CHAPTER

1

Learning Goals and Objectives

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The field of educational psychology has long been sensitive to the desirability of establishing learning objectives for instruction (Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). Consequently, most undergraduate education majors study the nature and use of objectives. Unfortunately, most graduate teaching assistants and beginning college teachers, not to mention even most highly experienced college teachers, have never had a course in education. This situation is not unlike a person who has studied biology for eight years, but who has never studied medicine, becoming a physician. Would you want this person to take care of you if you were sick?

While this deplorable situation is one of higher education's darker secrets, it is not likely to be changed in the near future. If you are one of these new college teachers, do not feel alone. Most of your colleagues either are or have been in a similar position. How on earth are you supposed to become a professional educator when all you know about the teaching process has come at the receiving end? Good question, but one that can't be answered fully in just this chapter. We can, however, begin by helping you understand just what college teaching (or teaching at any other level) really is all about. And that probably is not what you think it is at this moment.

Teaching is about content, getting students to learn information. Right? If only it were as simple as that. This is the most common misconception noneducators have about teaching. This misconception is what led people to believe that the invention of the printing press would make it possible to do away with teachers—since now all the prospective student needed was to read the book. Didn't happen, did it? Later, this same misconception led people to believe that, when radios and radio stations became widely available, radios would replace teachers. Students could stay home and just listen to the radio to get their lessons. Again, didn't happen, did it? But, of course, once TV came onto the scene (particularly color television) it was clear to the people who believed that content was all teaching was about that TV would put traditional teaching out of business. Didn't happen, did it? Currently the people who hold the misconception about
content being what teaching is about happily point to the Internet and profoundly predict that education, particularly higher education, will soon be the province of the Internet.coms instead of colleges and universities. Will it happen? Put your money on the lottery, the odds are much better.

Domains of Learning

It is generally accepted that there are three broad domains of learning: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. To understand what teaching is all about, we need to be familiar with all three.

Cognitive Learning

The cognitive domain of learning is concerned with the process of acquiring knowledge—the content aspect of education. At the lowest level, knowledge refers to a specific unit of information, such as the date of an historical event, how to define a given word, or what a driver is expected to do when he or she sees a stop sign. At the middle level, knowledge relates to methods of inquiry, such as hypothesis testing, mastering generalizations or principles, and comprehending larger theories. At the highest level of cognitive learning, knowledge is concerned with the ability to interpret, analyze, and synthesize the knowledge acquired at the lower levels with new information that the learner will confront in later life.

Cognitive learning objectives center on the lower level of the domain in early childhood education, and in beginning courses in high school and college, and move to the higher levels as the student progresses to more advanced instruction in a subject area. Thus, even in many college courses, since students typically have not been introduced to many subject matter areas before entering college, learning objectives may center on the lowest level of the cognitive domain. A primary function of such courses is to establish schema (organizational systems) for processing information in that particular subject matter. If the student does not take more advanced courses in the given subject matter area, he or she will still know this basic material but he or she will be highly unlikely to be able to deal with larger theories in the area, much less develop the cognitive skills necessary to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information in that content field. Mediated forms of communication, such as books, television, and more recently the Internet, have been found to be helpful to teachers in educating students at the lower levels of cognitive learning. However, these forms have been found much less helpful at the higher levels.

Psychomotor Learning

While cognitive learning is concerned with “knowing,” psychomotor learning is concerned with “doing.” At the lowest level, this domain relates to basic control of physical behaviors, such as a baby learning to hold a rattle handed to her or
him by a parent or focusing her or his eyes on a toy hanging over the bed. At a moderate level, psychomotor learning is concerned with such behaviors as writing, walking, running, jumping, throwing, hammering, and sawing. At the higher levels, concern centers on more complex behaviors such as typing or keyboarding, speaking a foreign language or an already known language with a different accent, playing a piano or other musical instrument, driving a vehicle or replacing the engine in that vehicle, or shooting a basketball while five other people are trying to prevent that behavior.

Psychomotor learning objectives tend to be valued in the lower grades, but seem to lose some of their importance in educational systems at each higher level. Consider the relative importance ascribed to English and mathematics, for example, compared to driver education, physical education, and typing (or keyboarding). This discrepancy exists in spite of the fact that driver education and physical education are likely to aid one to live a longer and healthier life and typing is the psychomotor skill required to permit one to work with the most sophisticated computers. In addition, psychomotor skills that lead to vocations such as carpentry, auto mechanics, and chiropractic are typically relegated to "trade" schools or junior colleges because they are deemed unworthy of inclusion by institutions that center on "intellectual" pursuits.

