

# LEARNING TARGETS

Helping Students Aim  
for Understanding  
in Today's Lesson

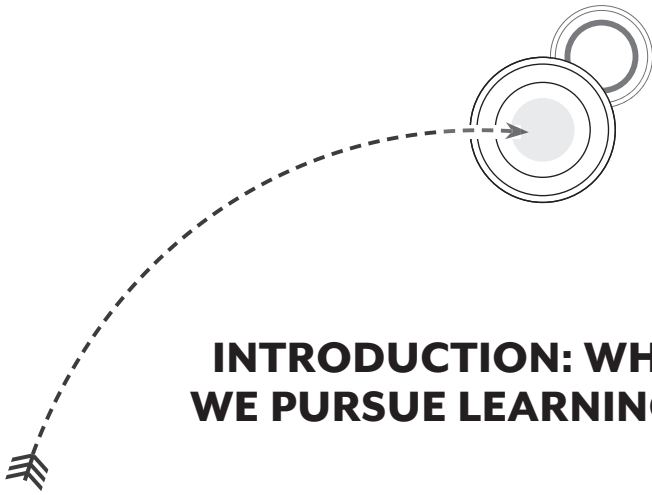
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## INTRODUCTION: WHY SHOULD WE PURSUE LEARNING TARGETS?

If you ask a teacher, an administrator, and a student the question “How can we raise student achievement?” you’ll likely get a variety of answers. Each answer will reveal a personal *theory of action*—that is, the individual’s mental map for what to do in a certain situation to produce a desired result. Our personal theories of action determine how we plan, implement, and evaluate our actions. They also guide us in deciding which evidence we accept or reject to help us determine whether or not we achieved what we set out to do.

School districts rarely work with a coherent theory of action on how to raise student achievement. As a result, students, teachers, and administrators are often working at odds, each person doing what he or she believes is best and often misunderstanding one another’s intentions and actions.

This book presents a *learning target theory of action* that arose from our research and professional learning partnerships with classrooms, schools, and school districts. These experiences compelled us to write a book explaining the crucial role that learning targets play in student learning and achievement, teacher expertise, and educational leadership.

## OUR THEORY OF ACTION IN A NUTSHELL

*The most effective teaching and the most meaningful student learning happen when teachers design the right learning target for today's lesson and use it along with their students to aim for and assess understanding.*

We believe that improving student learning and achievement happens in the immediacy of an individual lesson (what we call “today’s lesson” throughout this book), or it doesn’t happen at all. Teachers design the “right” learning target for today’s lesson when they consider where the lesson resides in a larger learning trajectory and identify the next steps students must take to move toward the overarching understandings described in standards and unit goals. Individual lessons should amount to something. The right learning target for today’s lesson builds on the learning targets from previous lessons in the unit and connects with learning targets in future lessons to advance student understanding of important concepts and skills. That’s why we consider important curricular standards *and* the potential learning trajectory as we define the learning target for today’s lesson. Our goal is to help our students master a coherent series of learning challenges that will ultimately lead to those standards.

Make no mistake, though: this book is not simply about developing the expertise to design the right target to guide instruction. Our theory of action rests on the crucial distinction that a target becomes a *learning target* only when students use it to aim for understanding throughout today’s lesson, and students can aim for a target only when they know what it is. Therefore, we use the term *learning target* to refer to a target that is shared and actively used by *both* halves of the classroom learning team—the teacher and the students.

Teachers share the target with their students by telling, showing, and—most important—engaging students in a performance of understanding, an activity that simultaneously shows students what the target is, develops their understanding of the concepts and skills that make up the target, and produces evidence of their progress toward the target. Together, teachers and students use that evidence to make decisions about further learning.

Learning targets, when shared with and used by both halves of the classroom learning team, are key to creating schools where teaching is effective, students are in charge of their own learning, and administrators lead communities of evidence-based decision makers. As part of a unified theory of action, learning targets compel *all* members of the school to look for and learn from what students are *actually doing* during today’s lesson to engage with important and challenging content, develop

increased understanding and skills, and produce strong evidence of their learning. In our experience, adopting a learning target theory of action compels schools to reexamine the fundamentals of teaching and learning that positively and powerfully influence student achievement.

## WHAT A LEARNING TARGET ISN'T AND IS

A learning target is not an instructional objective. Learning targets differ from instructional objectives in both design and purpose. As the name implies, instructional objectives guide instruction, and we write them from the teacher's point of view. Their purpose is to unify outcomes across a series of related lessons or an entire unit. By design, instructional objectives are too broad to guide what happens in today's lesson.

