

Looking for a Learning Target

Do students know what they are supposed to be learning, and are they aiming for understanding?

Jason Sample is a high school chemistry teacher in the Lakeview School District in Pennsylvania whose insightful classroom example clearly reveals the difference a learning target can make to student understanding. The insight came to him as he was gathering chemistry supplies to share with his son's 4th grade teacher in the same district. The 4th grade class was going to observe a simple demonstration: mixing table sugar (sucrose) with sulfuric acid to show the difference between physical and chemical changes. Mr. Sample explained:

For elementary science, it is easy to identify a chemical change by the formation of a new substance. In this demonstration, the sucrose will turn black and "grow" up and out of the beaker. The students witness a new substance being formed and therefore know it is a chemical change. I use the same demonstration in Advanced Chemistry during our discussion of organic reactions. This demonstration is a type of elimination reaction in which water is "eliminated" from sucrose molecules and eventually forms pure carbon. The water is given off as steam in the very exothermic reaction. The students can look at the basic equation for this reaction, and also the structural formula of sucrose and how this actually works. The same demonstration can be used for two completely different lessons to show two completely different concepts at vastly different difficulty levels, thus

reaching two different targets—because it isn't about the demonstration, it's about the target!

Mr. Sample's story is not only insightful; it's right on target. The first thing students ought to learn in today's lesson is exactly what it is they are supposed to learn—their learning target.

What Is a Learning Target?

A learning target describes—using words, pictures, actions, or some combination of the three—exactly what students are going to learn in today's lesson, what they will do to demonstrate that learning, and how well they are expected to learn and do it. This description uses language that students of this age and ability can understand and is framed from the point of view of a student who is learning the concept, skill, or reasoning process for the first time. In our experience, too many teachers continue to envision learning targets as simply statements that they write on the board. Nothing could be further off the mark. If students aren't aiming for the target and using it throughout the lesson, then a teacher might have a learning intention but the teacher *and the students* do not have a learning target. In fact, learning targets are all about student action—the action of students aiming for, pursuing, and regulating their own learning progress. In other words, a learning target describes what students will *achieve* in the lesson. Achievement means that you are looking for evidence of “something.” A learning target describes what that “something” is for today's lesson.

A learning target is part of an intentional learning process that comes alive during a powerful formative learning cycle (see Figure 2.2, p. 29) that promotes what researchers refer to as “short-term formative assessment” (William & Thompson, 2007), “rapid formative assessment” (Yeh, 2006), and “in-the-moment” formative assessment (William, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). Think about it this way: a learning target sets the formative learning cycle in motion to help students understand what they are supposed to learn, gives them a clear picture of the aims of their work, and makes plain what it means to “do good work in today's lesson” so that they can assess their own progress to meet those aims. During the formative learning cycle, students benefit from continuous feedback from a variety of sources and have the

opportunity to use that feed-forward information to *immediately* improve their work. Research shows that the short-term formative assessment that happens during the formative learning cycle can raise student learning rates by 70 to 80 percent (Leahy & Wiliam, 2009). The increase in student achievement is so significant that in terms of cost effectiveness it exceeds comprehensive school reforms such as a longer school day, reduced class size, exit exams, or summer school, to name just a few (Yeh, 2011).

A learning target for a worthwhile lesson puts the formative learning cycle in motion, gives it direction, and keeps it moving. In fact, *it isn't a learning target unless students understand it and use it during today's lesson to regulate their own work*. A learning target is not a rewritten instructional objective with the phrase "I can" tacked on the front. *Learning targets have five characteristics* (see the Collaborative Inquiry Guide for a Learning Target, Figure 5.4, p. 83) *and all five must be present*. The best way to examine and understand these characteristics is to demonstrate how they are used to design a learning target for a worthwhile lesson, which we do in the next sections. The example that follows will also help clarify one of the most important concepts about a quality learning target: it is only good for one lesson, and then teachers must design a new learning target for tomorrow's lesson.