Affective Learning

Affective learning is concerned with the student's attitudes, beliefs, and values that relate to the knowledge and psychomotor skills the student acquires. The affective domain is most centrally associated with a student's behavioral choices. A student may know what to do and have the psychomotor skills to do it, but if the student does not have a positive attitude toward doing it, it most likely will not be done. Affective learning is the domain of learning that receives the least attention from many college teachers. If fact, many college professors openly decry any interest at all in the affective domain. On college campuses, particularly in the more traditional disciplines, it is not at all unusual to hear a professor say something like: "I am hired to teach students math. It is not my job to make them like it!" This kind of comment certainly is not restricted to math professors. But, whatever the discipline referenced, such a comment is a blatant expression of the professor's ignorance about what a professional educator's job really entails. With this type of attitude, a book or TV set might be a worthy replacement for this professor. At least they would be less likely to harm students' growth.

At higher levels, the emphasis on psychomotor learning declines in most disciplines. However, both the cognitive and the affective domains remain critical in all disciplines at all levels. What is it worth for a student to learn about great literature, if he or she also learns to hate reading that literature? What is it worth for a student to learn elementary statistics, if he or she also learns to disrespect statistical probability? What is it worth for a person to learn to be a physician, if he or she also learns to devalue human life? Unfortunately, all of these types of outcomes are common in classrooms where professors forget that they are
teaching people, not content. If the affect of the learner is ignored, a competent job of teaching is not being done.

Long-Term Goals

Almost all of our long-term goals for education are based on appropriate affective learning. Long-term goals are those that are concerned with what will become of the student later on, well after he or she no longer is in our class. Such goals may deal with such global concerns as the student becoming a good citizen and a contributing member of society. They may be concerned with such things as developing an appreciation for art, music, film, or literature; adopting a healthy lifestyle; or becoming a lifelong learner. However, goals also may be concerned with somewhat more immediate matters such as the student choosing to enroll in another course in the subject matter you teach, being able to perform satisfactorily in an advanced course that follows yours, or choosing a career that draws on the subject you teach.

Employing an old analogy, the long-term goals are the forest while our daily instructional objectives are the trees. Often professors lose sight of the long-term goals, which are much more central to what higher education is all about, and focus virtually all of their attention and communication on the immediate, lower-level cognitive learning goals. If professors focus only on short-term goals, it is natural for students to learn to do likewise. Thus students develop an orientation that all learning is temporary, and that forgetting what was learned last semester is not only acceptable, but normal—and possibly even necessary.

For a professor to focus on short-term cognitive learning objectives may be, at least in part, a function of the professor’s being sensitive to her or his limitations. As teachers we often see ourselves as having a very limited “span of control.” That is, we feel we can directly impact only those students who are in our classes right now. It certainly is easier to see the impact we have on those students, but that does not mean our impact stops when the student completes our class. In fact, most of our important impact (positive or negative) will come later. If we turn a student on to what we teach (be it math, English, engineering, or whatever), that student will be more likely to succeed in later courses in that subject matter. However, if we turn that student off, the student may not even take another course in the area, much less succeed in the course. In a very real sense, we may terminate the student’s career in our field. In fact, a professor’s “I don’t have to make them like it” approach is most likely to have precisely that result.

The Role of Communication

It probably is evident at this point that we believe the role of affective learning is critical to the success of a professor or teaching assistant in higher education. This communication-based view (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978; McCroskey, 1998) is
not the view commonly expressed in colleges of arts and sciences, fine arts, or engineering. Nor even is it always the view expressed in colleges of education. In public discussions of how to improve public schools or colleges, it is a position rarely heard. Nor is this lack of attention to the affective domain of learning one of recent origin. Throughout history, attention has focused primarily on cognitive learning, and to a lesser extent on psychomotor learning. Attention to affective learning frequently has been missing entirely. The quality of instruction has suffered consistently as the result.

It is important that we do not give the impression that cognitive and psychomotor learning are unimportant. Far from that, they are vitally important. But they do not provide the critical learning element necessary to meet the long-term objectives of higher education. That element is positive affect for the subject being taught. If cognitive and psychomotor objectives receive all of the attention, and affective learning is ignored, higher education cannot meet its most important goals.

"Communication" as an academic field is still very young. Hence, it probably should not be surprising that most of the attention it paid to instruction in its early years was focused on the medium of instruction—print, radio, TV, satellite, Internet. Only in the last 25 years or so have a significant number of people in the field of human communication (as opposed to mediated communication) directed their research focus on improving live teacher–student interactions and the outcomes of those interactions. For the most part, the remaining chapters in this book focus on the live teacher–student context and attempt to integrate research and experience to provide advice for the beginning college teacher.

College professors and graduate teaching assistants function as professional communicators. As a consequence, what research has discovered about how human communication functions and how it can be improved can be applied in the context of instruction as well as other contexts in which professional communicators function. As has been noted previously (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978), the difference between knowing and teaching is communication in the classroom.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING


