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Knowing Your Learning Target

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What Is a Shared Learning Target?

If you own a global positioning system (GPS), you probably can't imagine taking a trip without it. Unlike a printed map, a GPS provides up-to-the-minute information about where you are, the distance to your destination, how long until you get there, and exactly what to do when you make a wrong turn. But a GPS can't do any of that without a precise description of where you want to go. Think of shared learning targets in the same way. They convey to students the destination for the lesson—what to learn, how deeply to learn it, and exactly how to demonstrate their new learning. In our estimation (Moss & Brookhart, 2009) and that of others (Seidle, Rimmele, & Prenzel, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2009), the intention for the lesson is one of the most important things students should learn. Without a precise description of where they are headed, too many students are "flying blind."

STOP! 1. Make a comment about the GPS Analogy

The Dangers of Flying Blind

No matter what we decide students need to learn, not much will happen until students understand what they are supposed to learn during a lesson, sub-unit, or unit and set their sights on learning it. Regardless of how important the content, how engaging the activity, how formative the assessment, or how differentiated the instruction, unless *all students* see, recognize, and understand the learning target, one factor will remain constant: The teacher will always be the only one providing the direction, focusing on getting students to meet the instructional objectives. The students, on the other hand, will focus on doing what the teacher says, rather than on learning. This flies in the face of what we know about nurturing motivated, self-regulated, and intentional learners (Zimmerman, 2001). Students who don't know the intention of a lesson or unit expend precious time and energy trying to figure out what their teachers expect them to learn. And many students, exhausted by the process, wonder why they should even care.

STOP! 2. Make a connection to "flying blind".

Constructing a Learning Target

A shared learning target unpacks a "lesson-sized" amount of learning—the precise "chunk" of the particular content students are to master (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005). It describes exactly how well we expect them to learn it and how we will ask them to demonstrate that learning. And although teachers derive them from instructional objectives, learning targets differ from instructional objectives in both design and function. Instructional objectives are about instruction, derived from content standards, written in teacher language, and used to guide teaching during a lesson or across a series of lessons. They are not designed for students but for the teacher. A shared learning target, on the other hand, frames the lesson from the students' point of view. A learning target helps students grasp the lesson's purpose—why it is crucial to learn this chunk of information, on this day, and in this way. Students can't see, recognize, and understand what they need to learn until we translate the learning intention into developmentally appropriate, student-friendly, and culturally respectful language. One way to do that is to answer the following three questions from the student's point of view:

1. What will I be able to do when I've finished this lesson?
2. What idea, topic, or subject is important for me to learn and understand so that I can do this?
3. How will I show that I can do this, and how well will I have to do it?

Beginning to Share

When teachers consistently shared learning targets in meaningful ways, students become more capable decision makers who know where they were headed and share responsibility with the teacher for getting there. Because they understand exactly what they are supposed to learn, students can be coached to take a more strategic approach to their work. Students have the information they need to keep track of how well a strategy is working,

and they can decide when and if to use that strategy again. In other words, students not only know where they are on the way to the expected performance, but also are aware of what it will take to get there.

Learning targets have no inherent power. They enhance student learning and achievement only when educators commit to consistently and intentionally using them to guide instruction and planning and then sharing them with students. This sharing starts when teachers use student-friendly language—and sometimes model or demonstrate what they expect—to explain the learning target from the beginning of the unit, sub-unit, or lesson, and when they continue to share it and reference it throughout the learning episodes. Here are two powerful ways to do that.

STOP! 3. Ask a Question about purpose of Learning Targets

Designing a Strong Performance of Understanding

The single best way to share a learning target is to create a strong *performance of understanding*—a learning experience that embodies the learning target. When students complete the actions that are part of a strong performance of understanding, they and their teachers will know that they have reached the target. When introducing the unit, sub-unit or lesson, the teacher should explicitly share the unpacked learning target for the day and explain how each of the tasks that are part of the lesson will lead students toward that target.

STOP! 4. Make a connection w/ "Performance of Understanding"

Explaining the Criteria for Success

Success criteria are developmentally appropriate descriptions and concrete examples of what success in a lesson looks like. They are not the grades students should earn, the number of problems they must get right, or the number of times they should include something in a performance or product (for example, how many descriptive adjectives they should include in a paragraph). A useful strategy is to ask students to examine work samples that represent various levels of quality and discuss what makes some samples better than others. Teachers can also use rubrics to define the elements of a successful performance or product and describe various performance levels for each element. An especially powerful way to do this is to have students apply a rubric's organized criteria to work samples with various levels of quality. Then ask students to explain their decisions using the language in the rubric. When students know the success criteria, they can be mindful of what success looks like as they use the rubric to guide their learning.

STOP! 5. Make a comment about "criteria for success".

Empowering Every Student

Curriculum or unit based learning targets guide teacher or team lesson planning, formative assessment development, and walk-throughs or observations by peers and others. But potentially the most impressive transformation is the one that results in students being full learning partners. Once students know where they are going, they tend to be more motivated to do the work to get there. It's just this simple. Do we want classrooms full of empowered, self-regulated, highly motivated, and intentional learners? If we do, then it is time to own up to the obstacles that educators create by withholding the very information that would empower learners. Students cannot regulate learning, use thoughtful reasoning processes, set meaningful goals, or assess the quality of their own work unless they understand what success looks like.

STOP! 6. Give a summary statement of the entire article.

References

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