

CASL Point #3: Quality Learning Targets

A learning target (also known as an objective, learning intention, learner outcome, expectation, etc.) is simply **a clear description of what is to be learned**. It should provide a clear vision of the ‘destination’ for student learning. It should focus on describing what is to be LEARNED vs what is to be ‘DONE’ (activity). A learning target can take from “five seconds to five weeks” depending on the complexity of the knowledge/reasoning/skill/product called for and its overall importance in the curriculum—as well as the age/abilities (prior experience and cognitive development) of your students.

In order to make targets clear to students, they must first be clear to teachers. The best way to reach clarity and consensus on what students must learn (i.e., standards) is by having a conversation with a group of other teachers or ‘experts’ who are well-versed in the content/concepts/standards that must be addressed in a particular content area. Standards are typically high-level expectations that need to be “broken down” into scaffolded segments of learning (i.e., targets) that allow a focus on one key concept or element (knowledge, reasoning, skill) at a time.

If students know what is expected of them, they are much more likely to achieve success. The learner should be able to “see the target” as well as define what success with the target looks like. Consider the following primary science **standard** (which overall is a PERFORMANCE SKILL standard):

- Students will use senses and scientific tools (e.g., hand lens/magnifier, metric ruler, balance, etc.) to observe, describe and classify earth materials (solid rocks, soils, water and air) using their physical properties.

One **performance skill learning target** may be:

- use senses to observe different earth materials

In **student-friendly terms**, a teacher may post or share a target like:

- *I can make observations of rocks, soil, and water with my senses. This means I can tell more about them by using my eyes to look, my hands to touch, my ears to listen to, my nose to smell, and sometimes my mouth to taste.*

This makes clear to the students not only what they are **learning** to do (make observations), but also how they will know if they have done it successfully or well. This target may remain for a week or more as the teacher engages students in multiple learning experiences, using formative assessments of their competence to plan each subsequent experience.

When deconstructing a standard into a set of targets, there are some criteria that should be met to ensure quality.

- Each target should clearly align to and support attainment of the standard.
- Each target should be clear to the teacher (and to the students) and focused on what is to be LEARNED – not just an activity.
- In looking at the ‘set’ of deconstructed targets for the standard collectively, others with expertise in the same content area should generally agree that the overall intent of the standard is met and that the targets would, in fact, scaffold the learner toward mastery/attainment of the overall standard.

So, when is a deconstruction considered wrong or weak?

- It is wrong if there is a misunderstanding of the intent of the standard -which is why many “experts” are needed to ensure consistency in interpretation.
- The deconstruction would be considered weak if it
 - lacks developmental continuity (ability to scaffold learning based on the developmental needs of the learners) **or**
 - fails to adequately address the content/concept(s) in the standard.

(Excerpted and adapted from *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right, Using it Well*, Rick Stiggins, et al; *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning*, Jan Chappius; *Active Learning Through Formative Assessment*, Shirley Clarke)