

## Transcript - Dr. Jason S. Todd: Explains the importance of learning objectives

Hi. This is Jay and in this video, we are going to be thinking about the student learning outcomes for our online classes.

In particular, we will be exploring the following ideas:

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### **Lecture Objectives**

1. Explain the difference between goals, objectives, outcomes, & competencies.
2. Verify that outcomes match the course level.
3. Write clear & effective class-level outcomes.
4. Write clear & effective unit-level outcomes.

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If you've been teaching for at least a few years, you're sure to have come across terms like Learning Goals, Learning Objectives, Learning Competencies, and Learning Outcomes.

Often, when discussing these, the first question to come up is, "What's the difference?" To be honest, there's not much, but there is some difference. These terms are often used interchangeably. They all, ultimately, concern what the students will know or what they will be able to do, as a result of a program of study, or a specific class, or a unit within a class.

If we want to be more accurate, though, we can think about it in this way:

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**Goals**  
**Objectives**  
**Competencies**  
**Outcomes**

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Goals and Objectives are very faculty-focused terms. Goals are often big, and sometimes lofty, ideas that we aim for with our classes and our programs. The English Department has as a goal that we aim to instill a life-long love of reading in our students. That's a great -- though challenging -- goal, but nothing we could ever hope to measure or assess.

Objectives are more focused, and more assessable, statements of what will be taught, but in my mind, they are more internal and therefore more faculty-focused. My objective in this portion of the lecture is to teach help you understand the difference between these often confused concepts. That's my objective. That's what I want to accomplish.

Competencies and Outcomes seem to me more student-focused. They describe what the student will get out of the lecture or the activity, the class or the program. Competencies are a fairly unique idea in this realm, so we need to be careful about misusing that term in particular.

A learning competency really describes the applied skills and knowledge that enable people to successfully perform in professional, educational, and other life contexts. Therefore, I think Outcomes are the best language for us at Xavier. The idea of an outcome is the end-result. It's how the student will be changed by the end of the learning experience.

A learning outcomes a specific statement that describes exactly what a student will be able to do in some measurable way. It's much more student-focused, and at a school like Xavier, I think it's the best way to think about these ideas.

Of the four, Objectives and Outcomes really are the most interchangeable, so you'll hear both as you work your way through the rest of this course.

I'm going to focus on Outcomes, because as I said, I think that's the most appropriate for Xavier. As I said, a Learning Outcome is a statement of what a student will learn as a result of a specific educational experience.

Here, we need to stop and, strangely enough, define what we mean by learning. Learning is change. More specifically, learning is a change or enhancement in a student's knowledge, skills, behaviors, or values. So, when we think about identifying our Learning Outcomes, we need to think about what our students will know, what they will be able to do, or how they will be different when they have completed a learning unit, a course, or a program of study.

Now the nice thing at Xavier is that your program of study already have learning outcomes designated for them. So we're not going to focus on program-level outcomes, but instead on identifying/developing course-level and unit-level learning outcomes, while making sure that they fit within the larger outcomes of the academic program. Quality Matters calls this alignment. It's the idea that "critical course components work together to ensure that students achieve the desired learning outcomes," but that also means that all learning outcomes work together.

When writing learning outcomes, we need to follow certain standards. One way to think about this is the acronym SMART.

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**S** => Specific  
**M** => Measurable  
**A** => Attainable  
**R** => Relevant  
**T** => Timely

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A specific outcome answers the questions "What is to be done?" and "How will you know it is done?"

To ensure that an outcome is specific is to make sure that the way it is described is observable or measurable. This means that somebody can see or hear (physically observe) or otherwise measure the

learner achieving the outcome. Specific also refers to the guideline that any one learning outcome should address only one behavior, activity, or area of knowledge.

A measurable outcome answers the question "How will you know the student has achieved the outcome?" It refers to the extent to which something can be evaluated against a defined standard.

An achievable outcome answers the questions "Can the student do it?" and "Can the measurable outcome be achieved by the student?" and "Does the student have the experience, knowledge, or capability of fulfilling the expectation?"

It also answers the questions, "Can it be done according to the conditions and degree specified by the outcome? and "Can the outcome be achieved at the student's current academic level?" A relevant outcome answers the questions "Should it be done?" and "Why?" and "What will be the impact?"

Is the outcome aligned with goals and outcomes further up the hierarchy? Does the outcome represent a needed knowledge base or skill set? Is the outcome appropriate for the level of the lesson, module or course? A timely outcome answers the question "When will it be done?"

Often this is included in the preface language of an outcome: "Upon completion of this course..." or "By the end of this module..." It refers to the fact that an outcome has a check point or end point built into it.

