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Establishing Purpose for Yourself and Your Students

"Great minds have purposes, others have wishes."

The author of this quote, Washington Irving, created the memorable character Rip Van Winkle. You may recall that Rip fell asleep one day and awoke 20 years later, confused about what had occurred and unable to make sense of his surroundings. Misadventures ensued as he failed to recognize his neighbors, confronted a man using his name (really his adult son), and announced his loyalty to the British throne, unaware that the American Revolution had been fought while he slept. Although Van Winkle was immersed in an environment that held all the clues he needed to understand his circumstances, he couldn't recognize them.

Otherwise effective classrooms sometimes operate this way, too. The cues that seem so obvious to us as teachers can be lost on students who, like Rip Van Winkle, fail to perceive the

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context and intent of what we're doing and what they should be learning. Good teachers work hard, using the latest in research-based practices and well-designed curriculum materials. But sometimes teachers rely a little too much on hope—hope that students will learn what we're teaching. Instead, we need to be clear about the purpose of every lesson.

Establishing Purpose

Establishing the purpose of a lesson, often through a written objective, is a common educational practice. From the time teachers get their professional licensure, they are encouraged to consider what their students will know and be able to do. An established purpose alerts learners to important information and garners their attention while helping teachers decide how best to use their instructional time. Consider the following content purpose statement:

To identify the steps in the life cycle of a frog

After reading that statement, do you know what the teacher wants her students to learn? Could you identify instructional materials or plan instructional events that would help guide students' understanding? Could you identify an assessment that would reveal which students had mastered this information? Hopefully, your answer to each of these questions is "yes."

While we can improve the quality of the statement above, perhaps by increasing relevance or focusing on the linguistic demands of the lesson (elements that will be discussed further in this book), our point is that a clearly established purpose drives instruction. We don't ask students to infer the purpose; we clearly state it.

Purpose = Expectations

Establishing a clear purpose for learning content serves as a priming mechanism for new learning and results in increased student understanding of the content (Gagné & Briggs, 1974; Hunter, 1976; Mager, 1962). Simply put, when students understand the purpose of a lesson, they learn more (Fraser, Walberg, Welch, & Hattie, 1987).

In stating a purpose, we make our expectations for learning clear. When teachers have high expectations for students, communicate those expectations, and provide the support necessary to achieve them, student performance soars; conversely, when teachers have low expectations and communicate this either verbally or nonverbally, student achievement suffers (Marzano, 2011). Evidence from high-poverty schools in London, England, suggests that high expectations can also help reduce delinquency and behavioral disturbances (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). We also know that teachers' low expectations for students from traditionally underperforming groups contribute to the achievement gap (van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010).

One of the ways teachers can measure high expectations is by analyzing whether the stated purpose for learning content matches the grade level being taught. A simple review of the purpose statement will reveal lessons that are below grade level and thus not designed to ensure that students reach high expectations. After all, excellent teaching of 4th grade standards to 6th grade students will result, at best, in a group of 7th graders performing at the 5th grade level. That's not to say that a teacher would never provide students with some developmental instruction—closing knowledge and skills gaps

is important, and can be accomplished during guided instruction. But lessons that are provided to the whole class, as well as the productive group work that students do collaboratively, should be aligned to grade-level expectations.

Objectives Versus Purpose Statements

A *lesson objective* is in the mind of the teacher; *establishing purpose* refers to the act of carefully communicating the objective to students. The establishment of purpose is accomplished through intentional use of lesson objectives by the teacher to let students know what they will learn and what they will be expected to do with what they've learned. A clearly stated and understood purpose lays the foundation for a schema building of concepts, skills, and information.

There are many excellent resources focused on writing lesson objectives (e.g., Mager, 1962; Marzano, 2009). We will touch on this subject in Chapter 2, but it is not the main focus of this book. We are interested in how the purpose of a lesson is communicated to students and how the established purpose guides learning. This requires more than writing a quality objective, which, though important, is insufficient to achieve the results we're after. We want students to become self-directed, motivated, critical thinkers who understand the world around them.

