

# Shifting Learning Objectives Into Personalized Student Goals

Posting learning objectives is a common instructional strategy used in classrooms daily. It makes sense, because having clear objectives creates an environment where students and their teacher—in theory—are on the same page for that lesson’s or unit’s expectations. But here’s the rub: simply stating an objective, which is often written to focus on the teaching goal, can easily miss the hook that helps students *commit to their own learning*. And that commitment is important—in our analysis of research for *The New Classroom Instruction That Works*, we found numerous studies in classrooms with diverse learners that showed when students set their *own* learning goals and monitor their *own* progress, it has a powerful effect on learning outcomes—in many cases, significantly narrowing achievement gaps.

To make the shift to high-quality, expert-level instructional practice, standard learning objectives need to evolve from what a teacher needs to teach to what a student *wants to learn*. Students need to see themselves in the objective, finding it relevant to their own lives. This means moving from the standard “Here’s what you will learn . . .” perspective to one that asks students what meaning they will find in the lesson. To be clear, we’re not asking teachers to do away with creating and posting learning objectives—teacher-written objectives are important for teacher clarity and aligning standards with what they need to teach. Instead, we’re recommending that this step becomes a precursor to students writing their own goals. This can be accomplished by asking students to rewrite the objective as a personal statement that addresses what and why they will learn.

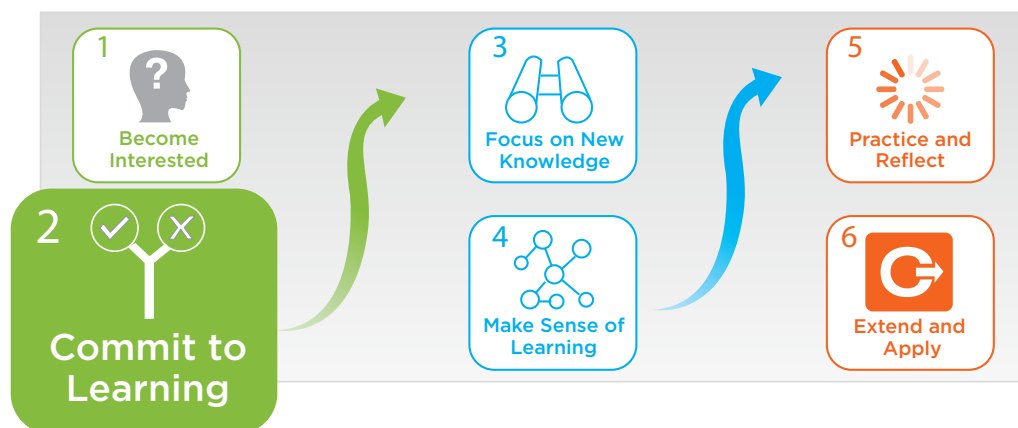
This personal commitment to learning is an essential step in our six-phase model for student learning, an evidence-based model powered by brain science on curiosity and memory (see graphic below). From this science, we know that “we must convince our brains it’s worth the effort to stay powered on. We must tell our brains we *want* to learn something (e.g., because we find it fascinating), *need* to learn something (e.g., because we find it useful), or *should* learn something (e.g., because it will help someone else).”<sup>1</sup>

Teachers can use this strategy to have their students redefine a lesson’s success criteria in personally relevant ways. Consider the goals we set in our own lives—we’re the most successful when we truly want to accomplish them and believe we can. It’s one thing to be told to do something, but the motivation is far stronger when it comes from within. For student goals, it’s no different. As Jere Brophy defined in 2004, student motivation is a combination of value and expectancy.<sup>2</sup> For students to be motivated by their goals, they must be able to answer several questions: What is the value of this lesson? What’s in it for me? And can I achieve this goal?

