Roadmap for Professional Development: How to Write Achievable and Measurable Learning Objectives

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In the beginning, there was no CMP. "What?!," you may ask. Hard as it may seem for those of you who have been members of RID for only the last decade and a half, however, the truth is that maintaining certification by documenting continuing education was instituted as a formal requirement as recently as the 1993 RID Convention. Since then, lifelong education has become a pursuit of RID members, and it is the goal of RID approved sponsors to ensure that the educational opportunities offered will be more than just "seat in a chair" hours.

One of the keys to planning a successful class or workshop is setting appropriate educational objectives. In many cases, activities are planned by individuals who are master interpreters but who have not had education or experience as teachers. As a result, "educational objectives" are often taken to mean a list of things that will be done during the activity. This interpretation, aside from failing to provide accurate information, deprives the workshop sponsor of valuable information that can lead to a successful activity and a satisfied audience.

Broadly speaking, well-written educational objectives will accomplish three things:

1) give you, the planner and/or presenter, a comprehensive viewpoint of what you are trying to accomplish (e.g. are you trying to achieve too much?, are you using the appropriate format for the time frame allotted?, are you aiming at an appropriate level of instruction for the audience?);
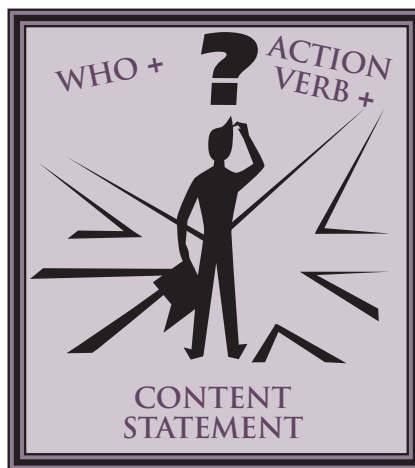
2) give the potential participants an idea of whether the presentation/workshop is appropriate for them and their skill level, the result of which is that the group that attends will be the one in which you have planned; and

3) help you to plan the activities and materials needed to impart the information as well as to develop the method by which you will know whether you have been successful.

So, do you need a degree in education to be able to write good educational objectives? Not at all. When you first start thinking about developing a workshop or class, you already have thoughts about what it is you want participants to glean from your presentation, whether that is new knowledge or new skills. The objectives you write are simply a list of basic sentences that focus on those new or improved abilities or knowledge. These sentences should follow a specific format. They must start with "who," and "the who" should be the participants, not the instructor. "The who" should be followed by an action verb, then the sentence will end with a content statement. The statements must be observable and measurable, which is why they require "action" verbs.

For example, have you presented a workshop on preparation for the NIC test? If your educational objective is - "Participants will better understand the process of the new NIC test" - how will you know you have succeeded? How can you observe or measure "better understanding?" That statement is vague and hard to measure.

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Instead, try these objectives which help to maintain more focus and achievable goals: Participants will be able to:

1. state the full name of the initials NIC
2. state the number of portions there are on the NIC
3. describe the portions of the NIC
4. indicate the date the NIC was first given.

With these more streamlined goals, you are better able to determine whether the participants have learned the information and to what extent they have mastered it.

Similarly, if you hope to improve someone's ability to perform a given task, the objective should not be "participants will improve their ability to remember information" but rather how many words they will be able to remember in a memory test, or how much longer they will be able to interpret in a practice video or whatever the task or goal for improvement you are seeking to be the end result of your workshop.

Words like "understand," "know" or "improve" might give a vague sense of accomplishment to the participants as well as the presenter, but they do not provide feedback to instructors and allow them to adjust the teaching or the curriculum for optimum success. Additionally, they do not allow sponsors to make good decisions about choosing instructors for future offerings.

As you read this article, you may think that this information does not really apply to you. Actually, the same strategy for narrowing the focus of educational objectives can be very useful in multiple situations. First, it can help you to assess whether a specific workshop or course meets your needs. Additionally, specified learning objectives also can help you organize your own learning. If you decide to design your own independent study plan for earning CEUs, your sponsor will want to know your specific objectives and how you will accomplish these goals and evaluate your success in the project.

