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Lifelong Learning as a Teacher

by Michael S. Kirkpatrick

As the last semester of the 2010s comes to a close, it is a good opportunity to look back on our experiences over the past decade. These years may have included professional milestones and successes, such as helping a student land a coveted internship or job, acquiring a grant to support an important project, or advancing through the tenure process. It's also likely that there were setbacks along the way, whether those be manuscript rejections or classes that just didn't go well. When we take the time to pause and reflect on our experiences, we can shift our role from teacher to learner as a step toward our future goals.

As we imagine what we hope to achieve going forward, we have the opportunity to embody many of the practices that we hope to instill in students. We can embrace a growth mindset ([Dweck 2006](#)), recognizing that we can learn and grow from our prior experiences; this view can help us to persist when we face inevitable challenges in the future. We can also model the self-assessment and lifelong learning goals at the heart of learner-centered teaching ([Weimer 2013](#)). In other words, we can take this time to be mindful about how we would like to improve as teachers in the coming years.

A recent blog post in [The Teaching Professor](#) proposed an intriguing approach to this planning by suggesting that we write learning objectives for ourselves as instructors ([Flaherty 2019](#)). In particular, Flaherty argues that "the best teachers have the humility and the courage to acknowledge that they are learners too." This process of articulating our desire for growth can help us to focus on our true goals and to maintain a culture of meaningful engagement in the classroom.

When we try to write learning objectives for our students, many of us turn to well-known taxonomies by Bloom ([Anderson and Krathwohl 2001](#)) or Fink ([Fink 2003](#)). Another taxonomy that might prove useful for writing our instructional learning objectives is the "Understanding by Design" framework ([Wiggins and McTighe 2005](#)). In this approach, the emphasis is placed on the learner exhibiting behavior that demonstrates mastery in six facets of learning.

The first three facets of understanding (explain, interpret, and apply) typically focus on content knowledge. As a computer scientist looking to keep my course material relevant, I might write an objective of "describe a recent cyberattack or system failure in terms of course concepts," inspiring me to devote some scholarship time to explaining interesting new attacks (yes, many of us computer scientists find malicious behavior interesting!). An interpretation objective might emphasize pedagogical content knowledge (how to teach course concepts), such as "use student final exam mistakes to identify topics that require additional teaching support." I might follow-up on that work with an application objective to "create a new [POGIL](#) activity to guide students through this tricky concept."

The latter three facets (perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge) offer even more possibilities for growth, focusing on the human dimension of the learning experience. An objective for the perspective facet might be to “develop a greater sense of students’ misconceptions that can make this subject challenging.” For empathy, I might consider an objective to “appreciate and take advantage of the diverse motivations that inspired students and brought them to my class.” A self-knowledge objective could include “identify one topic that I do not understand well enough to offer a clear explanation.”

By taking the time to write such learning objectives for ourselves, we can align our educational practices with our longer-term professional goals. These goals might be to improve our teaching practices, expand our scholarly expertise, or serve as a role model for bringing empathy and compassion to our professional practice. These practices of reflecting and writing explicit self-learning objectives can also help us to exhibit the growth mindset and lifelong learning goals that we hold for our students. Hopefully, this can lead to more reflections on successes when the next decade comes to a close.

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