



Identify learning outcomes for learning agreements

Janet MacDonald

Introduction

The role of the Educational Supervisor has changed and developed in recent years with the various responsibilities being specifically identified within the Gold Guide (2010). A cornerstone of the learning relationship between the Educational Supervisor and the Trainee is the learning agreement. However, many Trainees feel that they have inadequate or insufficient learning opportunities and are unclear as to what is expected of them; while Educational Supervisors protest about the need to complete these learning agreements and question their value in the process. Whilst a good working relationship goes a long way to producing a useful learning environment it is not a substitute for diligent educational planning which enables the development of quality learning outcomes.

Within the literature there has been much discussion about learning objectives and learning outcomes for some time. Whilst it may be argued that a process curriculum is important to equip learners with the skills to be able to learn in the future, it can be argued that the product is also important. If this is so, then we need to be clear about what it is that we want and expect our learners to know and be able to do in the first instance before we can begin to consider how the knowledge or skills can be learned or taught. There has been a move from writing instructional objectives to learning outcomes Harden (2002), however, the nomenclature is less important in this instance than are the specific differences between these different approaches.

Where do you start?

One of the main difficulties that Educational Supervisors experience is knowing where to start with this process. What should be included? What does the trainee need to know and be able to do? It can be useful to see this as a three way process as each part contributes to the development of learning outcomes for each placement (fig.1). This involves considering what learning needs each individual Trainee has, what learning opportunities can be offered by you and the placement and what are the curriculum requirements. It is the combination of each of these that should help the Educational Supervisor identify what specific learning outcomes could be developed for each Trainee.

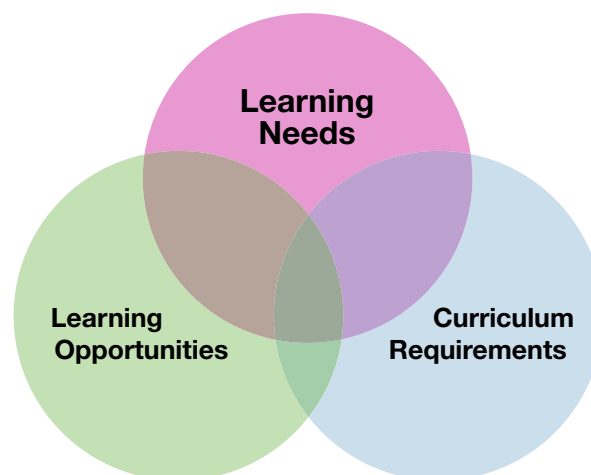


Figure 1

The next steps....

1. Identifying Learner's Needs

Identifying learner's needs is an important next step but doing this does not always seem easy. A learner may feel unable to identify gaps in their knowledge if 'I don't know what I don't know' (Eva et al 2004). Adult learners, however, come with a wealth of varied knowledge and experience and whilst you may have experience of previous learners at this stage of their training, each may have different levels of knowledge of particular conditions, investigations, treatments etc and may also have a range of different experiences from previous placements. Alongside this, individuals will have particular interests which may have led them to explore one or more specific areas and thus have detailed knowledge or skills in these. All of these can be identified through discussion with the Trainee and/or you may give a few pointers and ask them to reflect on these prior to your first discussion of learning outcomes. They could consider the four following areas.

Duties required in this post	Pre-existing skills and knowledge to be built upon
Topics of personal interest	Key milestones (e.g. exams) to prepare for

It is useful at this stage to consider the level of training for your learners. As far back as the 1950s, Bloom (1956) developed his taxonomy of learning and this continues to be used today in various forms in relation to identifying learning needs and learning outcomes. Bloom's cognitive domains are listed here and the learner's level within this could be considered.

