Drafting Effective Learning Objectives

This google doc is a refresher on integrated course design and specifically the first step of integrated course design--drafting effective learning outcomes. If you are a pro on integrated course design, you might skip down to the different learning taxonomies on page 3. These taxonomies are helpful for all of us to use when rethinking our course objectives, even those familiar with integrated course design.

Relevance: Why do experienced teachers need to worry about this topic when switching to physically distanced/hybrid/remote teaching?

Knowing your learning objectives is crucial in any type of course design. When transitioning to a new teaching environment, however, it is even more important to be intentional and deliberate about what you want your students to learn in the course. This decision should then guide every other decision that you make about how to structure your redesigned course.

Learning Theory

A. Connection to Integrated Course Design

Drafting effective learning objectives is the first step to designing a course through integrated course design. The idea of integrated course design is to design your course with the end in mind. What do you want your students to be able to think and do by the end of this course? How will your students be different by the end of the course? Once you can answer these questions, the second step of integrated course design is to figure out how you will know if they have in fact learned what you want them to learn. In other words, what evidence will students provide to you to demonstrate that they have achieved the course goals? Your formative and summative assessments should be linked to your learning objectives, illustrating whether your students have in fact achieved these outcomes. From there, the final step of integrated course design is to design the learning activities in the course to prepare the students for these assessments. You want to scaffold your students’ learning throughout the course using intentional activities so that they are prepared for the assessments.

Through integrated course design, the assessments and learning activities are all tightly linked to your course objectives:
B. Best Practices for Drafting Learning Objectives

When most of us sit down to write learning objectives, our first instinct is often to focus on the content we want our students to learn. The learning objectives for Civil Procedure, for example, might read as follows: “By the end of this course, the students will (i) understand personal jurisdiction, (ii) understand subject-matter jurisdiction, (iii) understand venue,” etc. When we think about what we want students to get out of our courses, however, our goals almost always extend beyond the content. We want our students to be able to apply the doctrine to new facts, evaluate arguments made in judicial opinions, critically examine the rules, etc. We also want our students to be able to use what they learn in their representation of clients, from drafting contracts to arguing motions and advising clients. Our exams and other assessments often ask our students to do this higher-level analysis and work, but we may not be as intentional about identifying our specific learning outcomes and designing the course around these outcomes.

As you write your learning objectives, force yourself to think beyond content. What do you want your students to be able to do with the content? The best learning objectives are both measurable and student-centered. Measurable outcomes center on action verbs (define, compare, design, assess, or draft) as opposed to nebulous verbs that reflect internal states that cannot be observed (know, understand, learn, realize, or appreciate). Student-centered outcomes focus on what the student will be able to do at the end of the course, rather than on what the teacher will teach during the course.

You can also use this exercise as a chance to think about different lenses on the law that you want to emphasize. Do you want students to understand the history of the doctrine? Do you want them to understand the broader social context of the rules they are studying? Do you want them to be exposed
to a critical perspective of the legal system? It is easier to include these different lenses into the law if you incorporate them as you design (or redesign) your course.

C. Main Learning Taxonomies

As you think through what you want your students to get out of your courses, you might refer to one or more learning taxonomies that categorize and explain different types of learning.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy:** Most of us are familiar with Bloom’s taxonomy, which sets out a hierarchy of learning categories that attempts to capture the spectrum of learning processes. Using this taxonomy, the professor can decide the depth of learning for various concepts in the course. For some topics, the professor may want the students to really engage with the material, evaluating it and creating new frameworks from it. For other topics, the professor may only want the students to remember or understand it.

The diagram below shows Bloom’s taxonomy, along with an explanation of each level of learning and a variety of verbs that can be used in crafting related learning objectives.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy (Revised)**

![Bloom’s Taxonomy Diagram](image)
**Davis & Arend Ways of Learning:** If the hierarchical levels of learning don’t fit your way of thinking, you might find that the David & Arend Six (or Seven) Ways of Learning is a better fit. This model is based on the following types of learning goals.