Learning targets, as their name implies, guide learning. They describe, in language that students understand, the lesson-sized chunk of information, skills, and reasoning processes that students will come to know deeply. We write learning targets from the students' point of view and share them throughout today's lesson so that students can use them to guide their own learning.

Finally, learning targets provide a common focus for the decisions that schools make about what works, what doesn't work, and what could work better. They help educators set challenging goals for what expert teachers and principals should know and be able to do.

## HOW WE ORGANIZED OUR BOOK

Our learning target theory of action compels us to pay close attention to what students are *actually doing to learn and achieve during today's lesson*. Throughout the book, we illustrate why gathering evidence about what students are doing, rather than what adults are doing, matters!

The book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 situates learning targets in a theory of action that students, teachers, principals, and central-office administrators can use to unify their efforts to raise student achievement and create a culture of evidence-based, results-oriented practice.

Chapter 2 defines learning targets and provides examples of what they are and are not. The chapter explains where learning targets come from, how they differ from yet are rooted in instructional objectives, and how they propel a formative learning cycle during today's lesson.

Chapter 3 examines what we mean by “sharing” learning targets. It provides strategies for weaving both the learning target and its criteria for success into the fabric of today’s lesson. This chapter will also discuss designing a strong performance of understanding (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011b, 2011c; Perkins & Blythe, 1994), which is the most effective way to obtain evidence of student learning.

Chapter 4 underlines the importance of “feeding students forward” during a formative learning cycle to set them up for success. This chapter provides strategies to help students understand how to set mastery goals, produce quality work, and monitor their own learning progress.

Chapter 5 explains the important role that learning targets play in increasing students’ capacity to assess their own work and choose effective strategies to monitor and improve that work.

In Chapter 6, we consider how learning targets enable teachers to better communicate exactly what individual students or groups of students should focus on during a differentiated lesson, as well as to customize success criteria and performances of understanding according to diverse student needs.

In Chapter 7, we explain how learning targets promote higher-order thinking through formative assessment and differentiated instruction. Formative assessment and differentiated instruction help make learning targets that involve higher-order thinking accessible to all students. We also demonstrate how learning targets foster goal setting, self-assessment, and self-regulation—processes that influence student learning and achievement.

Chapter 8 looks at the relationships between learning targets and summative assessment and grading. We explain how clearly articulated learning targets help teachers design classroom assessments that summarize achievement over a set of learning targets. The chapter discusses how learning targets connect reportable goals (broader goals for a unit or reporting period) with narrower goals situated in each daily lesson.

Chapter 9 concludes the book with a discussion of how learning targets focus educational leadership practices and collaborative professional development efforts. We explain how learning targets help teachers and administrators align their efforts to improve student learning and achievement. Teachers need to know that there is value in sharing learning targets and success criteria with their students. They also need to know that administrators will look for what students are actually doing during today’s lesson to advance their own understanding and recognize the importance and value of teaching this way.

Finally, we include an appendix of action tools that we created during our professional development work with teachers, schools, and school districts to put our theory of action to work across a variety of contexts.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We suggest that you read this book in the order it was written to grasp the fundamental changes in beliefs, reasoning, and practices it promotes. At its core, the book reframes what learning looks like in the classroom and what educators should count as evidence of student achievement. Reading it from beginning to end will help you recognize the relational nature of the chapters to a unified theory of action.

As you begin designing learning targets, sharing them with your students, and using them to guide what you do in your classroom, school, and district, use individual chapters as references to clarify specific points and clear up misconceptions. For example, if you are struggling to grasp the difference between a learning target and an instructional objective, Chapters 1 and 2 clarify this crucial distinction. The theory of action and action points laid out in Chapter 1 combined with Chapters 2 and 3 provide context and practical strategies for reframing learning at the classroom level and explain why the role that students play in their own learning matters. Chapters 6 and 7 deepen understanding of how differentiated instruction and formative assessment combine to promote learning and higher-order thinking for all students. School administrators will find practical ideas throughout the book, but we suggest a close reading of Chapters 1, 2, and 9 to bring coherence to professional learning and school improvement initiatives.

We hope the learning target theory of action and action points in this book lead to courageous conversations. If we truly intend to raise student achievement, then all members of the school—students, teachers, principals, and central-office administrators—must recognize who is achieving and who is not, and hold themselves and others accountable to do something about it.



## **LEARNING TARGETS: A THEORY OF ACTION**

### **HOW TO CATCH A MONKEY IN THE WILD: A CAUTIONARY TALE**

There are probably many ways to catch a monkey in the wild. One of the most effective is insidious in its simplicity.

