Knowing Your Learning Target

The first thing students need to learn is what they’re supposed to be learning.

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One of Toni Taladay’s students walked into Lenape Elementary School wearing a colorful tie-dyed shirt with a tiny bull’s-eye shape in the lower front corner. That small design caught the eye of his classmate, who exclaimed, “Look, Joey, you’re wearing a learning target!” In the Armstrong School District in southwestern Pennsylvania, learning targets are everywhere: in lesson plans, on bulletin boards, in hallways—and as this story illustrates—firmly on students’ minds.

What Is a Shared Learning Target?
If you own a global positioning system (GPS), you probably can’t imagine taking a trip without it. Unlike a printed map, a GPS provides up-to-the-minute information about where you are, the distance to your destination, how long until you get there, and exactly what to do when you make a wrong turn. But a GPS can’t do any of that without a precise description of where you want to go.

Think of shared learning targets in the same way. They convey to students the destination for the lesson—what to learn, how deeply to learn it, and exactly how to demonstrate their new learning. In our estimation (Moss & Brookhart, 2009) and that of others (Seidle, Rimmere, & Prenzel, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2009), the intention for the lesson is one of the most important things students should learn. Without a precise description of where they are headed, too many students are “flying blind.”

The Dangers of Flying Blind
No matter what we decide students need to learn, not much will happen until students understand what they are supposed to learn during a lesson and set their sights on learning it. Regardless of how important the content, how engaging the activity, how formative the assessment, or how differentiated the instruction, unless all students see, recognize, and understand the learning target from the very beginning of the lesson, one factor will remain constant: The teacher will always be the only one providing the direction, focusing on getting students to meet the instructional objectives. The students, on the other hand, will focus on doing what the teacher says, rather than on learning. This flies in the face of what we know about nurturing motivated, self-regulated, and intentional learners (Zimmerman, 2001).

Students who don’t know the intention of a lesson expend precious time and energy trying to figure out what their
some who tried did not share targets for every lesson. Some simply paraphrased instructional objectives, wrote the target statements on the board, or told students what they were going to learn at the beginning of a lesson. Yet, even their exploratory attempts became game changers. When teachers consistently shared learning targets in meaningful ways, students quickly became more capable decision makers who knew where they were headed and who shared responsibility for getting there.

At Lenape Elementary School, for example, teachers and administrators marveled at the immediate effect of shared targets and how quickly those effects multiplied. Principal Tom Dinga recalls a visit to a 1st grade classroom during the first week of sharing learning targets. The teacher, Brian Kovalovsky, led the class in discussing the learning target for the math lesson that day—to describe basic shapes and compare them to one another. When he asked his students how they would know when they hit that target, one 6-year-old replied, “I’ll be able to explain the difference between a square and a rectangle.”

Invigorated by the changes they were witnessing, teachers and administrators used e-mail, peer coaching, peer observations, focused walk-throughs, and professional conversations to share what was working in their classrooms and buildings and supported these claims with evidence that their students were learning more and learning smarter.

A learning target should convey to your students what today’s lesson should mean for them.

Students are now more actively engaged in their lessons as full-fledged learning partners. Because they understand exactly what they are supposed to learn, students take a more strategic approach to their work. Students have the information they need to keep track of how well a strategy is working, and they can decide when and if to use that strategy again. In other words, students not only know where they are on the way to mastery, but also are aware of what it will take to get there.

The Power of Meaningful Sharing
Learning targets have no inherent power. They enhance student learning and achievement only when educators commit to consistently and intentionally sharing them with students. Meaningful sharing requires that teachers use the learning targets with their students and students use them with one another. This level of sharing starts when teachers use student-friendly language—and sometimes model or demonstrate what they expect—to explain the learning target from the beginning of the lesson, and when they continue to share it throughout the lesson. Here are two powerful ways to do that.

Designing a Strong Performance of Understanding
The single best way to share a learning target is to create a strong performance of understanding—a learning experience that embodies the learning target. When students complete the actions that are part of a strong performance of understanding, they and their teachers will know that they have reached the target.

When introducing the lesson, the teacher should explicitly share the learning target for the day and explain how each of the tasks that are part of the lesson will lead students toward that target. Remember the lesson on Jane Eyre? Consider this lesson introduction: