Accessible learning

Last year I attended a journal club focussing on a paper by Diemand-Yaumann et al. (2011) focussing on disfluency and educational outcomes. The paper presented how difficult to read passages increased the retention of the information that was presented. This proved somewhat controversial in the discussion that followed, as there has been much work on accessible learning and as teachers we are actively encouraged to make our materials easier to read. I had been aware of the requirement to make learning universally accessible to learners, for example by using pre-set formats for power point slides and judicious use of colour but my experience with students with dyslexia was limited. During the discussion I heard an account from a colleague with dyslexia what the difficulties were that she faced by poor lectures, and it had challenged me to improve my own practice. I invited that colleague to take part in a peer-review session for one of my lectures. Working with her was particularly useful, as she was able to point out difficulties with my slides where her attention was lost, such as slides that are too busy and therefore distracting, and tables that are too small to be clear. Previously I had thought my slides were clear and straight-forward. I also consulted with the style guide from the British Dyslexia Association available online. I have since refined my slides to ensure minimal wording with large font sizes, avoiding Serif fonts, using pastel back-ground colours (not white), and ensuring fewer visual distractions per slide (V1, V3). I believe this has improved my slides for all students as my focus has been to simplify the slides and add new concepts gradually. I plan to continue doing this for future lectures that I will give. Additionally, I ensured that hand-outs of the presentation were available for students during the lecture to allow them to follow on paper, in case of sight or reading difficulties (V2). Shaw and Anderson (2017) expressed that up to 10% of the population can have dyslexia and that it can manifest in various ways in individuals. I have now been made aware of the difficulties that some students face, so that I can, in the future, be more sympathetic and supportive of any students that may be struggling. Additionally, improving and simplifying the layout of my slides, has forced me to be better prepared for my lectures, as I have fewer prompts from the slides themselves, which I believe can only improve my teaching.


British Dyslexia Association. Dyslexia style guide.[Internet]. [cited 2018 Sep 03]
The usefulness of learning objectives

I was aware of Outcomes Based Education since my own higher education days, and as a companion to that approach, I knew that learning objectives were a prerequisite for all courses studies. I had largely ignored learning objectives, or at least saw them as a nuisance requirement, even in my own studies. However, it wasn’t until last year when I did an online workshop in setting aims and learning objectives that I began to understand their usefulness. At this time, I was also involved in the planning and development of a new online MSc in Food Safety, and I was forced to write new aims and objectives from scratch. The tips I had learnt from the workshop I had attended made this much easier and more effective (V3). Writing objectives were also extremely helpful when planning lectures and framing assignments, as they were a structure for creating the lecture. I later also changed my current MSc Animal Biosciences lectures to better reflect the course aims and objectives, where previously I had just delivered the lectures based on what was done before. I found it useful to identify which knowledge dimension (and verbs) were required – remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, or creating – and whether I actually taught true to my given objective (Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2013).

With further reading, I learnt that the outcomes must be clearly and unambiguously specified (Harden, 1999), and that there was a difference between learning outcomes and instructional objectives (Harden 2002, Allan, 1996). I felt that keeping the course outcomes in mind useful for preparing materials when only delivering a few lectures out of the whole course, even though my focus would be the objectives of that particular lecture. I believe this has improved my teaching, and has definitely made my lectures more targeted, where I now give more thought into what I actually want the students to learn. This shift in focussing on what I want the students to learn, has also helped me prioritise more ‘real-world’ examples for use in my lectures with a statistics base, which I feel can particularly daunting to students, so that they can see that what they are learning is used daily in a variety of applications (V4). I hope that this encourages them to not be overwhelmed by the course material. In future lectures I plan to use the objectives to introduce the lecture (‘What this lecture will cover’) to give an overview. I feel this was particularly important for students who need to see the ‘big picture’ of where the lectures are headed to understand the work more effectively (V1).


R Schoenfeld-Tacher, MH Sims (2013). Course Goals, Competencies, and Instructional Objectives. Journal of Veterinary Medical Education. 40(2)