

# Learning Targets on Parade

Susan M. Brookhart and Connie M. Moss

## 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, Rimmel, & 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."

## 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 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 from the very beginning of the lesson, 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 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.

Consider the following high school lesson on *Jane Eyre*. The teacher begins by saying,

*Today, as you read the next chapter, carefully complete your study guide. Pay close attention to the questions about Bertha— Mr. Rochester's first wife. Questions 16 through 35 deal with lunacy and the five categories of mental illness. The next 15 questions focus on facts about Charlotte Brontë's own isolated childhood. The last 10 items ask you to define terms in the novel that we seldom use today—your dictionaries will help you define those words. All questions on Friday's test will come directly from the study guide.*

What is important for students to learn in this lesson? Is it how to carefully complete a study guide, the five types of mental illness, facts about Brontë's childhood, meanings of seldom-used words, or facts about Mr. Rochester's first wife? Your guess is as good as ours.

## **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, & William, 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 shared 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.

## **What the Research Says**

It's not enough for a teacher to plan a learning target and tell students about it once. Writing a learning target on the board but not having students do anything with it during the lesson won't harness the learning energy these studies describe. This sort of lip service to learning targets is what Marshall and Drummond (2006) call conforming only to the "letter" and not the "spirit" of assessment for learning. A learning target theory of action calls for teachers to design the right target for the day's lesson and use it along with their students to aim for and assess understanding. Students have the learning target in mind as they do their work, and they filter what they do during a lesson by asking themselves how this activity or assignment will help them hit that target.

Having a learning goal for students means more than just having a great learning target for today's lesson. All the learning targets from a sequence of lessons must add up to a larger unit goal or state standard. It's also not enough to have only the larger goal. Students experience learning one lesson at a time, so they need to know what they're supposed to be learning during each lesson. Each daily learning target needs to add a subsequent level of challenge or increase students' understanding or skill from the previous lesson and prepare them for the lesson that follows.

## **Beginning to Share**

When teachers in the Armstrong School District began sharing learning targets with their students, their early efforts were tentative and inconsistent. Not all teachers tried it, and some who tried did not share targets for every lesson. Some simply paraphrased instructional objectives, wrote the target statements on the board, or told students what they were going to learn at the beginning of a lesson. Yet, even their exploratory attempts became game changers. When teachers consistently shared learning targets in meaningful ways, students quickly became more capable decision makers who knew where they were headed and who shared responsibility for getting there.

# Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson

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## WHAT A LEARNING TARGET ISN'T AND IS

A learning target is not an instructional objective. Learning targets differ from instructional objectives in both design and purpose. As the name implies, instructional objectives guide instruction, and we write them from the teacher's point of view. Their purpose is to unify outcomes across a series of related lessons or an entire unit. By design, instructional objectives are too broad to guide what happens in today's lesson.

Learning targets, as their name implies, guide learning. They describe, in language that students understand, the lesson-sized chunk of information, skills, and reasoning processes that students will come to know deeply. We write learning targets from the students' point of view and share them throughout today's lesson so that students can use them to guide their own learning.