How Do Effective Teachers Design a Learning Target?

Figure 5.1 illustrates the four-column learning target framework that helps teachers and their coaches design and use quality learning targets throughout a formative learning cycle. The framework maps itself to the formative learning cycle and brings the learning target to life by answering four questions from the student's point of view:

- What will I be able to do at the end of today's lesson?
- What do I have to learn to be able to do it?
- How will I be asked to show that I can do it?
- How well will I be expected to do it?

Effective teachers answer those four questions from the student's viewpoint. They use language that is age and developmentally appropriate and that describes the learning from the perspective of a student who is learning the

concept, process, or skill for the first time, rather than from the viewpoint of a teacher who is an expert with the content. Using the framework, we can design a quality learning target in four steps. For additional support, Figure 5.2 contains guiding questions for each column. What follows is an example that uses the framework and the guiding questions.

Figure 5.1 | **The Four-Column Learning Target Framework**

The Learning Target:			
What am I learning? What will I be able to do when I finish today's lesson? (The shared learning target statement: Describe the learning in age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate language that students would understand.)	What concepts and skills are important for me to learn and understand so I can use this information to do it? (Lesson-sized chunk of content knowledge, skills, reasoning)	How will I be asked to show that I can do it? (Performance of understanding)	How will I know I can do this? How well do I have to do it? (Student look-fors)
<i>Yesterday we learned...</i> <i>Today we are learning...</i>	<i>To be able to do this we must learn and understand that...</i>	<i>You will show that you can do this by...</i>	<i>Here is what you will look for to know if you have hit the learning target:</i>

Column I: What will I be able to do at the end of today's lesson?

In Chapter 4 we designed a potential learning trajectory by focusing on what students would learn each day. Let's use an example from Denise Ebbitt, a 6th grade language arts teacher in the Norwin School District in Pennsylvania. Ms. Ebbitt used the four-step process to plan and share a lesson about clear and varied dialogue tags in written text. The first decision she had to make was to decide the lesson's "reason to live" (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, p. 28). She had already planned a potential learning trajectory, so she knew the

Here is her instructional objective for the lesson: “Students will be able to correctly underline dialogue in the text, highlight the dialogue tags, and explain their purpose.” That instructional objective will take her students nearly a week to accomplish as they explore ever more sophisticated fiction and nonfiction text, and that’s OK. An instructional objective is designed to bring cohesion to a series of lessons. A learning target, on the other hand, looks at a lesson-sized chunk of content—one lesson in that learning trajectory.

Thinking about what she wants her students to understand in today’s lesson, she crafts the first part of the framework by using the student’s viewpoint:

Today we are learning to find the special words that authors use in their writing to bring real or imagined experiences or events to life by showing us what a person actually said and painting a word picture about exactly how the person said it. We call those special words “dialogue tags.”

Ms. Ebbitt isn’t finished yet. She writes the shared learning target statement—what she will say during the lesson to describe what students are going to be able to do by the time the lesson is over. She knows that the time she spends unpacking what students are going to learn in today’s lesson will be time well spent. She sits in the student’s seat and considers two important questions about the vocabulary she will use to describe that learning to her students. First, she asks herself, “Are there terms that my students will hear for the first time today that we should unpack together?” Ms. Ebbitt realizes that students will hear the term “dialogue tag” for the first time today. She’ll need to check for understanding to learn what they already know about the term and provide illustrative examples that will help students connect the term to the writing convention they will look for and use. Second, she asks herself, “Are there terms that my students have heard before in another context that might help or confuse them about how we will use the term in today’s lesson?” Although her students will be hearing “dialogue tag” for the first time, they know the words “dialogue” and “tag.” They already know that “dialogue” means what a person or group of people says. “Tag,” however, is something they have not heard before as a literary term but have probably heard in other contexts (e.g., tag, you’re it; tag a base; price tag; name tag;

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graffiti artist's signature tag). She'll explain the idea of a tag being something that marks, labels, and signifies to help them see the literary convention in a meaningful way.