One way to help them recognize “what’s in it for me?” is to have them rewrite the learning objectives by adding the phrase “so that,” like this:

*I will learn/explain/demonstrate \_\_\_\_\_, so that I can \_\_\_\_\_.*

This addition helps students make that day’s lesson personally relevant. As students take ownership of the learning objective and make it personally relevant, they begin to commit to their own learning.



<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, B., Gibson, T., & Rouleau, K. (2020). *Learning that sticks: A brain-based model for k-12 instructional design and delivery*. ASCD. p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Brophy, J. (2004). *Motivating students to learn*. Routledge.

It's understandable if making this shift feels a bit overwhelming. Here are five guiding principles to keep in mind:

1. Concrete, achievable goals are highly effective for straightforward tasks.
2. Specific learning goals are better than vague ones.
3. Goals are more effective when paired with feedback.
4. Students should set mastery (not performance) goals.
5. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to exert effort to achieve goals.

Below are some examples of how to translate general learning objectives into more meaningful goals for students.

| Daily Learning Objective   | Student Learning Goal (Success Criteria)  |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Vague:</i> We will write an opinion essay.</p> <p><i>Specific:</i> We will use a graphic organizer to plan an opinion essay that includes a topic and supporting details <b>so that</b> we have the necessary information to begin writing.</p> <p>We will give and receive feedback about our essay plans <b>so that</b> we don't have gaps in our information.</p> | <p>I can use the text to identify a topic (and my opinion) for my essay.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> I believe the most influential character in the story was _____ .</p> <p>I can identify three relevant details from the text that support my topic and opinion.</p> <p>I can discuss my opinion and supporting details with a partner and add information if necessary.</p> <p>I can use a feedback protocol to give my partner specific feedback about their work.</p>   |
| <p><i>Vague:</i> We will use the text to add more details to our opinion essays.</p> <p><i>Specific:</i> We will use the text to add statements of explanation to our relevant details <b>so that</b> it is clear how the text supports each detail and gives credibility to our opinion.</p>  | <p>I can write two statements of explanation for each of my details.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> This detail about Grandma explains her relationship with other family members: they saw her as having wisdom, which made her very influential.</p> <p>I can explain to a partner exactly where I found information in the text to support my explanations.</p>  |
| <p><i>Vague:</i> We will write conclusions for our essays.</p> <p><i>Specific:</i> We will learn about what makes a conclusion effective <b>so that</b> we can write a strong concluding statement.</p>  | <p>I can analyze two opinion essays with my group and add to the class chart outlining the characteristics of their conclusions.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Effective conclusions restate the opinion and very briefly summarize the evidence supporting the opinion.</p> <p>I can analyze a third conclusion on my own, applying the information we generated as a class.</p> <p>I can draft a conclusion statement and highlight how I have incorporated characteristics of effective conclusions in my work.</p> |

Source: *The New Classroom Instruction That Works*, p. 35

Presenting teacher-defined learning objectives *plus* using student-identified objectives and success criteria is a simple shift but not an easy one. However, integrating these instructional practices into your classroom helps support the development of the following lifelong benefits for students:

- **Helping students learn to create better goals.** There's some secret sauce when it comes to setting successful goals that support student motivation. Students often are driven by **performance goals** based on wanting to look smart and meet an external expectation or requirement. They're usually tied to earning a specific grade (I want to pass the test; I will get an A in English; I will write a good essay). The problem with these goals is that students tend to "feel helpless, inadequate, and crestfallen when the going gets tough."<sup>3</sup>

To combat this despair, teachers can help students adopt a growth mindset and set **mastery goals** that embrace challenges and failure as parts of the natural process of getting better at just about anything. Rather than focusing on looking smart, students focus on wanting to get smarter by learning a new skill, mastering a new task, or understanding something new. In essence, **mastery goals** tend to focus on a larger purpose of learning and foster a mindset that doesn't crumble at the first signs of difficulty.

In addition, when students want to learn something because they intrinsically find it fascinating, useful, helpful, or important, they're more likely to form a deep connection to that learning. They're also more likely to retain the information after the lesson or unit has ended.

