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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## A Learning Activity is Not a Learning Outcome

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One of the most common pedagogical errors I see in course syllabi is confusing a learning activity for a learning outcome. This often becomes evident when reviewing course learning objectives. A professor will write a course objective that reads "The student will participate in class discussions." Or, "The student will write a 12-page paper on an assigned topic." Or, "The student will submit two case studies from their ministry context."

Those assignments provide clear expectations of student learning *activities*, but they reveal little about desired learning *outcomes*. What is the student supposed to learn as a result of doing those activities? Or, in what ways and to what extent will those activities provide evidence of student learning?

The potential miss in confusing a learning activity for a learning outcome is that a teacher will be satisfied with grading an assignment, like a research paper, but fail to assess what learning (knowledge or skill) the student has acquired.

A **learning activity** is something you want the students to do in order to achieve a learning outcome.

A **learning outcome** is the evidence the student provides that they have understood a concept, gained knowledge, mastered a level of competence, or changed affect (attitude, appreciation, or opinion).

This can be tricky in that sometimes an assignment can be the outcome. For example, in an

English composition class writing an effective essay can be an outcome. But in a theology or philosophy course, writing an essay may be a learning activity that leads to an outcome. In the former, the teacher assesses the quality of the student assignment, like form, grammar, styles, etc. In the latter, the teacher assesses the essay for evidence of critical thinking, correct application of theological concepts, logical reasoning, avoiding errors of bias, sound interpretation, responsible use of facts, comprehensiveness, etc.

### **Well-written Learning Objectives Can Help**

One way to overcome the trap of mistaking one thing for another is to design well-written learning objectives. Instead of identifying what a student will do ("The student will write a case study," "The student will read the text"), which is a learning activity, identify what the student will demonstrate ("The student will demonstrate . . .") which is a learning outcome.

Avoid being satisfied with vague educational terminology like, "The student will understand . . ." without providing a criterion for what constitutes understanding. Use a taxonomy of learning to define the quality, characteristic, or criterion of understanding you will look for in your learning outcome (e.g., Wiggins and McTighe's taxonomy of understanding). **Rubrics Can Help** Another way to reveal the learning intent of an activity is by applying a learning assessment rubric. A well-written rubric will identify the criterion and the quality of learning outcomes. Some rubrics evaluate the *product* of a student assignment, but fail to identify the learning that is supposed to result from the assignment. Elegant rubrics can do both, but at least try to write your rubrics for outcomes of learning and not merely for evaluating a student product (an assignment).

It can help to differentiate outcomes from activities by placing them in different headings in your course syllabus. Needless to say, your learning activities should align with your published learning outcomes: (1) In what ways will the learning activity help the student achieve the learning outcome (if it doesn't, then don't assign it), or (2) In what ways will the learning activity demonstrate that the student has achieved the learning outcome?

Attached is a graphic handout that can help you differentiate an activity (assignment) from an outcome.

<https://wabash.center/2020/02/a-learning-activity-is-not-a-learning-outcome/>