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Writing Effective Learning Objectives

Angela Wiens is a technical communication consultant with more than 16 years experience in the information technology industry. Angela's roles have included technical writer, instructional designer, and information architect. She has developed computer-based training, online help, user guides, and training manuals, and has designed content structures for intranets and web sites. Angela has created paper-based self-study courses and web-based training on behalf of PHARMALearn.com, a CPE program of the Faculty of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Alberta. Angela is a member of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and the former Edmonton Liaison of STC Alberta.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this session participants should be able to:

1. Explore the importance of learning objectives in the instructional design process.
2. Define the components of properly written learning objectives.
3. Define the categories (domains) of learning objectives.
4. Write measurable objectives.

Abstract

Objectives are critical components to a well-designed course. The objectives – also known as *performance objectives*, *behavioural objectives*, or *learning outcomes* – are statements of what learners should be able to do when they complete the course. These statements specifically identify what behaviour changes will result from taking the course as well as the measures of success that will be used to judge the course's adequacy. More broadly, objectives identify the scope of the course development project and focus the contents of the course.

A variety of individuals in the learning process can benefit from well-written objectives. To the course designer, objectives provide a mechanism to select content, develop a strategy, and conduct assessments. To the learner, objectives help outline expectations and provide direction while taking the course. To the learner's supervisor, objectives serve as input to decisions regarding whether the learner should take the course and whether the intended learning has occurred.

Two levels of objectives exist: course objective and content objectives. A course objective, which identifies what the course is intended to deliver, should not be confused with a course goal, which states the purpose of the course. Content objectives identify the learner's intended behavioural changes after taking each unit, module, and lesson of the course.

Three components compose objectives: performance, conditions, and standards. Properly written objectives include all three components. In addition, there are different categories, or *domains*, of learning objectives. “Cognitive” deals with thinking and intellectual skills; “psychomotor” deals with motor skills; and “affective” deals with attitudes and values. Each domain has different possible levels of learning. Objectives must be written with the domain and level of learning in mind.

Self-Assessment Questions

1. What importance have I placed on learning objectives?
2. Have I written learning objectives that include all three components?
3. Have I written learning objectives that are measurable?

References

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