- **Helping students chart and monitor their own path.** The overall mission for this shift is for teachers to help students see themselves within a lesson and then support those students as they take ownership over their learning. Through the combination of rewriting the learning objective to make it personally relevant and then defining how they'll engage and monitor their own learning, students begin to chart their own pathway for successful learning, which ultimately creates more motivated learners.

This is when another component to successful goal setting comes into play. Both **short-term** and **long-term** goals need to be part of the equation. Short-term goals are valuable for ensuring that students believe the success criteria is achievable. Clear goals and learning objectives tell students exactly what's expected of them and what success will look like each step of the way, acting as the mile markers on their path. This leads them to successfully achieving their long-term goals, which are crafted to focus on the big picture "so what" of a lesson: the reason the entire unit has value to them.

- **Helping students appreciate the value of their effort.** Not only does goal accomplishment release an addictive dopamine rush within our brains, it also helps to build the personality trait called "internal focus of control."<sup>4</sup> **Internal focus of control** is the belief that your own efforts have a greater impact on your success than do external factors. The size of the "success"—accomplishing large or small goals—doesn't necessarily matter. "Over time, as students set and achieve goals, they see their successes not as the result of luck or talent but rather their own efforts and are thus more apt to see themselves as masters of their own destinies."<sup>5</sup> This learned habit can become a long-term personality trait that will help students in the classroom and beyond.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Seligman, M. E. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. Vintage.

<sup>5</sup> Goodwin, B., Rouleau, K. (2023). *The new classroom instruction that works: The best research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. ASCD. p. 28-29.

# Suggested Next Steps for Professional Conversation and Collaborative Learning

## For Principals/Leaders

To help initiate a conversation with your teachers about this shift, here are some reflective questions/prompts you can ask in individual meetings or in a whole-group setting.

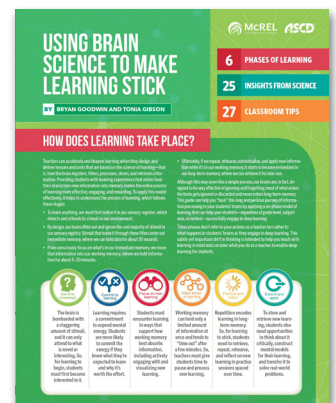
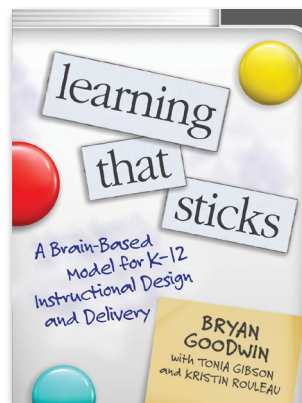
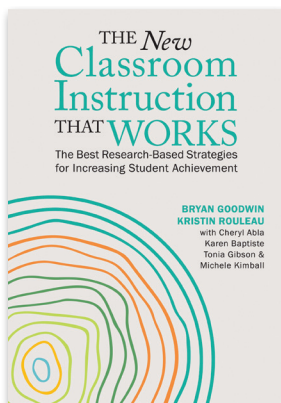
- How do we communicate the importance of learning to our students—and what's the role of student voice in determining why something might be important?
- What role do our students play in determining what success looks like for their learning?
- How do we engage students in monitoring their own learning?

## For Teachers

For individual classroom teachers and other instructional staff, here are some reflective questions/prompts you can ask yourself and your grade-level or subject area teams.

- Why might this lesson/unit be important to students outside of school? (Hint: Ask students! Your reasons and theirs might not be the same!)
- What will successful learning look like for our students in this unit?
- What are some mastery goals students might create for this unit? (Having examples for them is helpful as they learn how to set their own goals.)
- How will students know they are making progress in their learning?

## Additional Resources Available at [store.mcrel.org](http://store.mcrel.org)



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