In Assessment, You See What You Are Looking For

99by Susan M. Brookhart

Have you ever walked right past something – something important – and not seen it because you weren't really looking for it? People are like that. We see what we are looking for. It's no different in assessment. If you, as a teacher, want to be sure you assess students' work for certain qualities and characteristics, you need to describe what you're looking for. If you want students to become assessment-capable and recognize certain qualities in their work, you have to teach them what to look for.

Actually, articulating clear criteria for success – or what I prefer to term "look-fors" (Moss & Brookhart, 2012) and sharing them with students is part of using a learning target theory of action in teaching and assessing. If formative assessment involves students asking Where am I going? Where am I now? and How do I close the gap? (Sadler, 1989), then they need more than simply a statement of what they are trying to learn. They need to understand the learning target and experience it as living in their lesson, primarily because what they do, make, say, or write is clearly developing their understanding or skill and because they have look-fors that will help them monitor their progress and decide what to focus on next.

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It turns out that the look-fors are the hardest part. In professional development sessions all over the country, I have watched teachers plan learning targets and performances of understanding (things for students to do, make, say, or write) that match and that will provide formative

assessment evidence, and then struggle with figuring out what to look for in the work. And yet, without something to look for, the lesson has no formative power. Evidence isn't evidence until it's evidence *of* something. Students need to know: evidence of what?

In this article, I hope to accomplish two things. First, I want to make the case that a learning target is *not* simply an "I-can" statement or the equivalent written on the board and describe what else is involved if a learning target is going to live in a lesson. Second, I want to show that the success criteria or look-fors are the means by which students and teachers can transform having a learning target into actual learning.

When does a lesson have a learning target?

You can't tell whether a lesson has a learning target by just looking at the board and seeing if there is an "I-can" or "We-are-learning-to" statement there. You need to look at the lesson as an episode of learning from the students' point of view. A lesson has a learning target if students are actively trying to learn something, and the target is that something, regardless of what you state. For students to actively aim for some learning, they need to understand what it is they are trying to learn, have an opportunity to practice, and have some means of seeing where they are and what they need to do next. Therefore, a lesson has a learning target when

- Students can articulate what it is they are trying to learn – hence the need to state learning targets in student-friendly language;
- Students have to do, make, say or write something that lets them work on and develop the intended understanding or skill and, at the same time, produces evidence they can look at to see how they're doing; and
- Students use look-fors (success criteria) to gauge how well they are learning and decide what they need to work on next.

Students need a learning target statement, performance of understanding, and look-fors for every lesson, because a student's lived experience of learning is lesson by lesson. However, if any one of those elements changes (the statement, the performance, or the look-fors), the learning target changes. Successive lessons should build on each other. Maybe today we're learning to write sentences that use pronouns, and tomorrow we're learning to write more complex sentences that use pronouns. The learning target changes because the performance changes (we write different sentences in each lesson), although the look-fors may not change. For example, the look-fors for each lesson might be: My sentence uses a pronoun. I can show you what the pronoun is. I can tell you what the pronoun refers to and explain how it determined what pronoun I had to use. In both lessons, students apply these look-fors to gauge how well they understand pronoun use. Eventually, after using these criteria several times, they become part of how a student understands pronoun use, and the student can apply them in future writing.

Or, consider a lesson sequence where the look-fors do change, but only slightly. Maybe today we're learning to show multiplication as groups, and the performance is drawing diagrams that show various multiplication facts in that way. The look-fors for this lesson might be: My picture has as many groups as the first number I'm multiplying. Each group has as many objects

(stars or circles, or whatever students are drawing) as the second number I'm multiplying. When I count all my objects, I get the correct product. Then tomorrow we might learn to show multiplication as arrays, and the performance is drawing arrays that show various multiplication facts. The look-fors for this lesson are similar, but not identical, to the look-fors for the previous lesson: My array has as many rows as the first number I'm multiplying. My array has as many in each row as the second number I'm multiplying. When I count all my objects, I get the correct product.

Can you see that even in these very simple lessons, the look-fors carry most of the learning energy? Just writing sentences, or drawing groups of objects, in itself doesn't teach anything. It's only in appraising the process against criteria that we have an clear picture of what was learned and how we know that.

How do look-fors support learning?

If I have convinced you that look-fors support learning in a way that just "doing activities" cannot, then the next step is to show how to help students use these look-fors. To do that, I'd like to use a before-and-after example. This example comes from a mathematics teacher who planned a lesson about finding the area of combined rectangles. That is, she intended her students to learn how to find the area of shapes like this one.