The hunter gets a coconut and bores a small, cone-shaped hole in its shell, just large enough to allow a monkey to squeeze its paw inside. The hunter drains the coconut, ties it down, puts a piece of orange inside, and waits. Any monkey that comes by will smell the orange, put its paw inside the coconut to grab the juicy treat, and become trapped in the process. Capturing the monkey doesn't depend on the hunter's prowess, agility, or skill. Rather, it depends on the monkey's tenacious hold on the orange, a stubborn grip that renders it blind to a simple, lifesaving option: opening its paw.

Make no mistake: the hunter doesn't trap the monkey. The monkey's abiding tendency to stick firmly to its decision, ignore evidence to the contrary, and never question its actions is the trap that holds it captive.



## THE BELIEFS THAT WE HOLD AND THE BELIEFS THAT HOLD US

The beliefs that we hold also hold us. Our beliefs are the best predictors of our actions in any situation (Schreiber & Moss, 2002). And, like the monkey's death grip on the orange, our beliefs are deeply rooted, often invisible, and highly resistant to change. That's why so many "tried-but-not-true" methods remain alive and well in our classrooms despite clear evidence of their ineffectiveness. Take round-robin reading, for example. This practice has been rightly characterized as one of the most ineffectual practices still used in classrooms. You know the activity: the first student in a row reads the first paragraph from a book, the second student reads the second paragraph, and so on. Round-robin reading has long been declared a "disaster" in terms of listening and meaning-making (Sloan & Latham, 1981), and the reading comprehension it promotes pales in comparison to the effects of silent reading (Hoffman & Rasinski, 2003). So why do teachers still choose it for their students, and why do the principals who observe it in classrooms continue to turn a blind eye?

As our cautionary tale illustrates, it is essential for us to recognize our tendency to hold on to unexamined beliefs and practices. Each of us has our own mental map, a theory of action that directs our behavior in any situation (Argyris & Schön, 1974). What's tricky is that we actually operate under dual theories of action: an *espoused theory* and a *theory in use*. Our espoused theory is what we *say* we believe works in a given situation, whereas our theory in use is what actually guides our day-to-day actions (Argyris & Schön, 1974). For instance, if you ask a teacher what he believes makes assignments meaningful, he might tell you that students should be engaged in authentic tasks. Yet a visit to his classroom might reveal students copying vocabulary definitions from their textbooks. If you want to uncover what someone truly believes about any situation, look for what that person actually *does* in that situation.

Learning involves detecting and eliminating errors (Argyris & Schön, 1978). When something isn't working, our first reaction is to look for a new strategy—a way to fix the problem—that will allow us to hold on to our original beliefs, and to ignore any research or suggestions that go against our beliefs. Argyris and Schön (1974) call this belief-preserving line of reasoning *single-loop learning*.

Deeper levels of learning happen when we uncover what is not working and use that information to call our beliefs into question. When we question our beliefs and hold them up to critical scrutiny, we engage in the belief-altering process of *double-loop*

*learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Double-loop learning is how vibrant organizations change and grow (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983).

When Nobel laureate and astrophysicist Arno Penzias, honored for his discovery of cosmic microwave background radiation, was asked what accounted for his success, he replied, “I went for the jugular question. . . . Change starts with the individual. So the first thing I do each morning is ask myself, ‘Why do I strongly believe what I believe?’”

The best way to eliminate the disparity between what we say and what we do and to invite the jugular questions is to forge a unified theory of action, shared across a school or district, that both explains and determines the actions that members take as individuals and as a community.

## THE LEARNING TARGET THEORY OF ACTION

In the introduction to this book, we included a “nutshell statement” of our theory of action: *The most effective teaching and the most meaningful student learning happen when teachers design the right learning target for today’s lesson and use it along with their students to aim for and assess understanding.* Our theory grew from our continuing research with educators focused on raising student achievement through formative assessment processes (e.g., Brookhart, Moss, & Long, 2009, 2010, 2011; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). What we discovered and continue to refine is an understanding of the central role that learning targets play in schools.

Learning targets are student-friendly descriptions—via words, pictures, actions, or some combination of the three—of what you intend students to learn or accomplish in a given lesson. When shared meaningfully, they become actual targets that students can see and direct their efforts toward. They also serve as targets for the adults in the school whose responsibility it is to plan, monitor, assess, and improve the quality of learning opportunities to raise the achievement of *all* students.

When educators share learning targets throughout today’s lesson (a subject we discuss further in Chapter 3), they reframe what counts as evidence of expert teaching and meaningful learning. And they engage in double-loop learning to question the merits of their present beliefs and practices.