



Objective setting for Tools for Learning

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Specific and Measurable or broad and flexible - Which serves the learners best?

There are some good reasons why we often start the planning of a training or non-formal learning activity by expressing the objectives or goals. It demonstrates that we know where the activity fits in the bigger picture of policy or strategy; it gives us something to evaluate or review against; it enables us to demonstrate how prepared we are; it adds a robustness to our planning. But what are the disadvantages of formal or strict objective setting, and how can we tune our approach to objective setting so that learning is maximised? In the 1980s a friend of mine worked extensively with groups of young people who were sent on his courses instead of going to jail, or who were seen by the authorities to be so much at risk of committing crime that they needed some special experience to help them change.

When the groups arrived, my friend and his colleagues explained that they had a fleet of canoes, some tents, ropes, helmets and harnesses and that they knew the rivers, lakes and mountains of the area very well. Food and accommodation were arranged but the programme was not prepared. The young people were encouraged to say what they needed and wanted to do and to co-design the programme with the trainers.

If you had asked the participants in these courses to define the objectives, I guess they would have given one of three responses:

- To get the authorities off my back
- To avoid going to jail
- To survive the week without getting too wet in the rain
- To learn how to paddle a canoe or climb a mountain
- To have a good laugh

If you had asked the trainers, they might have said:

- To develop interpersonal skills

- To change attitudes to authority
- To develop team working skills or
- To generate a sense of hope and purpose

And the authorities might have said:

- To reduce offending or criminal behaviour
- To get “them” off the streets for a while
- To build their character
- To try to get some sense into them

So which ones are the better objectives?

Maybe there are all equally valid and just represent positions of the different stakeholders? None of them particularly follow the old mnemonic of SMART (see below). The outcomes from the programmes were genuinely difficult to measure. They were like beauty – difficult to define but we know it when we see it. So if the learning experiences or the tools for learning that we are planning have outcomes that are hard to define, how do we manage the demand for a crisp and clear set of objectives?

SPECIFIC

What exactly do you want to achieve? What learning do you want to see?

MEASURABLE

How will you know it has been achieved? What can you measure or observe?

ACHIEVABLE

Given what you know about the people involved, how likely is that they can achieve this in the time available and with the resources available?

REALISTIC

How realistic is this objective? What other influences and circumstances might affect the likelihood of success?

TIMED

What are the timescales? When do you want to start? When do you want to finish? What other factors will affect the timing?

Like many things, the biggest benefits of objective setting perhaps come from the thinking process rather than from lists produced. Some questions that come to mind to help that process are...

- Who are the stakeholders in this?

- What do they want out of their investment of time or money or effort?
- How will they know they have got it?

This last question relates to the M of SMarT - Measurable.

How will the stakeholders recognise the desired achievement, progress, change, performance, motivation, engagement or distance travelled? What constitutes suitable evidence?

This issue of measurement once got me into an argument with a youth worker who was under pressure from Government to 'measure' the outcomes of youth work. He had a good point; much of what we do in non-formal learning is difficult to measure in the strictest sense of the word – but good objectives enable us to know what evidence we might look for. Some stakeholders are more comfortable with things they can put numbers on, whilst for others an observable change that can be described in less prosaic terms is more valuable.

The Solutions Focus approach to therapy and coaching (Jackson and McKergow 2007) uses the concept of the Future Perfect – a description of the ideal state: The basis of this is to suppose that the best outcome has already occurred and to answer questions like “How will you know? What will be different? What will others notice? Appreciative Inquiry also encourages us to address challenges by considering what is going well already and using that as the basis for the dreaming about the future. This type of thinking can be applied at programme level in individual Tools for Learning.

An opposite approach to setting objectives is to simply state the problem that needs to be tackled and to prefix it with “To solve the problem of...” or “To explore possible responses to...”

However, we need to consider the motivational factor of objective setting here – which is more inspiring for you - the problem based approach or the solutions based approach? When designing or adopting Tools for Learning, most of us can't predict all the outcomes: Some will be intentional – and maybe we include them in our list of objectives, but some will be unintentional or accidental – so we can't write them down in any level of detail in advance.

But many of those unintentional outcomes will be positive ones and we don't want to miss them when evaluating our activity or event.

The lack of a prepared programme in my example above might have been one way of saying that we trust the processes we use and we know that the outcomes will be valuable. And by keeping the objectives broad and less-specific, we allow ourselves more freedom to respond to the needs, interests, aspirations or limitations of the participants. It's a higher risk strategy than stating in advance exactly what we intend to achieve, and for some stakeholders that might be too much. It might require too much trust – not only trusting the process but also trusting the skills and character of those running the process and those participating in it.

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