



Teaching in the “SLO” Lane

The Problem

Psychology is a diverse field that is always growing in knowledge and theory. Each month my intent is to share with my students the publications I read that are relevant to what they learn in the classroom and to their daily lives. Due to the short amount of time I have to teach the required content, I am unable to provide my students with the vast amounts of information I learn from my readings. I began to wonder if my students were able to connect how course concepts discussed during a semester relate to one another, as well as whether I was providing them with functional knowledge they needed beyond the classroom. Based on these questions, I formed a solution: teaching with Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs).

What are SLOs?

Student Learning Outcomes reflect what students must know by the time they complete the course. These broad outcomes were broken down by topic and chapter within our master syllabus for each course, and were determined by and aligned with the American Psychological Association’s “Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major.” While these learning outcomes have been reflected in my syllabus for years, I had never stopped to think about their value and how they should be implemented to reinvigorate and focus my courses.

Beginning on the first day of class, I talk about SLOs, what they are, and how they will be used in the course in combination with Bloom’s Taxonomy. The outcomes become a consistent part of the course; students are shown and reminded about the SLOs as we discuss each chapter during the semester. They are also posted within the college’s learning management system (LMS).

Practical Applications of SLOs

I initially believed SLOs would limit my creativity and academic freedom. However, I found that by realigning my courses with SLOs, I have more freedom to create engaging lessons that help students build a functional knowledge base.

Using SLOs serves as a funnel for the latest research in my field, and I now focus only on findings that directly relate to an outcome. This focus has eliminated the need to cram excessive amounts of information into each lesson.

As an example, in my Lifespan Psychology course, I incorporated a new research article about the long-term effects of child neglect into a lesson about the

psychosocial development of children. Using the SLOs lens, I was able to focus on multiple concepts directly related to the designated outcomes for that chapter. Students had an entire 80-minute class period to discuss the article and answer critical-thinking questions based on the topic. This technique proved to be more effective and practical than a traditional lecture about the topic, and the discussion continued long after the unit ended.

I am an advocate of active classroom learning, and using SLOs as the foundation for my courses has helped me select the most appropriate learning activities for class sessions. While some activities I used in the past were fun and engaging, they lacked learning value. SLOs’ alignment and learning value became my tools for determining whether an activity should be used in class. Through this refinement of my teaching toolkit, I have found more class time for open discussion, critical thinking, and hands-on activities that bring concepts to life. For example, in the chapter on sensation and perception in my General Psychology course, students must understand the structures and functions of the ear. Based on this learning outcome, I created an activity during which I bring a pile of household items to class and ask the students to decipher what each item represents in the human ear. After they identify each anatomical structure, they help each other line them up in the appropriate order, signifying the pathway of soundwaves, starting from the outermost structure to the brain. A student volunteer plays a loud gong sound on a cell phone or laptop, and the chain of passing sound waves commences. Later, students receive a pictorial guide that reminds them about the analogy between each household item and its corresponding anatomical structure.

At the end of each semester, students have the opportunity to play Jeopardy as a way to review for the comprehensive final exam. To prepare, students complete Jeopardy lists throughout the semester, which can be used during the game to respond to questions and scenarios. By using SLOs, I redefine these lists and bring them into alignment with core concepts. Students discover that similarities between Jeopardy lists and SLOs substantiate they have gained a strong understanding of the concepts.

The Process: Building Your Course Around SLOs

Incorporating SLOs into my teaching has challenged me to think about how I design each of my courses. My process includes updating lessons, handouts, learning activities, and assessments to focus on these critical outcomes, coupled with teaching students about Bloom’s Taxonomy. It was a time-consuming process, but was

well worth the effort. The process includes four steps:

1. Reflect on the outcomes listed in the master syllabus and categorize them by chapter.
2. Categorize the outcomes and connect them with the corresponding lessons, special topics, and handouts. Extraneous information I previously focused on was eliminated in favor of the SLOs.
3. Once lessons are in place, update the planned learning activities. Over the course of a semester, I revitalized three psychology courses. Activities that were in alignment with SLOs were retained, while those activities that had no learning value were discarded.
4. The final step is assessment. To ensure SLOs were properly assessed within each exam, I developed "test blueprints." These blueprints included a table for each chapter in a unit exam, typically four chapters at a time. The columns contained the SLOs and rows indicated what level of Bloom's Taxonomy was assessed by that question. The table allowed me to see how many questions came from each chapter, ensuring equitable distribution of SLOs on the exam. The test blueprints challenged me to develop questions that slowly progressed from lower levels of the taxonomy, such as memorization, to higher levels, such as application and analysis, as students progressed through the semester.

Benefits and Effectiveness of SLOs

In addition to streamlining and enhancing class time, teaching with SLOs helped my students develop better study skills. Due to the availability of each chapter's SLOs to students via the college's LMS, students learned how to use them to focus their studying by examining the verbs that are part of each outcome. The verbs indicate what they should be able to do with those concepts by the end of a chapter: outline, explain, debate, create, etc. Over time, students became more autonomous in studying, asking less often for a study guide or other information. Students have access to a wealth of resources within the LMS, but I found that this information became more cumbersome as I added new resources, videos, and study tools each semester. Realignment with SLOs streamlined the study aids that were made available to students through the LMS, thus eliminating distracting and nonessential content.

Consistent use of SLOs also helps students link previous learning to new concepts, as well as helps them make the connection between the concepts and real-world settings.

I now focus each lesson, chapter, and unit on SLOs. I feel more confident that students finish my courses with functional knowledge that transfers not only to a future career, but also to other courses outside of psychology. Students frequently tell me about the connections they notice between psychology and biology or between psychology and sociology.

To gauge whether students were truly benefitting from the use of SLOs, I sought quantitative and qualitative feedback.

Quantitative feedback relied on final exam scores matched to individual SLOs on the exam. Well over 60 percent of students correctly responded to questions ranging from social issues and mental health to theory applications.

Regarding qualitative feedback collected through anonymous surveys administered during class, over 90 percent of students across three different courses reported using SLOs to gauge how well they mastered the concepts; 85 percent believed they were successful in mastering SLOs; and nearly 80 percent said using SLOs in their courses was beneficial.

I watched students become aware of what is expected of them, which has given me the opportunity to teach them metacognitive skills. After students completed an anonymous study techniques survey administered after the first exam, outlining which strategies proved successful, I discovered that students were using SLOs to their benefit.

Three different students in one course commented on the importance of using SLOs in studying:

- "I make sure I understand each one thoroughly."
- "I make notecards from the SLOs, key terms, and questions from the back of the chapter in the textbook."
- "I rewrote all my notes in a concise study guide that would allow for better understanding and execution of SLOs."

Conclusion

Overall, incorporating SLOs into my courses has changed the way I teach. I am now able to easily and efficiently incorporate the latest pertinent research and social issues and engage students in discussions about current events as they arise. Additionally, when I change textbooks, the transition is easier because I know exactly what to focus on within each lesson and overall unit. SLOs have become a roadmap for each of my courses, and teaching in the SLO lane has put my students on the fast track toward success.

What are your thoughts on using SLOs as a course roadmap? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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