

Formation for Enabling Ministry

Unit 10: Designing Learning

Aims and objectives

In the previous section on 'learning tasks', we saw that designing learning requires a clear idea of the kind of thing you hope your learners will learn. At the same time, we recognised that whatever adults learn will be affected by their own learning goals and the prior experience and expectations they bring to the learning. If adults are to remain in control of their learning, it may not be possible to pin down exactly what they are likely to learn.

The subject of aims and objectives can be a controversial one when discussing the goals of an educational programme. Some people will argue that since everyone comes to learning with different needs, it is unwise or even wrong to specify too tightly what you expect people to learn, and that it is important to leave open the possibility of unexpected insight. Others will argue that unless there is a clear aim it is unlikely that the learning programme will achieve very much. 'Aim at nothing, and you are bound to hit it!'

Both sides of the argument have merit. We can never legislate for all the benefit people derive from learning or plan in advance for everything that they are likely to gain. The goals adult learners bring with them are likely to have as great if not greater influence on what they learn as the aims of the teacher. Nevertheless, aims and objectives are a vital element in planning learning. Without knowing what we were hoping for, it will be impossible to evaluate whether we have achieved anything worthwhile. It is important *both* to plan as carefully as possible *and* to leave space for the unexpected. God's Holy Spirit can be expected to be at work in both areas: helping us to discern the learning needs and to create effective and enjoyable learning sessions, while still encountering people in unexpected ways and using our carefully designed programmes for purposes we could never predict.

To design effective learning, it is necessary to have a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve. This will always be in the form of what you hope the learners will learn rather than what you intend to teach. To be able to frame aims and objectives from the point of view of the learner is an essential skill for anyone whose task is to help others learn. It is not going too far to say that the distinguishing mark of the teacher is someone who thinks, 'What do I hope they will learn?' rather than, 'What will I teach?' and whose next question is, 'How best will they learn it?' In other words, teachers fit the content to the process rather than the other way round.

There is a variety of words in the English language to express goals or purposes. In the context of education, 'aims' and 'objectives' are used in a specific way.

- 'Aims' are broad-brush aspirations. They describe what you hope will be the outcome of a whole learning programme. They may include the change you hope to see not only in the learners but in the institution where the learning takes place, such as the church or college. The aims of this programme are that you will learn how to equip ministers to enable everyday faith, and also that the whole Church and each individual Theological Education Institution will place enabling everyday faith at the centre of its vision for ministry.

- ‘Objectives’ are the specific outcomes you hope for from an individual learning session or, if your learning session consists of several learning tasks, from each of these tasks. The objectives of this learning task are that you will be able to explain what aims and objectives are designed to achieve and equipped to use aims and objectives in the process of designing learning.

Aims and objectives are commonly held to be of three types, each related to a specific domain of human functioning: the cognitive domain (thinking), the affective domain (feeling and values) and the psychomotor domain (behaviour or physical skill). However, Christian theology introduces a fourth dimension. Learning for discipleship is a corporate process in which our relationships are transformed. Hence, we can divide aims and objectives into four groups:

- Knowing. What new understanding will arise from the learning.
- Doing. The new skills learners will develop, which may be cognitive as well as physical skills. Interpreting the Bible and designing learning are examples of cognitive skills. Attentive listening is a relational skill.
- Being. The way learners will feel and the values, attitudes and dispositions they will develop.
- Relational. The changes that will take place in the way they relate to others.

When I teach a module from the Church of England’s Common Awards suite of modules called ‘Adult Education for the Learning Church’, my aims are that by the end of course they will:

- explain the theory and practice of adult education in a Christian context
- describe and evaluate some methods of adult learning
- become aware of their own preferred ways of both learning and teaching
- be able to design and lead a course of learning that takes account of the learners’ needs, and to evaluate it afterwards
- become excited about the possibility of helping their church become a learning community
- be challenged to reconsider their assumptions about what ministry is all about

This set of aims clearly includes knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The last is also implicitly relational. Theologically, the study of teaching and learning in the local church belongs in the context of adult discipleship, whose goal is everyday faith, so this aim affects the students’ understanding and attitude to their future role.

Another important feature of aims and objectives is that they should be measurable. After teaching the module, I receive assignments from the students by which to evaluate their ability to design a programme of learning for adults and their understanding of the theory and practice of adult Christian education. But even without these assignments, I could, in principle, evaluate all these aims. I could set exercises during class time which would tell me how much students were learning. I could design questionnaires to find out what they had learned and whether their attitudes had changed.