The terms *goals* and *objectives* have been used for decades to refer to broad categories of written or verbal statements that describe what students should learn in a given unit or lesson. Goals most often represent a larger curricular focus, while objectives represent smaller, more specific segments of learning that lead to the goal (Gronlund & Linn, 1990). For example, in special education, a goal on an Individual Education Program (IEP) typically

encompasses a year of instruction, with stated objectives representing incremental benchmarks toward the goal (Billingsley, 1984). These objectives require that the time and evidence of learning be specified. The design of IEPs is influenced by the work of Mager (1962), who suggested that behavioral objectives (1) contain a measurable verb that describes the performance, (2) outline the conditions under which the objective is to be achieved, and (3) note the criteria for determining success.

However, as Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) explain, a narrowly defined objective can actually inhibit student performance because it "focuses students' attention to such a degree that they ignore information not specifically related to the goal" (p. 94). This effect can be especially troubling for teachers of English language learners, who are attempting to build schema by encouraging students to draw on their background knowledge and prior experiences. An overly narrow objective may result in students editing out such salient information.

"SMART" is a commonly used mnemonic device for helping people remember the components of a well-crafted objective. Originally, SMART stood for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based. However, it has been revised over time with additional words for added clarity. For example, Haughey (2010) suggests the following:

S - Specific, significant, stretching
M - Measurable, meaningful, motivational
A - Agreed-upon, attainable, achievable, acceptable, action-oriented
R - Realistic, relevant, reasonable, rewarding, results-oriented
T - Time-based, timely, tangible, trackable

As we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, understanding the components of an effective *objective* is important in a teacher's planning process, whereas the *purpose* has to be understood by students such that they can explain it in their own words and grasp its relevance. In other words, teachers who painstakingly write objectives that meet the SMART criteria should do so for themselves and their own understanding of the lesson. An objective probably won't work as a purpose statement, as students are likely to get lost in the details. Students want to know what they are going to learn and how they will be expected to demonstrate their understanding.

Consider the following objective for a biology class designed to meet the SMART criteria:

> By the end of the period, students will describe the role of DNA in the creation of proteins by summarizing the process in writing.

This objective is useful for teachers. It has a time component and mentions specific content and a measurable outcome. But even though it meets the SMART criteria, we would argue that it is not very useful for students. First, while time limits are important in teaching, we're not convinced that they are necessary for a purpose statement. Second, when the purpose statement includes a task, students pay more attention to the task rather than to what they are expected to learn. For us, a better content purpose statement, based on the objective that the teacher has written, would read as follows:

> Explain the role of DNA in the creation of proteins.

In this case, students are immediately alerted to what they are expected to learn. They assume that the teacher will structure

class time to ensure that they do, in fact, learn this and that they will be held accountable for doing so. Thus, the purpose statement is focusing for students, while not being so narrow as to limit their understanding.

Standards Versus Purpose Statements

As states increased the development of content standards in the 1980s, the standards effectively replaced the objectives that teachers posted for their students. (We even worked for a superintendent once who required standards to be posted on classroom walls and principals to check for them during their classroom observations.) However, replacing objectives with standards was actually a step backward in education. Although we believe that objectives may be overkill for students, at least they focus on what students are learning at the moment. Imagine the classroom that has the following 6th grade standard posted on the wall:

> Explain the significance of Greek mythology to the everyday life of people in the region and how Greek literature continues to permeate our literature and language today, drawing from Greek mythology and epics, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and from *Aesop's Fables*. (California Department of Education, 2000, p. 25)

The first problem with this statement is that the content described is taught and learned over several days, if not weeks. Our experience suggests that a purpose statement should focus on what can be accomplished today, rather than over several days. As it stands, this standard posing as a purpose statement is likely to be seen as wallpaper by students because it will be posted for so long. Second, there are too many ideas wrapped