Column 2: What will I have to learn to be able to do it?

Ms. Ebbitt now turns her attention to the lesson's content. She considers three types of content that form the backbone of the lesson and asks herself the following questions:

What *knowledge content*—concepts, ideas, formulas, facts, figures, generalizations, or principles—forms the lesson-sized chunk of information that is absolutely essential for students to master today? What *skills, procedures, or processes* must students master at a level of proficiency or increased proficiency in today's lesson? And what *reasoning processes* should my students use to deepen their understanding of content and increase their level of proficiency with skills?

Using these questions, she can fill in the second column. Her students must learn many things, including the following:

- What a person says and how the person says it lets the reader know what he or she is like (knowledge).
- Dialogue can be a statement or a conversation (knowledge).
- The purpose of dialogue is to reveal something that moves the plot along (knowledge).
- Dialogue tags are words that describe how a person is speaking, such as "muttered," "admitted," "argued," "bragged" (knowledge).
- We can find dialogue by looking for quotation marks (knowledge, skill).
- We can use dialogue tags in our writing to show when a person is speaking (knowledge, skill).
- We can analyze a piece of text to look for dialogue tags and infer things about the person who is speaking (e.g., knowledge, skill, reasoning).

Column 3: How will I be asked to show that I can do it?

Now that Denise Ebbitt knows what she wants students to master, she can design a strong performance of understanding. We will examine performances of understanding in greater detail in Chapter 6, but for now, the

important point is that a performance of understanding is part of a learning target. It is what translates the knowledge, skills, and reasoning content into action for the students. A learning target is a description of a living learning process that students not only aim for but also are required to pursue. The performance of understanding is what Ms. Ebbitt will require her students to do, say, make, or write—during today’s lesson—to deepen their understanding of the content, produce evidence of what they understand and can do, and use their look-fors to assess and regulate the quality of their work as they are producing it. In the formative learning cycle (Figure 2.2, p. 29), the performance of understanding happens after Ms. Ebbitt is confident that her modeling and explaining and the students’ guided practice have led them to a place in the lesson where they are ready to grapple with the content as independent learners. When students reach that point in their learning progress, Ms. Ebbitt will engage them in the following performance:

Today you will read two pieces of text—the first is a short piece of fiction and the second is a newspaper article. In each piece you will look for and underline the dialogue and highlight the dialogue tags. Beside each tag you will explain what that tag helps you infer about what the person is like based on what the person said and how the person said it.

Column 4: How well will I be expected to do it?

The optimal outcome in a learning target theory of action is to develop students who are assessment capable. Denise Ebbitt understands the role that student look-fors play in developing assessment-capable students. To use a bow-and-arrow metaphor: Without a target to aim for, an opportunity to pick up the bow and shoot the arrow, and rings on the target that help you gauge how close you are to the bull’s-eye, you cannot assess your proficiency as an archer or decide on the next steps you will take to improve your skill. We will examine student look-fors further in Chapter 7, but for now, it is important to understand them as publicly stated success criteria that students can literally look for in their work. Without student look-fors to guide their self-regulation, students do not have a learning target. Here are the look-fors Denise Ebbitt designed for her students:

- Spoken words are inside quotation marks (“ ”). Example: “You can use it when you go into the woods with your father.”
- Dialogue tags are the words used when a person speaks that are outside the quotation marks and tell us how the person says something. Example: “You get out of here,” Mary shouted. “I am not listening to your lies!”
- Each person who is speaking gets his or her own paragraph each time he or she speaks. Example:
 - “I’m so hungry,” sobbed Mark. “When will we get food?”
 - “I promise you it won’t be long,” answered Mother.
 - “OK, Mom. I’ll quit complaining,” whispered Mark. “I am tired.”