1. **Goal: Build Skills**
   - Do you want students to learn a skill where accuracy, precision, and efficiency are important?
   - Best learned by breaking into concrete steps and practiced by students with the support of precise and timely feedback.

2. **Goal: Acquire Knowledge**
   - Do students need to learn new ideas, terminology, or rules?
   - Use cognitive learning (retrieval practice, spaced learning) to help students learn concepts, relate new information to prior knowledge, and make meaning out of information.

3. **Goal: Developing critical, creative, and dialogical thinking**
   - Do students need to critique information, evaluate information or arguments, and reason through problems?
   - Use learning through inquiry, which involves the instructor modeling the thinking process and making it visible and then providing opportunities for the students to practice thinking through meaningful discussion and instructor facilitation.

4. **Goal: Cultivating Decision-Making Abilities and Problem-Solving**
   - Do students need to find and define problems, generate solutions, and evaluate and choose among solutions?
   - Use learning with mental models, which is based on theories of decision making and problem solving. Students apply mental models to their decisions, reflecting on the multiple interests.

5. **Goal: Exploring Attitudes, Feelings, and Perspectives**
   - Is your goal to change your students’ attitudes or opinions or make them aware of multiple perspectives? Do you want to cultivate empathy in your students and/or help them learn to collaborate?
   - Use learning through groups and teams, with the instructor carefully designing, preparing, monitoring, and helping to interpret the learning that occurs within groups.

6. **Goal: Develop Professional Judgment**
   - Do your students need to develop professional judgment within a variety of contexts?
   - Use experiential education, simulations, or role playing to help students gain competence and confidence, with instructors creating, supporting, and debriefing the experiences.

**Human-Focused Learning Objectives:** If you want a learning taxonomy framework that incorporates the human experience in a more deliberate way, you might take a look at the Fink taxonomy or the Wiggins & McTighe taxonomy, both of which are described on this page. They include specific categories for empathy, self-knowledge, caring, learning about the self, and learning how to learn.
Here are the main learning domains from Dee Fink’s taxonomy.

Objectives Around Big Questions: In addition to specific learning objectives, many courses also include big questions about the law, society, or the role of lawyers. These questions are broader than the learning objectives in the syllabus and include the important takeaways that you want students to get from the course. In 3-5 years, what impact do you hope your course has had on your students? In the long-term, what will distinguish students who have taken your course from students who have not?

Here, you might also think about the main throughlines for your course. What are the big questions that you want students to wrestle with throughout the semester? What fundamental concepts, issues, or problems run throughout the course? For these questions, you may not be able to have specific and measurable learning objectives. That’s ok. The big questions matter even if they don’t fit this mold. The best courses have a variety of specific and measurable objectives, along with a few big questions that permeate the course.

D. Rethink the Primacy of Content

Course design forces hard choices between breadth and depth of learning. If your only goal is to expose students to legal rules and concepts, you can cover a lot of material in your course. If you want to have students engage more deeply with the material, however, you will probably have to sacrifice some
That’s inevitable when you introduce more active learning and deeper learning objectives into your course. And with students in new and unfamiliar learning environments, it may take them longer to learn the same material that we are used to covering in a traditional class period, so we might have to cut content just to stay at the same depth of learning on other topics.

This may be the hardest part of redesigning a course. Cutting material to allow the students to go deeper into other material is painful and frankly a little scary. How will they be good lawyers if I don’t teach them the details of res judicata, third-party beneficiaries, or partnership accounting??? If you start to panic, consider the forgetting curve. The forgetting curve documents just how quickly students learn assigned material. Without any reinforcement or connections to prior knowledge, information is quickly forgotten—roughly 56 percent in one hour, 66 percent after a day, and 75 percent after six days. In other words, they are going to forget a lot of the content anyway.

You can increase their retention by using active learning techniques (which we will talk about next time and which are covered here). The forgetting curve changes when instructors provide plenty of opportunities for students to practice their learning and make the learning more relevant to their own interests and goals.
This research means we have a choice. We can cram a lot of content into our course, but they will probably forget it pretty soon after the semester has ended. Or we can focus on the most important content and then using active learning strategies to put this content into their long-term memory, while also leaving space for learning beyond retention of content.

