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Travis Montgomery: Student and Teacher

Travis Montgomery, an Oklahoman, won the 2007 Lawrence "Shaky" Yates Award for Outstanding Teaching in Freshman Composition. Mr. Montgomery received his B.A. from Oklahoma Christian University, arrived in 2002 at the University of Mississippi, and earned a master's degree here in 2004. A Ph.D. candidate, he works to balance responsibilities as a student and teacher. As a recipient of the Yates award, he has been successful.

Mr. Montgomery attributes his teacher success to excellent professors and mentors. At Oklahoma Christian, he studied with Dr. Cami Agan, an English professor who sought out promising students and prepared them for graduate work. In classes, she encouraged students to express themselves freely, creating a non-threatening space for dialogue. She also masterfully managed discussions by directing students to key themes or issues without forcefully driving the conversation along. Prepared and professional, she exemplified virtues that she tried to instill in pupils. According to Montgomery, "Dr. Agan had a remarkable way of making sure her students learned 'the basics' while she involved them in the learning process."

Mr. Montgomery identifies with, and appreciates the lessons he learned from watching Agan in action. He follows her example, but recognizes that it will take years of "seasoning" to achieve her level of excellence.

On campus here, outstanding professors have influenced Mr. Montgomery. Included in this group are Drs. Benjamin Fisher, Colby Kullman, Jay Watson, and Hank Bass. Montgomery praises Dr. Fisher, his dissertation director, for his wisdom and profound learning. Dr. Kullman is revered as a teacher who treats his colleagues and his students with dignity and respect. Dr. Watson receives high marks for his well-crafted discussion questions to help students engage texts from fresh perspectives. Dr. Bass, who speaks cogently about his field to non-specialists, is a model of interdisciplinary outreach.

Mr. Montgomery's own approach to teaching is pragmatic: "I do what works. If I sense that something isn't working, then I regroup and change my approach." One specific challenge he faces is getting students to look critically at their own views and beliefs. The trick, he says, is keeping the students' trust. "I encourage them to investigate issues from different viewpoints. If students trust me and want to improve as thinkers and writers, then I have a chance. I must, however, mute my personal beliefs, adopt a balanced tone, and listen."

Travis Montgomery

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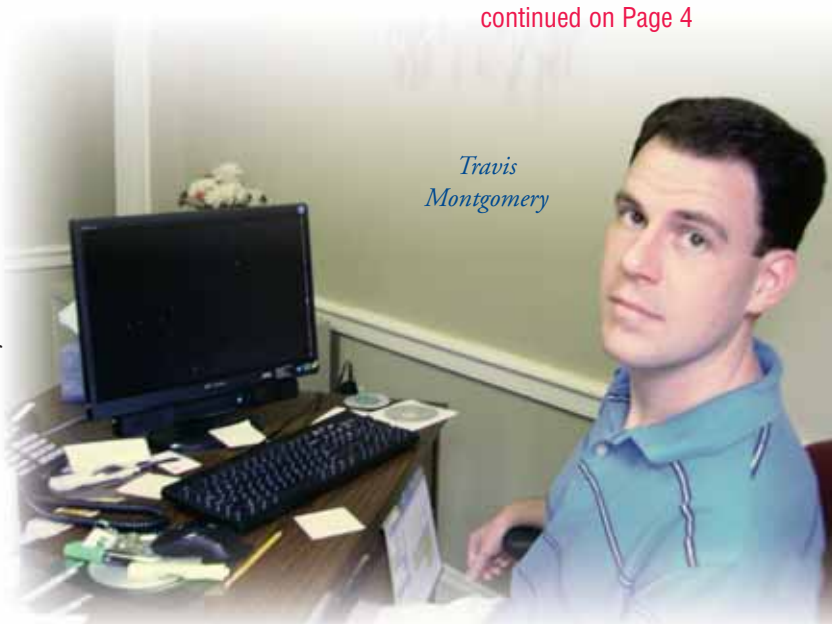
Devising and Using Learning Objectives

by Susan Mossing

During the 2008 spring semester, Interim Provost Morris Stocks sent a request to all teaching faculty that included the following information:

"To demonstrate compliance with requirements of our institutional accrediting agency, SACS, it is essential that we receive from you the following information:

- *A course syllabus for all courses (except the above types) that you teach*
- *The learning objectives/outcomes for each course*
- *The different learning expectations for graduate and undergraduate students for 500-level courses*
- *For graduate courses, how the course fosters independent learning.*

…Typically, student learning outcomes are expressed as a bulleted list of about 3-10 concise phrases."

What are Learning Objectives?

Consider what you want your students to gain from your course in the next 15 weeks. Learning objectives should succinctly state those expected or desired gains. In an introductory course, your learning objectives could include remembering basic terminology and understanding fundamental concepts. In an upper-division course where students come with a basic understanding from one or more pre-requisite courses, your learning objectives could include analyzing real-world scenarios or evaluating research articles. In general, well written learning objectives are **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, incorporate **A**ccountability, are **R**ealistic, and are **T**ime-specific.

Many taxonomies for organizing levels of understanding exist. The most well-known, Bloom's taxonomy (1956), is described as a pyramid, where learners begin at the bottom and master each level before they move up to the next one. In this model, there are six levels of understanding from the bottom and moving upwards: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Most reading and homework assignments can be described using verbs as follows:

- Knowledge: Define, identify, list, name
- Comprehension: Describe, interpret, predict, summarize
- Application: Demonstrate, illustrate, relate, solve
- Analysis: Connect, classify, explain, infer
- Synthesis: Create, design, formulate, integrate
- Evaluation: Assess, conclude, convince, discriminate

Not all learning objectives are incorporated in Bloom's taxonomy, however. Take for example, "independent learning" in the Provost's directive. Another example is the University's mission statement, "Our goal is to produce graduates who have the breadth and depth of knowledge to be lifelong learners, to be successful in their discipline, and to be good citizens" (www.olemiss.edu/depts/chancellor/MissionandGoals.html). For these higher-level learning objectives, consider L. Dee Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. Fink's taxonomy of significant learning is divided into six parts and incorporates Bloom's levels of understanding, but moves beyond them to include: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn.

Listed below are samples of learning objectives currently being used at Ole Miss. (The format has been modified to show Fink's taxonomy.)

Foundational knowledge. Students will be able to understand and remember

- The structure and function of biological macromolecules, especially proteins
- Civil engineering practicing areas
- The molecular basis of cell function

Application. Students will be able to apply

- Modern techniques of molecular biology
- Basic principles of good teaching and best practices
- An ability to identify, formulate, and solve engineering problems

Integration. Students will be able to integrate

- Teaching-related materials accrued in class to create a teaching portfolio
- Basic concepts, principles, and scientific methods in the various subdisciplines of psychology
- The practical and evolutionary implications of nucleic acid and protein sequence analysis

Human dimension. Students will be able to

- Articulate their philosophy of teaching
- Effectively function on a team of classmates
- Understand the impact of engineering solutions in a global and societal context
- Think critically about the U.S. and their place(s) in it
- Exchange within the class community ideas and opinions related to course readings

Caring. Students will develop

- An enthusiasm for continued study in the field
- An interest in reading the professional literature on teaching and learning

Learning how to learn. Students will learn how to

- Effectively use the scientific biomedical literature and database
- Use the research related to college-level teaching and student learning
- Recognize the need for, and be able to engage in life-long learning

Writing concise learning objectives incorporates specificity in terms of the gains to be made and the time period in which those gains are made, with two additional aspects to consider: how these objectives will be accomplished (teaching techniques/learning activities) and how their accomplishment will be measured (assessments). With thoughtful planning, learning activities and assessments can work to support learning objectives.

Access to Syllabi and Learning Objectives Uploaded to myOleMiss

If you are interested in seeing the learning objectives established by other instructors or in previous semesters, you can access them online. To access learning objectives and syllabi, log onto myOleMiss and select **Class Info** under the **Faculty** tab. Choose the appropriate semester and press **Select**. The chosen course should be listed on the next page that appears (**Course Listing for Instructor**). For example to find your course, select **Manage Syllabi** from the drop-down menu and press **Go**.

Department chairs have access to all course syllabi information and can print out individual pages or a spreadsheet listing all learning objectives. According to Maurice Eftink, Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate School, "Academic administrators (chairs or above) can use myOleMiss to search for syllabi and learning objectives for all courses in an area. A chair would do this by using the academic administrator tab and then selecting **Reports and Syllabi/Learning Objectives**." Eftink adds that such a report might be useful, "to prompt discussion about syllabi and learning objectives."

Currently, students are not able to access learning objectives or syllabi uploaded to myOleMiss. Their usual access to this information is through Blackboard (after the first day of class).

References

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain.* New York: McKay.

Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

University of Mississippi Office of Chancellor. *Mission and Goals.* Retrieved March 5, 2008, from www.olemiss.edu/depts/chancellor/Missionand Goals.html.

Faculty that shared their learning objectives for this article include: Marni Kendricks (Engineering), Stephen Monroe (English), Mike Mossing (Chemistry & Biochemistry), and Ken Sufka (Psychology).

Teaching Tips

Faculty and staff are invited to a free 1-day introductory POGIL workshop on Saturday, May 3, 2008, from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. at the Yerby Conference Center. The workshop, entitled **Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (POGIL)** in the Classroom, is designed to incorporate active learning techniques into large lecture classes. It is highly recommended to instructors who are curious about or wish to pursue POGIL techniques in their classrooms.

This workshop provides participants with an understanding of the principles and philosophy of POGIL. POGIL, a student-centered method of instruction, teaches foundational knowledge while simultaneously allowing students to "think analytically and work effectively as part of a collaborative team." Instructors will learn how to make the shift from the expert role to facilitator of the learning process.

Support for this workshop was provided by the National Science Foundation and is being hosted by Dr. Kerri Scott, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. For more information on POGIL, visit **www.pogil.org**. To register for this workshop, please visit www.pogil.org/events/UMiss.php. The workshop is limited to 40 participants.

Advice for others includes the following:

- Embrace classroom diversity; it enriches the students' conversation and writing.
- Don't use the classroom as political pulpit. Be a guide—not a dictator.
- Keep pedagogical preferences in perspective. A good pedagogy leaves room for flexibility, and content should take precedence over method.
- When writing prompts for essays, avoid adverbs and adjectives that "color" the assignment. You don't want students assuming that they have to investigate a topic from a single "correct" perspective.

Commenting on the Yates Award, Mr. Montgomery recognizes his colleagues in Somerville Hall for helping him sharpen his skills in the classroom. Composition teachers at UM often share ideas and assignments, commiserate with each other in tough times, and offer encouragement when colleagues need it. He says, "If I didn't have these folks, then I would be a terrible teacher." One doubts that this is entirely true.

Teaching Resources

The March Professional Development Luncheon presented three views of how teaching and research can co-exist in meaningful ways. For more on this type of discussion, please read the following article and the additional associated articles found by following the links.

www.magnapubs.com/issues/magnapubs_ff/5_3/news/601247-1.html?s=FF&p=MFCFEZ

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