For example, suppose you have agreed to mentor a non-certified member who is preparing for the NIC performance test. Such an activity may lend itself to an Independent Study Plan. As you design that plan, the format mentioned above for crafting objectives still applies, however, "the who" in this instance will be you; the mentor. What will you learn from this experience that will enhance your professional growth?

Your objectives should include more specific action verbs such as "describe," "state," "list" or "explain" rather than the more vague action verbs such as "understand" or "know."

The action verb will be followed by a very specific content statement. For example, statements such as, "the vocabulary associated with high school math" or "the ethical challenges of the mental health intake procedure" are vague and not appropriate for "the who." A more improved content statement would be "effective language for giving feedback," "formats for evaluation sheets" or "types of classifiers and their grammatical function."

Remember, objectives in this case are related to what you are studying in preparing to mentor, not what the mentee will do or learn.

In short, well-written educational objectives, which are simple sentences using action verbs that are observable and measurable, can work for everyone, including event planners, instructors and participants. They are crucial to the success of the event and play an important role at all stages of planning including before, during and after any educational activity. They are not difficult to write once you get accustomed to the idea that the event should have a more focused and specific set of goals to achieve. This will ensure greater success in the participants be able to demonstrate the new knowledge and/or skills they have attained as a result of attending your educational workshop.

Take these steps to ensure your next presentation will be one in which the participants will do more than just fill a seat. ■

Below is a sampling of observable action verbs:

Identify	Demonstrate	Recall
List	Perform	Specify
Describe	Defend	Distinguish
Compare/contrast	Justify	Produce
Classify	Dispute	
Analyze	Explain	

If you need assistance, the Professional Development Committee can help get you on the right track. Go to http://rid.org/aboutRID/leadership/index.cfm/AID/128 for contact information and a list of committee members.

Formative Assessment Examples:

Repeat Back
Learners repeating back what they just heard or learned, paraphrasing, explaining, etc. Works in pairs or small groups. In groups, sharing one, two, or three of the most important things they remember from the material (Bowman, 2005, p. 232).

Think Back
Learners think about the new information and how it fits with what they already know. Share comments or questions about the content; share how the new information might be used in professional situations. This can be reflection time that provides learners the opportunity to create connections and consider the meaning of the new information (Bowman, 2005, p. 233).

Teach Back
Learners work in pairs and take turns in teacher/learner roles for the opportunity to master the material by further explaining the concepts to others (Bowman, 2005, p. 233).

Play Back:
Learners do improve or role-play to practice applying the information or strategies taught (Bowman, 2005, p. 233).

Report Back
Learners prepare a report (formal or informal) in order to share the content with colleagues and apply in professional settings (Bowman, 2005, p. 233).

Think/Pair/Square/Share
A "Pair Share" simply asks learners to turn to their neighbor to engage in a short discussion on a given topic (Bowman, 2005, p. 37). In a more advanced version of this, asking learners to first reflect on their own (think) then pair up to discuss (pair) then two pairs come together to broaden or deepen the discussion (square) and then share a summary of the discussion with the full group (share).

Poster Sessions
Various activities can be combined with a poster session which provides an opportunity to display the information visually and for others to review the content of the posters individual, in pairs, or in groups, with or without prompts for consideration and deeper thinking as they review. Consider an app like VoiceThread to visually display information online asynchronously.

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Watch, Listen, and Reteach Right Away
Listen to learners' conversations and observe behaviors as they engage in training activities; ensure activities are included throughout the training so that opportunities are present to immediately review and reteach any concepts that appear to be unclear (Bowman, 2005, p. 234).

Discussions
After instruction, provide a few minutes of whole group processing in which participants can talk about what they learned and time to address other questions/concerns they may have (Bowman, 2005, p. 234). When providing group discussion topics and questions, the way you frame the discussion is important in getting honest and accurate information: ask about pros and cons, don't ask questions people are uncomfortable answering honestly, consider phrasing in a way that elicits thoughtful replies (not just simple, shallow answers) (Suskie, 2009, p. 188).

