Some Thoughts on Selecting IDEA Objectives

How do we know that teaching is effective or ineffective? The typical student rating system judges effectiveness by the degree to which the instructor's methods resemble those of a "model" teacher. In contrast, the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction system judges the effectiveness of teach a

iveness are derived by answering one question: *Do students make progress in achieving objectives selected by the instructor?*

The selection of objectives on the Faculty Information Form is a crucial activity for two reasons. First, the IDEA System evaluates teaching by assessing student progress on these *unique*, *instructor-chosen objectives*. Second, objectives provide guidance for selecting teaching methods; those that promote progress on one type of objective may differ from those that promote progress on other types. Differential objectives make each course a unique learning experience.

The educational literature is replete with suggestions on how to select and develop goals and objectives (e.g., Angelo & Cross, 1993; Davis, 1993; McKeachie, 1999; Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). Familiarity with this literature should improve the process of conceptualizing and defining instructional purposes. The purpose of this paper is to offer additional help to participants in the IDEA System in identifying course objectives.

HOW MANY OBJECTIVES SHOULD BE SELECTED?

Although each of the 12 IDEA objectives is desirable in the abstract, it is unrealistic to think that, in a single course, students can make significant progress on all, or even most, of them. Not everything that either the instructor or the students might wish to accomplish is possible in a single course. Section II of the **Directions to Faculty**

some attention is given to them, an **M** should be selected on the FIF.

WHAT IS MEANT BY EACH IDEA OBJECTIVE?

It would be easier to describe objectives if they were mutually exclusive, but they are not. Instructors typically address more than one objective through a single approach. For example, a theme on "the meaning of happiness" may be assigned to address three objectives; developing writing skills, exploring values, and improving critical thinking. The 12 IDEA objectives have been developed over a period of 25 years, both through literature reviews and by consulting faculty who have used the IDEA system. The intent is to provide a *useful, practical* way to describe the objectives of most college courses.

A brief description of each of these objectives, together with some comments about how they may be compared or contrasted, follows. The objectives are organized into six groups on the basis of statistical and conceptual similarities. The number used to identify each objective (1-12) corresponds with that used on the Faculty Information Form.

I. Basic Cognitive Background

The first two IDEA objectives focus on the development of a basic background in the subject.

1. *Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classifications, methods, trends)*
2. *Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories*

These objectives are mainly *cognitive* in nature as distinguished from *affective* objectives, which focus on feelings or attitudes. They are closely related. Both are concerned with the acquisition of information or knowledge. They differ primarily in the level of knowledge and in the degree of generalization. *Factual knowledge* covers not only straightforward facts (e. g., when the Declaration of Independence was written; who developed the theory of games), but also terminology (e. g.. what the VII cranial nerve is called; or what "onomatopoeia" means) and classifications (e. g. stone tools produced by the Mousterian techniques are characterized by . . .). This objective stresses learning at its most basic level. Frequently what is required is that students memorize and remember the information taught; because the emphasis is on acquiring information, comprehension is not an issue. For those familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, *et al*., 1956) such learning is primarily at the "Knowledge" level of the cognitive taxonomy.

Though they are similar, it is possible to distinguish *factual knowledge* objectives from *principles and theories* objectives. There is a difference between terms that represent simple facts, e.g., the VII cranial nerve is the *auditory nerv*e, and those that represent concepts, e.g., *reinforcement,* a psychological concept that is a key element in learning theory. Learning the meaning of "auditory nerve" essentially requires memorization, while learning the meaning of "reinforcement" requires comprehension, which embraces many examples. Illustrative principles or theories are Gresham's law, the categorical imperative, and the wave and quantum theories of light. Objectives concerned with understanding concepts and theories are representative of the "Comprehension" level of Bloom's cognitive taxonomy.

A primary distinction between *factual knowledge* and *principles and theories* objectives is the degree of generalization expected. To learn a fact, the student need not go beyond the fact itself; but to comprehend principles and theories the student must extend his/her understanding to multiple circumstances or examples. This is not meant to imply that the learning or memorization of facts is unimportant. A strong factual basis is essential to the mastery of principles and theories and other "higher level" intellectual skills; students cannot learn to think unless they have something to think about. For academically naive students, gaining factual knowledge is often an essential first step. On the other hand, if teaching/learning never goes beyond this level, the student will acquire a body of unused--perhaps trivial--knowledge that tends to be quickly forgotten.

II. Application of Learning

Two other objectives focus on applying what has been learned to solve problems, make decisions, or perform specialized functions. These are:

3. *Learning to* apply *course materials (to improve rational thinking, problem solving and decisions)*

4. *Developing specific skills, competencies and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course*

achievement on the objective is meaningfully reflected in the appraisal of student progress.

Frequently, there are differences between the instructor's and the students' perception of the relevance of a given objective. It is recommended that the course objectives be discussed with the students, preferably early in the term. It is desirable to let students know that they are going to be asked to rate their own progress on these objectives, and that these ratings are taken seriously. Ask them to reflect on their understanding of the course's purposes and the way in which they believe the various parts of the course fit into each of the 12 objectives. Student learning will be enhanced if they are committed to clearly formulated objectives. Thus, the opportunity to consider the relevance of the IDEA objectives to their own purposes in taking your course may, in itself, stimulate success. If student perceptions of the importance of the objectives and their relevance to various portions of the course are substantially different from yours, it may be helpful to explain your rationale for selecting (or not selecting) a given objective. A discussion of such differences will not necessarily resolve them, but it will provide a framework for interpreting student ratings of progress on the IDEA objectives. This should increase the usefulness of student feedback.

Based on interviews with a small number of students, we do not believe that holding such a