To learn how to find the area of combined rectangles, students needed to know what a rectangle is, that some shapes can be broken into component rectangles, and that the area of a rectangle can be found by multiplying its length times its width. Students were asked to show they understood by finding the area of combined rectangles; the problem set included ten of these. Before revision, the teacher didn't have look-fors, although when pressed she said students would know how well they were learning if they got the right answer for each of the ten problems.

It may be hard to remember what it was like not to know how to do this – but try. If you were a student in this class, and you didn't yet know how to find the area of combined rectangles, how would you know whether your answers were "right," and how would you know what that meant in terms of what you learned (not what you *scored*, what you *learned*)?

The teacher revised the lesson, this time adding look-fors that students could use to monitor their own learning *and*, it is worth noting, were about understanding as well as "getting the right answer." In her revised lesson plan, the look-fors were:

- I can explain how to solve a complex area problem when the shape can be broken into rectangles.
- I can separate the figure into multiple rectangles.
- I can find a missing side when other side measures are given.
- I can find the area of each rectangle.
- I can add the areas together to get the area of the combined figure.
- I can write and solve my own combined rectangle area problems.

Now, imagine yourself again as that student who doesn't know how to find the area of combined rectangles. Knowing what to look for would help focus your work: you would either do the problem and explain it, or if you couldn't, you would know what you needed to work on. For example, you might need to work on finding the measure of the missing side of the smaller rectangles.

Look-fors are critical for learning in all subject areas and at all grade levels. Here is a primary language arts example. A second grade teacher was trying to teach her students to read aloud with expression. She did this over many lessons scattered throughout the year. Each time, the performance changed; students practiced their oral reading with a different reading passage or story. The learning target statement didn't change ("I can read with expression"). She arranged the look-fors in a simple oral reading rubric:

	Wow	**Getting There**	**Needs Work**
Expression	Sounds like I'm reading a story to keep a small child interested. My voice goes up and down at all the right spots.	Sounds like I'm reading a story.	Sounds like a robot. I'm just calling the words.
Phrasing	I stop at the end of sentences. I pause for commas.	I stop at the end of sentences.	I read one word at a time.
Speed	I read fast enough to keep people interested but slow enough they can follow the story.	I read a bit too fast or too slow.	I have to stop a lot to figure out words or find my place.
Clarity	I use a loud, clear voice.	I mostly use a loud, clear voice.	I mumble.

Since the students used this oral reading rubric every time they read aloud, they soon began to think in terms of expression, phrasing, speed, and clarity when they read aloud. What's more, they were able to assess their own reading aloud. The teacher gave them an opportunity to do that each time they read, and then based on their self-assessment, read the passage over and see

the improvement. In this case, look-fors supported the development of a long-term skill, reading aloud, by presenting look-fors as a self-assessment tool.

Finally, let's look at a high school social studies lesson. The learning target for the lesson is that the students will understand what qualifies someone to vote in the United States. Lesson content included discussion and examples of what a it means to be a resident, what it means to be a citizen, that voters need to be at least 18 years of age, and so on. The performance of understanding was a set of scenarios describing individual people, each of which ended "Is this person eligible to vote in the U.S.? Explain your answer." The look-fors in this case might be obvious to you, as an adult who votes, but consider the task from the students' point of view. How will I know I have done a good job of analyzing these scenarios? The teacher provided the look-fors for this lesson in the form of simple guiding questions. Did I match evidence in the scenario to the list of qualifications for voting? Can I explain how I used this evidence to conclude whether the person could vote?

Look-fors Help Both Students and Teachers

In each of these examples, the *students* used the look-fors as part of the formative assessment cycle (Where am I going? Where am I now? How do I close the gap?). The students are the learners. The look-fors provide the means by which they see where they are and move closer to a learning target that they are aiming for. They are the "street signs" on the learning journey, if you will. You can't get somewhere unless you know the route.

In the same lessons, the *teachers* use the look-fors, as well. Teacher feedback should be based on the look-fors. The same qualities that show students how well they are doing show teachers how well students are doing and suggest areas for comment, whether about strengths or suggestions for improvement.

In short, look-fors are essential for learning. A learning target statement without look-fors is incomplete, because it doesn't contain the information students need to actually learn. For some reason, teachers find them difficult to write, which is why I provided a range of examples. You wouldn't think of planning a lesson without some sort of learning intention and some learning activity for students to do. But don't forget the look-fors. They provide the momentum that turns those learning intentions and activities into learning, and they make possible assessment information along the way so that both you and your students know learning is happening.

References

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Sadler, R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science, 18*, 119-144.