be engaged in multiple types of learning at the same time. ³ Added to Bloom’s taxonomy by Anderson et al. (2001).	

A group of education specialists has developed a revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy, separating the cognitive processes or skills from type of content (Anderson, et al., 2001). They identify three types of content in Bloom's original hierarchy: "factual," "procedural," and "conceptual." In addition, Anderson et al., add a fourth type, metacognitive knowledge. Metacognitive knowledge includes "knowledge of general strategies that might be used for different tasks, knowledge of the conditions under which these strategies might be used, knowledge of the extent to which the strategies are effective, and knowledge of self" (Pintrich, 2002, 217). Marsh (2007) concurs: "facts in and of themselves do not help people to solve problems, people need to know how to seek out and evaluate information in order to adjust to everyday problems that they face in a variety of social situations" (2007, 7).

L. Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning involves both cognitive and emotive categories. For learning to be significant, it "requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner's life" (2003, 30). The categories of "Foundational Knowledge," "Application," and "Integration" correspond approximately to Bloom's six stages. The other categories, "Human Dimension," "Caring," and "Learning How to Learn" complete Fink's taxonomy. The human dimension involves the human significance of a subject, either to the student her/himself or to others. Caring relates to students developing new feelings or interests, becoming involved in a subject. Learning how to learn recognizes the importance of students becoming able to develop their own paths to knowledge. Rather than hierarchical, Fink concludes that learning is most apt to be significant when it spans categories.

DEVELOPING LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Since each learning objective typically focuses on a specific skill or action, you will probably need more than one objective to achieve your goals for the case. It is often easiest to start at the top, that is, to begin by identifying the highest level of skills and the types of knowledge that your students will need to use. For example, students may be expected to make a recommendation for the decision maker ("evaluate" or "create" in Bloom's taxonomy).

Before they can make an informed recommendation, however, your students will need to analyze the situation, apply models of competition or leadership or other theoretical concepts, assess the company's situation, and compare possible alternatives. Each of these steps requires a different action by the student, and may also require a different type of knowledge. If a case has a relatively simple purpose, requiring primarily one type of skills, only one or two learning objectives may be necessary. More complex case goals will require more objectives. However, a single case discussion normally can't be expected to support more than four or five separate objectives.

Following Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, each learning objective should have two components. It should identify an area of content. That content could be a specific set of facts, such as about terminology or a specific industry, for example:

Understand the differences between a not-for-profit and a for-profit organization.

It could be conceptual knowledge, such as application of theories, models or key concepts from the course or discipline, for example:

Apply relevant models including the concept of performance-expectations gaps, Kohlberg's stages of moral development, and models of ethical reasoning.

Metacognitive knowledge (Anderson et al., 2001) is less common as a content component, but might include knowledge of when a particular model or process would or would not be an effective choice. Metacognitive objectives could ask students, for example, to:

Develop criteria for an effective decision

or

Develop alternative approaches in the face of ethical problems.

A good objective will also have an action verb, indicating the skill that students will use or develop. Action verbs such as “apply,” “compare,” or “recommend” give students more direction than verbs such as “understand” or “appreciate.” It’s also easy to see whether students have accomplished that task. It is much harder for an instructor to determine how well students have accomplished objectives that have vaguer verbs such as “understand” or “appreciate.” One of my examples does ask students to “understand the differences” between not-for-profit and for-profit organizations—this wording is more specific and the learning is easier to assess than if I had said “understand not-for-profit organizations.” A better wording might be: “Create a list of ways in which not-for-profit organizations differ from for-profit organizations.”

Vary the verbs that you use: it virtually guarantees that you will vary the skills that students will have to employ. You will usually begin a case discussion with simpler concepts and work up to the more complex ideas. Your objectives call for students to begin with skills they already know, and build up to skills that they have not yet mastered. Following Bloom, your learning objectives are likely to be arranged from lowest to highest level of learning. For example, the objectives for “Humble Abode Music and the Mammals: Not Your Grandpa’s String Band!” (Merenda, et al., 2010) state that students will be able to:

- *Apply definitions of entrepreneurship to a non-traditional venture.*
- *Apply analytical tools including Porter’s 5 Forces analysis, SWOT, and sustainable competitive advantage, to a small business in a niche market.*
- *Analyze the stages of small business growth as they apply to The Mammals.*
- *Identify the issues and challenges facing The Mammals.*
- *Analyze interrelationships among those issues.*
- *Evaluate the financial and other tradeoffs involved with signing the recording contract.*
- *Develop recommendations for the key issues facing The Mammals.*

Even these objectives, from a heavily reviewed, revised, and ultimately published case, can be improved. Seven objectives may be too many for a single class discussion. As the instructor, you may have to pick and choose which ones to concentrate on. Two of these objectives ask students to “apply,” although they ask for different types of content knowledge: “definitions of entrepreneurship” and a variety of “analytical tools” from strategic management. Two others ask students to “analyze;” one of these is actually another form of applying a model, the stages of small business growth, to facts from the case. However, the final four objectives do ask students to perform increasingly complex (hierarchical, in Bloom’s terms) tasks: identify issues, look at how those issues are related to each other, evaluate tradeoffs, and develop a recommendation.

