THE PROCESS FOR DEFINING OUTCOMES

PURPOSE
Many instructors know what they’re trying to achieve, but struggle to articulate it on paper or align course activities to their desired outcomes. This tool presents a process for writing learning outcomes in a way that will powerfully impact your courses.

DESCRIPTION
Defining good outcomes is dependent on several factors. First, you must determine the context and level of the outcomes our course addresses. Just as courses are couched within a program, course outcomes are couched within an environment of other outcomes, all of which need to be aligned. Next, there are multiple types of outcomes which need to be defined at each level. These outcomes are framed in terms of what students will do (performance outcomes) and not in terms of material to be taught. Finally, each performance outcome, of each type, at each level, needs to be measurable in some way. We therefore need a process that addresses the levels, the types, the articulation and the means of measurement.

Context and Level
The first step is to review outcomes at the professional and institutional level. Many disciplines have standards which are useful in contextualizing your course standards. Institutional outcomes as embodied in mission statements or charters are helpful as well. The mission of BYU-Idaho is to develop Disciple Leaders. The BYU-Idaho mission statement suggests several aspects of that endeavor. Pres. Clark has also elaborated on the process in a talk entitled Realizing the Mission. College and department outcomes should also be considered.

The next step is to determine what can be assumed about prior student skills and knowledge as they come into your course. Having looked at the bigger picture and at where your course fits in, you can begin to define the scope of your course outcomes.

Course level outcomes are those statements which describe how a student will be different 2-3 years after having taken the course, as a result of their experience in the course. These broad, general, long-term outcomes envelop more granular statements of what information and skills students will master during the course. These more detailed statements are sometimes referred to as enabling outcomes or learning objectives. This tool focuses at the level of both course outcomes and learning objectives. See: Selecting the Scope of Learning Outcomes.

Type
The next task is to define and prioritize specific types of outcomes within the constraints of your course. Given 12.5 weeks, and the context of overarching objectives and previous student preparation, what would be the most significant results you could hope to see from your class? To answer this question, it’s important to think about all the kinds of significant learning possible, not only content learning.

The most common way to achieve this broad perspective is to apply a taxonomy or template which divides course outcomes into several categories. A example of such a taxonomy is:

Knowledge • Attitudes/Values • Skills

Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives is also widely known and used to define different types of learning objectives.

Others taxonomies exist that have proven useful. You should find one you’re comfortable with and use it as a guide in defining your course objectives. For more examples, see Learning Outcome Taxonomies.

The following questions may help in the process:
1. appropriate to your course?
2. balanced in the different kinds of learning?
3. in accordance with the Learning Model?
4. attainable within the course period?
5. in sync with your department’s goals?
Articulation

Outcome statements generally contain four elements. More general course outcome statements often won’t have all of the elements, while class level learning objectives need the specificity. The four elements are often represented as A, B, C, and D although they don’t always appear in that order.

A – Audience
B – Behavior
C – Condition
D – Degree of Mastery

Examples of the ABCD method, in and out of order:
[C] Given a series of Spanish sentences written in past or present tense, [A] the student [B] will rewrite the sentences in future tense [D] with no errors.

Measurement

Outcomes serve to focus and align. Determining the level and type provides focus. Insuring that the outcomes are measurable allows for alignment of course objectives, activities, and assessments. A measurable objective is defined in terms of student performance. It answers the question: What will this student do to demonstrate mastery of the objective?

Only rarely can mastery be demonstrated with a single form of assessment. Instructors need to think about various ways, formal and informal, direct and indirect, of gathering data about student learning. These might include traditional testing or quizzing. They might also include self and peer assessment, observations, dialogue, or projects. Measuring student achievement against outcomes provides data on which instructional activities work and which needs reexamined. Not all of this data need be used as part of formal student assessment for a grade.

Knowledge:
Verbally recount the basic narrative of the first half of the Book of Mormon at a chapter level, highlighting names and events with 90% accuracy.

Attitudes/Values:
Demonstrate an increased sensitivity to multiple, nuanced meanings in scriptural narrative by a 20% increased use of contextual detail during in-class comments over the course of the semester.

Skills:
Demonstrate the ability to apply scriptural stories allegorically to their own lives by following the logical structure of a scriptural story to resolve personal questions in at least 2 journal entries.

Examples of Learning Objectives

Student will be able to:

Factual: Construct an accurate timeline of 10 Book of Mormon prophets from the first half of the book.

Conceptual: Distinguish between homiletic exegesis and contextual exegesis of scripture in church talks.

Procedural: Articulate specific strategies for both thematic and chronological study of the scriptures.

Meta-cognitive: Articulate in writing, ways in which their study of the scriptures is both similar to, and different from the study of other texts.

TIPS

- A course only needs 3-5 general outcomes, and each class period only needs 3-5 objectives.
- Well-written objectives help immensely when designing assessments.

PITFALLS

- Not sharing outcomes/objectives with students
- Content outcomes crowding out other types

CAMPUS PRACTITIONERS
Todd Lines, Mike McLaughlin, Steve Adams

KEY ARTICLES
Jackson, N, Wisdom J and Shaw M, (2003). Using learning outcomes to design a course...

OTHER RESOURCES
BYU Provo Website on Program Objectives
Penn State site on Writing Clear Objectives

http://www.byui.edu/learningandteaching/