Now that we have a sense of what a learning outcome should look like, let's consider one of the American Literature classes I sometimes teach. To start, here's one of the learning outcomes for the English major program:

- \* Students will be able to identify important authors, works, and trends from the different literary movements and periods of the British, American, and African American traditions.

Now, that's pretty big, but remember it's for a 39-hour program of study.

If we focus in on the course itself, we can see how that goal narrows:

- \* Students will be able to describe the unique characteristics of different literary periods that occurred in American literature between 1865 and the present.

So, we narrowed it down a good deal to say that by the end of this course, students will have learned (and will be able to describe) the differences of literary periods within a specific span of time and a specific cultural background. Notice that it fits clearly with the program-level outcome. But also notice that this outcome specifies what students will be able to do with the knowledge they gain. We've already gotten more specific while also making this outcome more clearly observable and demonstrable.

Doing so will also help us keep our classes leveled: We need to be sure that our expectations are in line with the course as a whole -- our outcomes for a 4000-level senior seminar are going to be very different from those for a 1000-level introductory course.

At Xavier, we have guidelines for how to properly level a course. You can find a link to the full guidelines on the Learn More page of this module, as well as links to resources about the kind of language, especially action verbs, you want to use when writing your outcomes. These guidelines will help you develop measurable, achievable, and relevant outcomes.

Getting back to our example, let's get even more specific. Within this course on American Literature, we have a unit on Realism in American Literature, a period that began after the Civil War and lasted into the beginning of the 20th Century.

Although we may not always specify outcomes at this level, for online teaching, it's an important component (and it's really the better way to teach regardless).

In considering the three weeks we might spend on this unit, what do we want students to learn?

\* Students will be able to classify a work of literature as an example of American Realism.

Again, notice how much more narrow and more measurable this outcome is than the others. Not only does it state what kind of knowledge students will gain, it also specifies how the students will be able to demonstrate that new knowledge. This is the point we want to get to with our unit-level outcomes.

Now I know exactly what I need to accomplish as the instructor with this unit, and my students know exactly what they should know and what they should be able to do by the end of that unit.

There shouldn't be any mystery here. We need to be transparent with our expectations. This keeps both us and the students on track.

For effective online teaching, we need to be sure to start by giving our students course-level learning outcomes that match the program-level outcomes, and then we need to give our students unit-level outcomes that match those course-level outcomes.

All of those outcomes need to be measurable, meaning there's a reasonably effective way for the students to demonstrate what they've learned.

Note the language of each. They don't say, Students will learn something. They say, Students will IDENTIFY, Students will DESCRIBE, Students will CLASSIFY. Again, remember that learning outcomes state what the student will be capable of as a result of the learning experience.

Remember that while stating these are helpful to you as the instructor, they are really here for the students' benefit. They need to be easy for the student to find in Brightspace (even if the student doesn't know they are looking for them), and they need to be written in a way that the student will understand.

If I say that one of the outcomes for my Realism unit is, Students will learn about regionalism, naturalism, sentimentalism, etc., I will know what needs to be covered, but my students will have no idea what to expect.

However, if I say, Students will be able to recognize the key differences between the most prominent divisions within the broad category of realism, my students will have a sense of the kind of learning they will experience.

One thing we need to consider, and this will become more clear as you work through the next few units of this course, is that you need to clearly state the connection between the activities you plan for the class and the outcomes you've specified.

A student should always be able to see that connection.

Recent research has shown that the more transparent our assignments are, the more likely our students, especially first-generation college students and other underprepared students, are to succeed with those assignments.

In a later module, we will provide you with an effective template for creating fully transparent assignments.

Finally, we need to think about how we will present these well-written learning outcomes to our students.

The syllabus is the obvious place for them, but as many of us know, despite our efforts, many of our students do refer back to the syllabus after the first day of class.

So we need to think about how we can use Brightspace to make our course-level and unit-level outcomes accessible to our students.

In the next section of this module, we have a number of examples of how outcomes can be shared using Brightspace.

But the best thing to remember is that they should never just be in one place. Share them on the Content page; share them when you give the students an assignment.

Remember that whenever you ask students to do something, whether it's watch a lecture or participate in a discussion or write an essay, you should be telling them which learning outcomes these actions are helping them accomplish.

This is another aspect of transparency: your learning outcomes should always be clear and visible.

Okay. That's a lot of information for one lecture, but as I hope you've seen, this is critical to effective course design and instruction here at Xavier.

Let's give it a quick test.

Here are the outcomes I gave you at the beginning of this lecture:

[The following information is displayed on the screen]

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[End of information displayed]

Ask yourself, as the student, if you understand all these ideas. Remember that as a lecture, this video is meant to introduce the ideas to you.

In the next part of the module, you'll review some specific examples of how learning outcomes can be shared with students in Brightspace.

Thanks for watching.