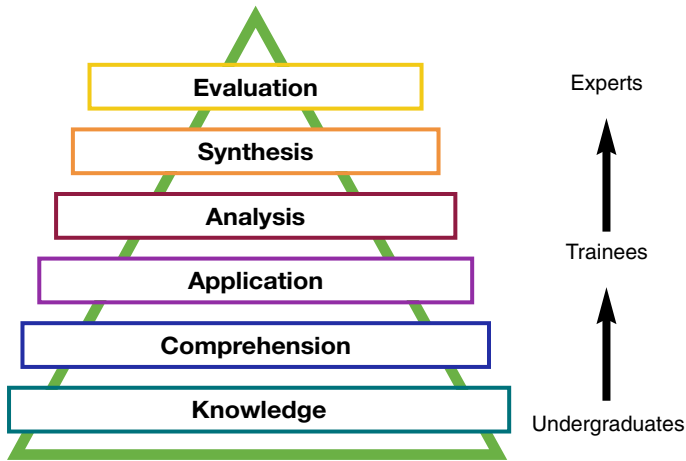


Figure 2: The Learning Taxonomy (adapted from Bloom 1956)

2. Identifying Learning Opportunities

There are some learning opportunities that are likely to be found in most settings e.g. history taking but there are many that are unique to each setting and it is important to make most use of these as the Trainee might not have opportunities to learn from these in future placements. It is crucial, therefore, to identify what these are. It may be helpful to think about this as two separate opportunities.

Opportunities afforded by your particular setting

- Patient demographics
- Specialised equipment or procedures
- Specific learning environments
- Special interests, skills or knowledge of staff in your setting

Opportunities afforded by you

- Special interests, skills or knowledge
- Supervision skills
- What you are prepared to do/not do
- What you are prepared to let the Trainee do/not do

By making these explicit it becomes easier to identify various learning opportunities and what it is you have to offer as an educational setting.

3. Identifying Curriculum Requirements

Royal Colleges have set out what Trainees are required to learn and achieve and these requirements are usually set out in terms of knowledge, clinical or professional skills and competencies and attitudes. When writing learning outcomes with Trainees then it can be useful to break them down in these terms and to explore where the Trainee has previous experience and opportunities to achieve these and where there are gaps. Indeed, learning needs can be identified as gaps between Trainees' current and expected levels of knowledge and performance.

Where do you start?

Having identified learning needs, learning opportunities and curriculum requirements then it is possible, if thorough, that these are numerous. It may then be necessary to prioritise these and the following are some questions to ask.

- How great is the knowledge or skills gap?
- How urgent is it to close this gap?
- Is it feasible?
- How has the need been identified e.g. through assessments or might the Trainee simply lack confidence?
- What opportunities are available to close this gap?

In summary

Ensuring that learning outcomes are well thought through from the start will make the whole process of writing learning agreements a useful and productive process. There are a few key points to bear in mind when writing these.

Ensure that important knowledge and skills are identified and included rather than those that are easy to write down.

The Educational Supervisor and Trainee should both share the same understanding about what is required.

The process for achieving the learning outcomes should be clear.

Ensure that the learning outcomes are written as explicit statements so that the Trainee doesn't need to guess what is in the Educational Supervisor's head.

And now . . .

The next stage is to try to write these learning outcomes. The next challenge!

Further Information

Bloom, B.S. Engelhart, M.D. Furst, E.J. Hill, W.H. Krathwohl, D.R. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals; Handbook I: cognitive domain*. New York: Longmans Green

Eva, K.W. Cunningham, J.P.W. Reiter, H.I. Keane, D.R. Norman, G.R. (2004) *How Can I Know What I Don't Know? Poor Self Assessment in a Well-Defined Domain*. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 9: 211-224

Harden, R.M. (2002) *Learning outcomes and instructional objectives: is there a difference?* *Medical Teacher*, 24: 2. 151-155

UK Health Departments (2010) *A Reference Guide for Postgraduate Specialty Training in the UK: The Gold Guide* (4th Edition)

Janet MacDonald is a Senior Lecturer. She works in the Academic Section of Medical Education, School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, Wales Deanery, Cardiff University.

Interested in learning more about this and other educational topics? Why not professionalise your role with an academic qualification at PGCert, Dip or MSc in Medical Education via e-learning or attendance courses.

Contact: medicaleducation@cardiff.ac.uk

Series Editor: Dr Lesley Pugsley, Medical Education, School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, Cardiff University.

Wales Deanery

Cardiff University, 9th Floor, Neuadd Meirionydd,
Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4YS
Tel: +44 (0)29 2068 7451 Fax: +44 (0)29 2068 7455
E-mail: medicaleducation@cardiff.ac.uk

Wales
Deanery
Deoniaeth
Cymru