Most of those who teach in seminaries and colleges will be familiar with the terminology of higher education, which centres around ‘aims’ and ‘learning outcomes’. There are some crucial differences between the way these are used and the way we are using ‘aims’ and ‘objectives’ here.

- Aims in higher education tend to be subject- rather than learner-centred. They describe the way students are inducted into the subject discipline and only indirectly the impact on the students’ lives.

- Learning outcomes are not the same as objectives. They specify what the accrediting agency sees as measurable learning from a whole course and not from each learning session or learning task. In some situations, the module aims include a change in attitude or disposition, but these are almost always absent from the learning outcomes, since changes in attitude rarely contribute to the mark the student receives.

For these reasons, even though it is necessary to be guided by module aims and learning outcomes, learning to frame 'aims' and 'objectives' is far more useful and indeed essential when it comes to designing learning.

In the past, when teaching and learning were strongly influenced by behaviourist psychology, it was thought that aims and objectives should only be framed in terms of the changes in visible behaviour that would result from the learning. Changes 'in the head' such as 'understanding' or 'being excited' were ruled out as they were not observable or measurable. Although the understanding of adult learning has now moved away from the behaviourist perspective, it is still useful to bear in mind that some verbs are better than others in framing objectives. 'Understand' is a relatively vague term whereas the things that understanding enables such as 'describe', 'explain', 'analyse', 'apply', 'compare' and 'create' are far more specific and easier to evaluate. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom designed a 'taxonomy' of educational objectives, which is a rich resource of verbs to describe the possible outcomes of learning.

The advantages of aims and objectives are many. Here are some of the most important:

- Defining your aims and objectives acts as a guide as to the information you need to include and what you can afford to leave out. It saves you from the pitfall of including far more information than the learners can cope with just because you see it as valuable.
- Defining your objectives acts as a guide to the methods most likely to achieve them. If you want learners to learn a skill, you need to give them an opportunity to practice that skill and reflect on it. If you want them to examine and perhaps change their attitudes, you need to include something that will enable them to identify their feelings and reflect on them.
- Being able to share your aims and objectives with the learners will help them to learn. Since adults need to be in control of their learning, sharing aims and objectives may involve negotiation with the learners' goals. But once they accept the objectives, the learners will be working with you to achieve them.
- When you offer optional programmes of learning, defining your aims and objectives helps you to convey to the potential learners what they are likely to gain from the course and so helps you to recruit the people most likely to gain.
- The more clearly you define your aims and objectives, the easier it is for both you and the learners to monitor their progress. For adult learners, for whom learning is always a choice, being able to see their progress is an important source of motivation.
- Defining your aims and objectives enables you to reflect on your assumptions. You can do this by framing a 'Why?' question, such as 'Why have I chosen this aim?' or, 'Why do I think it important that the learners should cover this topic?' Having worked out the answer to your initial question, asking further 'Why?' questions will help you dig down into the assumptions you are working with.

Finally, the action of setting objectives for others' learning throws a spotlight on your relationship with the learners. Since adult learners are interdependent people, all of whom are your equals, who are you to be setting objectives for them? There are at least two wrong answers to this question:

- One is based on positional authority: 'I am the teacher and they are the students.' Effective adult learning always requires the authority of permission: the trust learners place in you as the facilitator of their learning.
- The second pitfall is to understand your status as an expert in the subject as the main source of your authority. Taken on its own, your expertise in the subject area is disabling, since it reduces the learner to dependence. Your knowledge of the subject is only one aspect of a broader picture. In any case, if all they wanted was knowledge of the subject, they could get it from a book.

I suggest that, as a facilitator of adult learning, the source of your authority to construct aims and objectives is made up of the following:

- Your calling from God as a leader in the church and to your specific role in ministerial formation
- Your knowledge of the subject matter, which places you in a better position than the learners to judge what the outcome of their learning should be
- Your skill as a designer of learning, giving you the ability to act as a 'guide on the side' rather than 'sage on the stage'
- Your love for the learners and desire to see them grow in faith and to see the church equipped for mission
- The learners' agreement to attend the learning event

The last two bullet points point to the importance of taking into consideration the learners' own goals, their existing experience and their fears and hesitations about learning and to design the learning with these in mind. It means that aims and objectives become servants of the learning rather than masters and creates an avenue for the Holy Spirit to use your plans for the benefit of all the learners as the Spirit knows best.