Ms. Ebbitt will write the look-fors on the whiteboard so that her students can use them with her throughout the formative learning cycle. That way, students will become mindful of the success criteria and have them in mind as they engage in their performance of understanding. And both Ms. Ebbitt and her students will use the language of the look-fors to feed learning forward throughout today’s lesson.

Designing a New Learning Target for Tomorrow’s Lesson

One of the most misunderstood concepts of a learning target theory of action is that a learning target has a limited shelf life. It is good for only one lesson, and then, based on the formative assessment information teachers gather about students’ progress in today’s lesson, they must design a new learning target for tomorrow’s lesson. The difficulty with this idea stems from one major misconception: a learning target is a statement that teachers write on the board. Consider two important sources of information: the potential learning trajectory and the four-column learning target framework.

The potential learning trajectory. The role of the potential learning trajectory is to provide a probable sequence of increasingly challenging lessons. Such a sequence means that students either master more sophisticated content, put learned concepts together to form more sophisticated concepts, master a new skill, increase their proficiency with a learned skill, or produce more sophisticated products, among other possibilities. Use the information in the potential learning trajectory to focus on describing the “lesson’s reason

to live” and choosing the content, performance of understanding, and student look-fors that will help get your students there.

Denise Ebbitt followed her lesson on dialogue and dialogue tags with the following three lessons: (1) how to read dialogue, (2) reading dialogue with expression, and (3) reading dialogue expressively in groups. Although her students spent days on learning about dialogue and dialogue tags, each lesson presented them with an increased level of challenge.

The four-column learning target framework. If you change the information in Column 2 (the content), Column 3 (the performance of understanding), or Column 4 (the student look-fors), then you have designed a new learning target. The shared learning target statement would never remain the same because it describes what students will learn today that is different from what they will learn tomorrow. Here is what happened in Denise Ebbitt’s follow-up series of three lessons.

Lesson 1—Dialogue reading. Ms. Ebbitt designed a new shared learning target statement:

Today we are learning to use an interesting reading style called “dialogue reading” that focuses on what the characters say.

Her content remained the same—the same piece of text, the same thinking skills. She designed a new performance of understanding:

Students will choral-read.

She added the following additional look-for to the list from her original lesson:

I can make my eyes skim ahead to figure out who is speaking.

Lesson 2—Dialogue reading with expression. Because this lesson had a new reason to live, Denise Ebbitt described it in a new, shared learning target statement:

Yesterday we practiced an interesting reading style called “dialogue reading.” Today we are learning to read what the characters say as if we are actors in a play and do it with expression.

She chose a new piece of dramatic text with lots of dialogue and detailed dialogue tags. The performance of understanding was the same as yesterday—group choral reading. The students used the same list of look-fors from Lesson 1 on dialogue reading.

Lesson 3—Dialogue reading in small groups. Denise Ebbitt created a new learning target statement:

Today we are learning to use dialogue reading to act out what we read with other members in our reading group.

She chose a new story. The performance of understanding changed:

Students will read only the lines of their assigned character.

To accomplish this, students would use the same list of look-fors that they used in follow-up Lessons 1 and 2.

Unless the learning target changes, students are running in place rather than stretching to reach new academic outcomes. Students should never be asked to “do the same thing” as yesterday. Classrooms, like Denise Ebbitt’s, that operate with a learning target theory of action are intellectual places of continual learning progress.

How Will I Recognize a Learning Target?

It is worth repeating one of the essential messages of this book: *What you will learn about a lesson can be best seen from the student’s seat.* To recognize the learning target, watch the students. What are they doing to learn? In our experience educators mistakenly conclude that if they see an “I can” statement written on the board, the lesson has a learning target. What we’ve learned from Denise Ebbitt’s learning target is that nothing could be further from the truth. Figure 5.3 illustrates the important areas of difference between an instructional objective and a learning target. *Instructional objectives* describe an instructional outcome and the nature of evidence that the teacher will use to certify if the outcome has been met. It is written in teacher language—the language of *instruction*; that’s why we call it an “instructional” objective! In contrast, learning targets must be designed in student language and are used by the students.

