

Learning Objectives for Introductory Psychology: May I Object?

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All psychologists will readily agree that what we used to call “intentional learning” is more effective and efficient than “incidental learning.” Cognitive psychologists now talk about the “focused and unconscious processing” of information -- as John Watson, Fred Skinner, Greg Kimble, Bill Verplanck and others spin in their graves. Regardless of terminology, it does seem to be true that purposively setting about to learn something is a smart way for students to behave. Intending, focusing, and effort do matter.

Thus, the notion of providing students a set of objectives or learning goals appears to be -- *prima fascia* -- a good thing to do. Before we step into a class, we should have a firm idea of what it is that we want our students to learn. In other words, we should be aware of our “learning objectives.”

Learning objectives can serve as a set of organizing statements. I’ve written ten editions of an introductory psychology text (and six brief editions), and continue to be guided by the advice I received nearly 25 years ago from my first editor, Scott Hardy of Scott Foresman & Co.: “Tell them what you are going to do; do it; then tell them what you have done.”

The most impressive and extensive set of learning objectives I have yet encountered is the 2005 revision of the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula. It was written by a truly blue-ribbon panel and can be found at www.apa.org/ed/natlstandards.html. The document includes learning objectives for every conceivable topic in general psychology, followed by examples of how students may demonstrate their knowledge of these objectives, which they call “performance indicators.” Here is a very brief sample of some of those indicators. Students may indicate their comprehension of varied objectives by:

- Summarizing some 19th century scientific research findings (e.g., Helmholtz, Weber, Fechner).
- Describing how learning affects neural transmission (e.g., Eric Kandel’s work).
- Discussing how bicultural and multicultural individuals may express different personality dimensions (e.g., code-switching) depending on the cultural context.
- Comparing the views of Chomsky and Skinner on language development.
- Defending spiritually-based explanations for abnormal behavior (e.g., soul loss, transgression against ancestor).

There are 48 pages of such performance indicators, and remember, these are designed for high school students!

I do not object to these objectives. They provide excellent guidance for what one ought to be doing in a first course in psychology. My objection comes when we start to believe that these might be the sorts of things that our students will remember after their final exam, much less for the rest of their lives.

Related to this point, I share a true story. I recently met a man whose daughter had just been in my introductory psychology class. He guessed that he himself had taken that same class from me in about 1971. With a smile, he said, “I remember you and that class -- ding-foof-slobber.” This was my simple little mnemonic for remembering the essence of Pavlovian conditioning: Ring a bell, blow food powder into a dog’s mouth, and it will salivate; or ding-foof-slobber. This, 38 years later, was a former student’s primary recollection of the hours we spent together in the classroom.

The point of this chapter is that we all need to spend time focusing on the question: What 5 or 6 things do we want our students to carry with them long after the class is over? To me, these are the real learning objectives of any course. In this spirit, I recommend a brief article in the December 2006 APS Observer by Julie Gosselin, who was at the time a graduate student at Université de Montreal. Speaking to the issue of what students might remember from our courses, she wrote, “Always hope for more, but be prepared to settle for less.”

I conclude by sharing some of my own major learning objectives for introductory psychology. I do not argue that these should be your learning objectives. I offer them only in the spirit of encouraging you to think concretely about those issues that you would like your students to remember should you encounter them 31 years from now.

1. That Gerow guy was one great teacher! (How’s that for intellectual honesty?)
2. Psychology is a science. Our cognitions come from many different sources, tradition (e.g., “My grandmother always used to say...”); common sense (e.g., “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”); faith (e.g., “There is a God” or “There is no God.”); or the arts (e.g., Shakespeare really knew what true is.”). But when we are being psychologists, we rely on the methods of science. That science may yield beliefs that are counterintuitive (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) or controversial, but it the method of psychology. My favorite quote from the history of psychology (Galton, 1894) captures this sentiment: “I can find no evidence that the intensity of a belief is any measure of its validity.”
3. Psychological functioning is always more complicated than it may appear at first, and interactionism is a powerful concept. Nature and nurture interact. Personal dispositions and situations interact. Specific experiences and culture interact. Almost everything in psychology resonates with a biopsychosocial model of explanation.
4. There are individual differences. All of psychology’s “laws” are nomothetic and are expressed in terms like “by-and-large,” “in the long run,” or “more often than not.” For example, students with high SAT scores will do well in college, at least through their freshman year. Indeed, no two people are alike, and no one person is exactly the same from one moment to the next. Given the nearly infinite number of ways in which we each are different from all others, sometimes it is a wonder that we get along with each other at all.
5. One’s experience of reality is often more important than reality itself. What we perceive and what we remember are surely dependent upon events as they occur. But they

also are influenced by one's motivation, one's expectations, and one's past experiences. For example, simply consider the conflicting reports of several eyewitnesses to the same event.

That is a short list. I do hope for more than the comprehension and recollection of these large ideas. Here are my second-tier objectives for my students. I hope they come to appreciate that: (a) Thorndike's Law of Effect is old, but its essence is still true; (b) Persons with psychological disorders are not weak, or bad, or sinful; (c) Life is short, stress is bad, and it's important to learn how to cope; (d) Distributed practice is superior to massed practice; (e) Our ability to pay attention is severely limited; (f) Psychotherapy works; (g) Spanking doesn't; and (h) It is always a good idea to know when to stop. I believe that time is now.

References

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