

Facilitating Discussions About Learning Goals

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A Discipline-Based Education Specialist (DBES) will need to guide learning goal development quite heavily, since this is an unfamiliar process for most faculty members. Learning goal development is very useful for course development and communication across courses and faculty, and students typically come to rely upon them (and find them very useful) once learning goals are normative for courses in the department. However, learning goal development can take time and is also unlikely to be highly motivating for the average faculty member. The DBES can help the process go smoothly by providing strong support for the work. Here are some suggested steps for you to take.

Learning goal development process

Generally, learning goal development consists of a combination of one-on-one faculty meetings, discussions in a working group, and surveys among the broader department faculty.

Consider tackling learning goals later in the project

It may be appealing to tackle learning goals first, but some faculty are initially resistant to the idea of explicit learning goals or the learning goals may just be too difficult as a starting step. It can be beneficial to attempt some other small course changes and (especially) collect data on student learning and student experience in the course. The key is to find something from the overall set of course redesign components that is of deep interest to the course instructor and build towards the others with data from early small wins.

Meet and discuss with individual faculty members

The primary mechanism for learning goal development is discussion between you and the faculty. Set up discussions with the faculty in charge of the course, but also with other interested faculty, such as those who typically teach the course or teach follow-on courses. Surprisingly, in the SEI instructors of subsequent courses were often better able to articulate learning goals for the preceding course than the instructor of that preceding course. You will likely need to have several such discussions, as learning goals are developed and iterated.

Create a faculty working group to develop goals

In many cases, a major task in the planning term is the facilitation of a faculty working group focused on developing course goals. Such a group may have been identified as part of the proposal process in the department or created ad hoc. Typically, learning goals are not adopted through official curricular channels, but rather are broadly accepted by such a working group. Such a group must meet multiple times to develop learning goals; single meetings are not productive.

Probing faculty about learning goals

It is often best to listen to faculty about what they want students to do, then to write down their ideas in the form of learning goals.

Ask questions

Do not tell faculty what you think are important learning goals. Instead, find a way to frame yourself as a naïve and eager listener, using questions to draw out their ideas (see prompts below). These questions are useful for individual faculty and/or groups.

Ask for examples of student work

Ask faculty for examples of student work demonstrating where students were and were not achieving the desired level of understanding. Go over past exam questions and ask them to explain why they included that question and what it was testing. Help the faculty member construct learning goals that address what they do and don't expect, based on these student mistakes.

Use a sticky note activity

Faculty write a response to one of the prompts below (one idea per sticky note) and the resulting notes are organized into themes.

Provide examples of high-quality learning goals

This can help guide faculty in their thinking. See [example learning goals from the SEI](#).

Write draft goals for faculty and get feedback

It is usually too ambitious to expect faculty to write high-quality learning goals out of the gate. To avoid faculty fatigue, it is often prudent for the DBES to take faculty ideas and then shape them into the language of learning goals (perhaps indicating the faculty member whose idea originated in that goal). Then bring those goals to the faculty member(s) for feedback.

Don't regulate language too strongly

In particular, it is best to avoid the vague term "understand" in learning goals. Initially, you may wish to be flexible in this regard, and provide some outlet for this language. You might humorously suggest that it's better to keep to more measurable language, but leave it for the moment and return to the language choice once there is more buy-in to creating measurable goals.

Help to improve the learning goals after the first iteration of the course

While it's tempting to tackle learning goal development during a planning term, usually the goals can be greatly improved upon the first teaching of the course. The test of a good learning goal is whether it is actually useful for guiding instruction. In many cases, the first draft of a set of learning goals (especially for a course which one has not yet taught) can be dramatically improved in this regard.

Prompts and probes for faculty learning goal development

- What are the big ideas that you want to get across in this course?
- What is this course about?
- How is this course different from course X (higher/lower level course)?
- If you were writing a letter of recommendation for a student who just completed this course, what would you like to be able to say that they can do? What will they know and what will they value?
- Are there topics in the course where students really seem to struggle? How do you know that they struggle?
- Do you have other goals beyond the content/knowledge goals, such as critical thinking, attitudes, beliefs, or increasing student interest in the major? (Giving examples can be useful.)
- What knowledge and skills are the students expected to have for a follow-on course (if applicable)? What do they typically lack when entering that follow-on course?
- After you lecture on topic X, what do you expect a student to be able to do?
- If a student gets this exam question right (wrong), what does it show they can (can't) do?
- What do you mean by "understand"?
- How might you measure that type of student learning?

Challenges

Faculty feeling that learning goals tell them what to teach

Faculty can see learning goals as potentially restrictive. You can make it clear that learning goals don't dictate what faculty can teach. Rather, learning goals can be used by any individual faculty to guide their teaching, at their discretion. That said, having a departmental decision to universally adopt at least a subset of the learning goals can be productive (both for course development, and sustainability).

Faculty feeling that learning goals are 'teaching to the test'

Some faculty don't want to tell students what to study or what to learn explicitly. They feel that explicit learning goals are teaching to the test. You might work with the faculty member(s) to write a few learning goals while examining a test or assignment and point out the distinction between the learning goal and the test question which assesses that goal. You may also point out that students with learning goals in hand still struggle to achieve those goals. Finally, to address faculty concerns that everything is or has to be spelled out in the learning goals, urge them to consider inclusion of higher-level goals about combining/choosing strategies related to multiple goals (e.g., "Students should be able to approach novel problems that combine multiple goals by choosing appropriate strategies and providing details of their methods"), leaving room for assessments which are more novel.

Course content varies by instructor

In some introductory sequences, the course content depends upon the faculty teaching the course and how they align it with their specialty. This can be challenging for identifying common learning goals across instructors. In one SEI department, after instructors identified several common themes within course goals across these specialties (e.g., homeostasis and diffusion) each instructor was tasked with considering how they would teach their specialty as an example within this theme. This helped to emphasize to instructors that they would be able to teach their specialty while still allowing better coordination among the themes in the course

Opportunities

Learning goal discussions can have several positive benefits. Within the course itself, learning goal discussions often lead to a discussion on the relevance of particular topics within the course, enabling streamlining of the course content. Additionally, work on course-level learning goals often leads to later interest in department-level learning goals and curricular alignment, because faculty have now spent more time considering student learning and gaps in courses.

Resources

- [SEI Learning Goal page](#) (with workshops, example goals, and guidance).
- [Building Strong Departments: Degree Programs](#) (for developing program-level learning goals; from Science Education Resource Center).
- [Facilitating Faculty Conversations](#) (Pepper et al., 2011).
- [Creating Significant Learning Experiences](#) (Fink, 2013).