That’s also why the big questions described above are so important. If they will ultimately forget a lot of the content, what do you want to be the lasting legacy of your course?

E. Rethink Content to Include Marginalized Voices

We are in a historical moment that calls on all of us to rethink our course content through a lens of racism and oppression. As we all know, decisions about course content are not neutral, so as we think through our new course designs, we should also consider the following questions. Whose voices are we prioritizing in our selection of readings? What perspectives are we providing on these readings? Do we acknowledge the interests that the law is protecting or ignoring? Are we providing space in the classroom for students to explore the broader social and historical context of the doctrine?

We heard at the student forum in the spring that students want professors to talk more about the context in which cases are decided. They don’t want to ignore the procedural posture, the holding, etc., but they also want us to surface the societal and historical forces that underlie the cases and the impact of these cases on our broader society, including marginalized communities who may be excluded from traditional narratives.

As we all redesign our courses this summer, this is a good opportunity to examine your course objectives, readings, assessments, and learning activities through a lens of anti-racism. This topic deserves its own dedicated sessions, and we will try to schedule those, but it’s important to consider now as you rethink your course objectives and how you want to frame the learning in your class.

F. Sharing Your Learning Objectives with the Students

Professors can spend a lot of time crafting their learning objectives, but they rarely talk about them with their students. Yet the research indicates that students perform better when they know the course objectives and reflect on how they connect to their own learning and their personal goals for the course. We all know that students can glaze over course objectives in the syllabus, but you might think about an assignment in the first week of the course asking students to read the course objectives and submit a brief video or written response about how these objectives relate to their own objectives for their career or the course. You might also consider asking students to reflect at the end of the semester on whether they achieved the course objectives and the advice they might have for students taking the course in the future.

Examples:

Here are some examples of learning objectives for law school courses:
Legal Doctrine, Analysis & Application
- Accurately articulate law governing lawyers, and ethical rules and values of the legal profession.
- Compare the rules that govern various forms of business entities.
- Apply the rules of personal jurisdiction to a new fact pattern in a way that restates the relevant rule, explains how that rule likely applies to the facts, and evaluates possible counterarguments.
- Identify the elements of a judicial decision, including the procedural facts, the issue, the holding, and the rationale, as well as synthesize a rule from a line of related opinions.
- Create a discovery plan for a mock case that uses specific discovery tools to obtain information relevant to the elements of the claim.
- Advise clients on how they should approach decision making in the boardroom given their legal powers and duties.

Critical Engagement:
- Identify the history, structures, values, shortcomings, and ongoing responsibilities of the legal profession with regard to fostering justice and diversity.
- Propose changes to employment law that would address structural inequalities, racism, and oppression in the legal system.

Professional Identity:
- Reflect on, identify, and assess students’ strengths, weaknesses, and values as professionals.
- Identify, plan, and initiate efforts to pursue their professional goals in a manner that considers their values, priorities, and interests, as well as the steps required to achieve those professional goals.

Additional Resources:

If you just can’t get enough information about integrated course design and drafting effective learning objectives, here are a few additional resources.

Chapter entitled “Integrated Design” from Wiggins & McTighe, UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN (2005)
This book chapter is a primer on integrated course design.

Frameworks & Taxonomies of Learning, DePaul Teaching Commons.
This site explains the different learning taxonomies in a bit more detail.

Writing Student Learning Outcomes, University of Wisconsin Office of the Provost
This site provides practical information and concrete steps for drafting learning outcomes.

Teaching about Celebrity and Philanthropy: A Case Study of Integrated Course Design
This case study explains how to use learning objectives in course design. It relates to non-profit management, not law, but the lessons are similar.

Anti-Racism Pedagogy Guide by the University of Southern California,
This libguide provides resources for developing anti-racist pedagogical strategies and syllabi.