Objectives like these also fit three of the categories in Fink’s taxonomy: foundational knowledge, application, and integration. Learning objectives for foundational

knowledge are similar to those relating to content, discussed above. “Apply,” “analyze” and “identify” are all forms of Fink’s application, while “evaluate” and “recommend” ask students to integrate their knowledge. Your students should also be involving themselves in their own learning; Fink’s learning how to learn would have objectives similar to the metacognitive objectives discussed above.

To involve the human dimension, you could ask students, for example, to:

***Take the role** of one of the owners and decide how to deal with this difficult situation, given the constraints and issues presented in the case,*

or

***To advise** the protagonist how to overcome the clash of culture between his company and the one he has acquired.*

While students may already care about an issue or person in your case, you could have a learning objective that explicitly asks them for their personal views, for example:

***Prioritize** the benefits of each alternative and defend your rankings,*

or

*Define “success” **and apply your definition** to the small business owner in the case.*

You could also involve the caring dimension by following a learning objective based on analysis of the case with an objective asking students, for example, to:

Apply** a similar analysis to a situation **in the student’s experience.

The otherwise vague verb “appreciate” could also be seen as an example relating to the caring dimension. A clearer statement of “human dimension” or “caring” objectives should be more specific. For example,

*By examining the external environment in which the Barnaba Institute exists, students should **learn how difficult it is** to circumscribe the extent of human trafficking in the world and particularly in the United States. (The Barnaba Institute, Rock and Seeger, 2011.)*

***Develop an awareness of the underlying causes** of homelessness in the United States, and how a myriad of federal, state and local government programs work with and through not-for-profit organizations to provide needed services and shelters. (Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, Thurston, Eddy, and Ruggieri, in this issue, 2013.)*

Each of these objectives asks students to explore the human significance of an issue. As they understand the issue more thoroughly, they may also find that they have developed concern for the people involved.

For learning to be significant, however, Fink expects that it will fall into multiple categories in his taxonomy. The objectives from the Helen Drinan case (Ingols, Shapiro, and Gentile, 2011) illustrate this multiple category type of learning. They ask students to:

***Recognize the contextual factors** surrounding a values conflict (integration and the human dimension);*

***Develop strategies** to articulate the values conflict persuasively and in a way that invites conversation and problem solving (application, integration and learning how to learn);*

Practice articulating one's position in a values conflict situation through recommending what Drinan could say (application, human dimension, caring); and

Practice coaching peers in their articulation of values conflicts (learning how to learn).

As in the example from Humble Abode Music, the individual objectives address specific aspects of the desired learning, but work together to challenge students to create new understanding.

ACCOMPLISHING YOUR OBJECTIVES

There is more to the process of developing learning objectives than simply creating a list of actions and knowledge. If your case is going to lead students to the types of learning that you expect, the rest of the Instructor's Manual should help an instructor to carry out your objectives. Tie your objectives directly to the questions for student preparation and class discussion. As students respond to the questions, they should be finding your key content points and applying the theories that you have linked to the case. The questions should ask students to use the same types of skills that you have identified in the learning objectives. And each of your learning objectives should be achieved using one or more of your discussion questions.

Your learning objectives will also help you fine-tune your case. As you develop the discussion questions and analysis, you may discover that students will need more information to be able to give a full answer. If you can't find it in the case, neither will your students. They won't be able to achieve the learning that you expected. Lack of information for the discussion is a signal that your case isn't finished—you'll need to add what's missing.

Another aspect to consider, in both your learning objectives and your discussion, is measurability. Educational institutions are becoming more focused on assessing students' learning. Your learning objectives should be attainable, taking into account the students' initial level of understanding and skills and moving them to the next level (Teacher and Educational Development, 2005). While not every objective needs to be quantifiable, your responses to each discussion question should identify the points that are associated with achieving one or more of the objectives. Where possible, you should also indicate the points that represent different levels of mastery, such as what an "A" student would say as compared to an average (or less prepared) student.

One final question that you may have is whether your learning objectives should be described in paragraph form, or simply listed. As a writer, a paragraph may seem more natural. Writing in paragraph form forces you to think in terms of the flow of your objectives, how students should move from one to the next. For an instructor who is thinking about using your case, however, it is easier to see the specifics, both content and skills, in a list format. What is most important is that you have developed a guide that shows the learning that students can achieve with your case, and a plan for how to achieve that learning.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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