To describe learning in a way that students can understand and use, a learning target combines the five characteristics described in the Collaborative Inquiry Guide for a Learning Target (Figure 5.4). Let’s apply the Collaborative Inquiry Guide to the example in Scenario 5.1.

Figure 5.3 Compare an Instructional Objective to a Learning Target		
	Instructional Objective Framed from the Teacher's Perspective	Learning Target Framed from the Student's Perspective
Where does it come from?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Derived from a standard or a curricular goal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Derived from an instructional objective.
Who uses it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used by the teacher to guide planning and delivery of instruction during a lesson or over a series or group of lessons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used by the teacher <i>and the students</i> to aim for understanding and assess the quality of student learning during today's lesson.
What does it describe?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content knowledge (concepts, understandings) and skills students should be able to demonstrate at the end of a series of lessons. Uses teacher language—the language of curriculum, standards, and instruction. May describe what students will be able to learn or do in one lesson but usually requires a set of lessons to accomplish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>What am I going to know and be able to do by the end of this lesson?</i> <i>What content do I have to learn or what skills do I have to master to be able to learn or be able to do it?</i> <i>How will I be asked to demonstrate my learning and skill?</i> <i>How well will I be expected to do it?</i>
How does it promote evidence-based assessment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes criteria and performance standards in language that teachers use to judge the quality of their instruction and the quality of student learning over the set of lessons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes student look-fors—success criteria in student language specific to today's lesson (e.g., "I can" statements, rubrics, checklists) and examples of work.

Figure 5.4 Collaborative Inquiry Guide for a Learning Target			
<p>A learning target is more than a statement written on the board. A learning target is a <i>description</i> of what is important to learn, how well students are expected to learn it, how they will be asked to demonstrate that learning, and how they can tell when they've learned it. The bottom line is that unless students are using the target to aim for and assess their understanding, the teacher may have a learning intention for the lesson, but the classroom learning team does not have a learning target for today's lesson. Use the inquiry guide to look for the characteristics of a learning target and evaluate if the classroom learning team is guided by one throughout today's lesson.</p>			
	Yes	Somewhat	No
<p>Is there a description for students—via words, pictures, actions, or some combination of the three—of exactly what they are going to learn by the end of today's lesson?</p> <p><i>Explain your choice:</i></p>			
<p>Is the description of learning shared in developmentally appropriate language that all students can understand?</p> <p><i>Explain your choice:</i></p>			
<p>Is the description of learning stated from the point of view of a student who has yet to master the content, skill, or reasoning process that makes up the learning target for today's lesson?</p> <p><i>Explain your choice:</i></p>			
<p>Does today's lesson have a specific performance of understanding—what the students <i>do, make, say, or write</i>—that translates the description into action for the students to deepen their understanding, help them aim for mastery, allow them to self-assess the quality of their learning, and provide both the teacher and students with evidence of the students' level of understanding?</p> <p><i>Explain your choice:</i></p>			
<p>Does the description of learning contain student look-fors—criteria the students can use to judge how close they are to the target using language that describes the quality of student learning, rather than in grading or scoring language (letters, points, numbers, percentage right, number correct, etc.)?</p> <p><i>Explain your choice:</i></p>			

Elementary math lesson. Angela Traggiai, a 5th grade teacher in the Laurel School District in Pennsylvania, designed this lesson about correctly placing a decimal in a product when multiplying two factors with decimals. She wrote the following learning target statement on the board:

We are learning how to place the decimal point in our product when we multiply two factors that have decimals.

Notice that the statement is about the learning the students will do, and it uses grade- and age-appropriate language of the math discipline. To guide learning, Ms. Traggiai shared look-fors at the beginning of the lesson as “I can” statements and referred to them as she worked through demonstration problems to point out common misconceptions and help the students focus on important details:

- I can look for the number of places after the decimals in my factors.
- I can move the same number of places in my product and put the decimal point there.
- I can estimate and check that my product is smaller because when I multiply two decimal factors where each is less than one, the product is always smaller than each individual factor.
- I can explain why I may have to add zeroes to my product to get the correct answer and show value.

