



Writing Student Learning Outcomes

by Deb Mashek & Laura Palucki Blake

Curricular design—whether at the level of a single course, a major, or a common core — invites educators to think intentionally about what they want students to learn, to state those intentions in clear and measurable ways, to design their curriculum to meet those intentions, and to evaluate the success of their curriculum against those intentions.

HxA members and other heterodox enthusiasts who wish to help their students engage in open inquiry and constructive disagreement can use intentional curricular design to ensure courses, assignments, and class sessions advance critical outcomes.

The steps below provide a broad-strokes overview of how to approach course-level curricular design. Your campus colleagues in institutional research, assessment, and instructional design — and professional development centers focused on teaching and learning — can offer additional support and guidance.



Step 1.

Articulate Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

Before crafting a course calendar, selecting texts, or writing assignments, it is useful to first ask yourself key questions that will help you articulate the student learning outcomes your course will advance. These include: What do you want your students to do at the end of your class? What do you want students to get out of the course? Sample SLOs related to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement include:

Students who complete this course can:

- Explain how biases, logical fallacies, heuristics, and other critical thinking limitations can impede the quality of ethical, evidence-based decision making.
- Seek, evaluate, and fairly represent the strengths and limitations of evidence for and against a social policy.
- Apply empirical research and theoretical frameworks to design strategies to promote constructive engagement across differences.
- Engage people who hold views that differ from their own with respect, curiosity, and vulnerability.



Step 2.

Create Learning Experiences to Meet the Learning Objectives

After you have written SLOs, you are ready to design the course. SLOs serve as the center of your course—learning experiences should thus be designed intentionally and specifically to meet these learning objectives. Ask yourself how your texts, assignments, evaluation, and activities support your learning outcomes, and whether the class time you spend on each outcome is proportioned meaningfully.

For example, if an SLO for a course were “Seek out, evaluate, and fairly represent the strengths and limitations of evidence for and against a social policy,” the instructor could ask students to prepare for an in-class debate about, a proposed drug legalization policy, with the caveat that the debaters wouldn’t learn which position they had been assigned to defend until moments before the debate kicks off. The student’s grade could be determined based on the quality of the evidence they deployed in the debate, and how accurately they represented evidence on both their side and the opposing side of the debate.

Through this step in the design process, you may realize that a different type of assignment (e.g., a reflective writing exercise) might more effectively advance your SLOs than exams. Likewise, you might realize that a different class format (e.g., small group discussion) might make more sense than traditional lecture to help students wrestle with conflicting evidence.



Step 3.

Check for Alignment

These questions can help bring into relief disconnects between your intentions (i.e., the SLOs) and your course design:

1. Is each SLO addressed by at least one assignment or aspect of the course? If not, how might you modify the course to better meet the constellation of SLOs?
2. Does each assignment or aspect of the course map onto at least one SLO? If not, might you consider dropping that assignment?
3. Do the number and intensity of the different assignments signal the relative importance of the different SLOs?



Step 5.

Assess Student Learning

When you introduce an assignment, state explicitly which SLO that assignment intends to advance and clarify how your evaluation criteria will focus on the students’ ability to demonstrate their mastery of that SLO. A valuable way to accomplish this is to make the SLO explicit, then develop the rubric for evaluation with students. Ask them what it would look like to “engage people who hold views that differ from your own with respect.” Involving students at this stage gives them a sense of agency and allows you to articulate the difference between developing respect and mastery of respect, for example.



Step 4.

Communicate to Your Students

Discuss with your students early and often about the course SLOs and explain how they informed your decisions about course design. Help students see why you have structured your course to emphasize discussion and perspective taking, why you’re having them read authors representing a range of viewpoints, and why you’re asking them to evaluate evidence on multiple sides of an issue. By making your intentions and decisions explicit, your students will have a clear sense of what you’re doing and why, creating a cohesive experience that will facilitate

learning. And, you will have a crisp touchstone for framing the many decisions you will need to make during course design and implementation.



Please Share Your Ideas

HxA invites instructors to share SLOs, assignments, and syllabi that have a clear focus on open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement across lines of difference. As materials become available, we will work to organize and provide a compendium of resources. Please submit your contributions to events@heterodoxacademy.org.



Recommended Resources

- Sample, M. (2011). *Teaching for Enduring Understanding*. Retrieved from <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/teaching-for-enduring-understanding/35243>
- Wiggins, Grant, and McTighe, Jay. (1998). *Backward Design*. In *Understanding by Design* (pp. 13-34). ASCD.