Minute Paper
A popular and widely used technique! Stop the training a few minutes before scheduled (breaks, lunch, end of each day, etc.) and ask leaners to respond briefly to some variation of the two questions: 1) What was the most important thing you learned? 2) What important question remains unanswered? Responses can be written on paper or index cards (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 148) or instructors can use online survey software to allow the use of computers and cell phones (i.e. Survey Monkey).

Muddiest Point
A quick way to collect information! Ask learners to jot down a quick response to one question: "What was the muddiest point in _____?" Learners can respond to a lecture, discussion, or assignment, etc. (Angelo & Cross, 193, p. 154). Instructors can use online survey software to allow the use of computers and cell phones to respond (i.e. Survey Monkey).

Empty Outlines
Provide learners with an empty or partially completed outline related to instruction; after instruction call on learners to share responses to review the content (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 138).

One Sentence Summary
Learners answer the question: "Who does what to whom, where, how, and why?" As a way of summarizing a large amount of information on a given topic in a single sentence. It is a helpful practice for chunking information and makes it easy for the instructor to quickly review responses (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 183).

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Concept Map

Learners draw or diagram the various concepts presented; provides an opportunity to show relationships of the ideas learned and visually represent the conceptual schema held by the learner; an effective method for self and peer-assessment as well ((Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 196).

Application Cards

After learners have completed the lesson, the instructor engages them by handing out an index card and asks them to write down at least one possible, real-world application for what they have just learned (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 138). Alternatively, for online learning, an app like VoiceThread could be used for learners to add examples to a teacher-generated prompt such as: "How is this applicable?"

Summative Assessment Examples:

3X5 Reflection Cards (take away, etc.)

These are also known as exit cards and they provide an opportunity for learners to respond to questions at the conclusion of the day or at the end of the training. Try simple questions like: "Write what your main take away is from this training" or "Today I learned." Adding a prize drawing at the close of the training is a helpful way to ensure people fill them out!

Interviews or Focus Groups

Interviews can be conducted with individual or groups of learners to determine understanding of the information (and can allow for follow up questions); frequently used with language objectives (Allen, 2004, p. 88). Focus groups are planned, small group discussions using constructed questions; allow for probing questions and clarifications and allow all to hear and respond to the responses of others (Suskie, 2009, p. 195).

Poster Sessions

A question about the training is written at the top of a poster with several posters placed around the room. Learners make their way around the room responding to the question, and reviewing the responses placed on posters by other learners; information can be added or check marks used to agree with earlier responses. Consider an app like VoiceThread to collect responses from learners online asynchronously.

Chain Notes

A question about the training is written on the outside of an envelope and then passed around the room; learners respond to the question on index cards, spending a short amount of time on the question before passing it on (several envelopes could be used with different questions or prompts on each) (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 322).

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Teacher-Designed Feedback Forms
Standard or generic forms are easy to use, but provide little data to improve teaching! If you use the standard forms (or standard questions) add a teacher-generated form as well, or at least teacher-generated questions; these allow for feedback on specific topics related to the training written by the instructor (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 330).

Group Instructional Feedback Technique
Using someone other than the teacher to facilitate a feedback session where learners are polled and responses collected from three questions: 1) What works? 2) What doesn't? and 3) What can be done to improve it? The facilitator summarizes the information and the instructor is able to see the training through the eyes of an observer (Angelo & Cross, 1993, p. 334).

Tests (Authentic or Traditional)
Authentic tests may be problem based (a complex, real world problem presented for learners to solve using the information learned)
 and a traditional test incorporates essay, multiple choice, true-false, matching, or completion formats and requires learners to recall or recognize answers (Allen, 2004, p. 80).

Portfolio
A compilation of the work completed over a period of time that often requires learners to reflect their achievement as it relates to the learning objectives; directly engage learners in the assessment process; showcase portfolios highlight the extent of learning by including the best work and developmental portfolios show student progress (Allen, 2004, p. 90; Suskie, 2009, p. 202).

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