She used the same look-for language during the students’ guided practice. The students had those look-fors in mind as they worked on several problems as a performance of understanding. Ms. Traggiai used the look-for language to feed her students forward and feed them back as they worked. The students used the look-for language to ask specific questions when they needed help. Everything in this lesson—the statement on the board, the math computation problems, the teacher’s modeling, the look-fors, the performance of understanding—shared the learning target. There was no doubt that the students were learning how to place the decimal point in their products and explain how they arrived at their decision. When a lesson systematically develops the students’ ability to self-assess as they are learning and working, you have a strong indicator of a learning target.

Advanced high school chemistry lesson. Carol Lilly is a high school principal in the Lakeview School District in Pennsylvania. She walked through a

Principal Lilly was able to see the students grow in their understanding as they tried on the learning target and used the look-fors in the metaphor to regulate the quality of their work as they completed their electron configurations. This lesson shared the learning target throughout. Not only did the students grasp the concept, they grew in their understanding. Seeing students move from little understanding of complex content to more sophisticated levels of understanding is another strong indicator of a learning target.

What observable strategies provide evidence that students are aiming for a learning target?

The single best way to know if the students have a learning target is to see them aiming for it and using it. That happens most visibly when students are engaged in a performance of understanding—something they do, say, make, or write independently during the lesson that will help them deepen their understanding and use the look-fors to monitor and regulate the quality of their work. The other strategies you can look for in the classroom all have to do with the students using the learning target in what they are asked to think about and do. Here are several common strategies that would provide evidence of that.

The teacher shares the target verbally. Listen for the teacher describing what the students are going to learn. This is very different from hearing directions for an assignment or activity—what the students are going to do. Do you hear the teacher explaining the big ideas of the lesson so that students understand what they are supposed to learn and see the connections to that understanding through everything they are being asked to do?

The students are asked to put the learning target into their own words or explain it to a friend. In the case of Lynn Schmook's lesson on cause and effect, she might ask her students to explain cause and effect to their learning partners by giving an example from their own life and explaining it using the look-fors.

The students have an organizing visual—a picture, chart, video, white-board image, or handout that unpacks an important concept or idea. Clearly not all handouts or visuals communicate the learning target. Look for visuals that explain, illustrate, describe, and unpack the important concepts and skills. Handouts that are about points, scoring, or directions may be

important management tools, but they do not help describe the learning target so that students can better see it and aim for it.

The students and the teacher refer to the learning target throughout the lesson in ways that help the students self-assess. Think of Mr. Sample's metaphor for the location of electrons. The entire lesson focused on discussing, clarifying, describing, and pinpointing the locations of the electrons through a very specific process. The language was so clear and so focused that Principal Lilly understood the concept during her walkthrough and was able to document student growth using evidence from what the students said and did.

The students are asked to analyze and discuss examples of strong and weak work, to examine the characteristics of each. In a language arts lesson, before students are asked to write a paragraph, they are able to use the rubric that organizes their look-fors to assess examples of strong, good, and weak paragraphs. In a science discovery lesson, students are told they must draw a conclusion and explain it once they complete their experiment. Students review the characteristics of a solid scientific conclusion (their look-fors) and use them to assess conclusions from a different experiment. In a physical education class, students watch videos of a high school basketball game and use their look-fors to rate the players' skill in dribbling the ball.

The students discuss the connection of today's lesson to what they learned previously and where they are headed in this lesson group. These discussions can be led by the teacher or the students. The key is that students see how their learning builds on previous learning and will lead to future learning in the discipline. Ms. Schmook might help her students see that once they understand cause and effect, they can use it to make sense of the stories they read and learn more about the characters in those stories.

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