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# INTRODUCTION



Hitting a target you cannot see is extremely difficult—challenging at best. What would you do if someone asked you to prepare a healthy dinner? Although you know exactly what the intention is, without a clearer description of what this individual means by a healthy dinner, you would likely succeed in meeting that intention if, and only if, you and this person share a common understanding of a healthy dinner. Without that understanding, your success is left to chance. During the planning and preparation, you are left guessing about the ingredients, supplies, and how to use them to create the final product. Without additional information, you would have to wait until the actual presentation of the dinner to even find out if you met expectations.

Now, imagine a similar scenario involving 30 students and a teacher who asks them to construct a viable mathematical argument, gather compelling scientific evidence, use text features to make meaning, or compare two historical accounts of the same event. Without any additional information, these 30 students—much like you and your preparation of a healthy dinner—are left to interpret what is meant by a viable argument, compelling evidence, text features, or an appropriate comparison. The students are clear about the goal or intention (e.g., construct a viable mathematical argument), but their success at meeting the learning intention is left to chance. Ambiguity in expectations of what success looks like in any process, task, or product diminishes learning. This effect applies to both students and teachers (see Table I.1).

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**TABLE I.1** Ambiguity in Expectations of Success Affects Both Students and Teachers

STUDENTS ARE LIMITED IN THEIR POTENTIAL TO . . .	TEACHERS ARE LIMITED IN THEIR POTENTIAL TO . . .
Retrieve the necessary background knowledge and prior knowledge	Activate the necessary background knowledge and prior knowledge
Identify the necessary tools and skills	Select high-impact approaches or strategies
Monitor their progress toward successful completion	Design and implement checks for understanding that monitor learners' progress
Seek support and feedback	Scaffold and provide feedback to learners
Recognize when they are successful	Decide when learners are ready to move forward

Ensuring that teachers and learners have clarity about expectations through high-quality success criteria increases the likelihood that learning will happen and *all* learners will meet the learning intentions. Thus, we focus on this critical need. Clarity for learning must move beyond just learning intentions and provide supporting, high-quality success criteria that define what success looks like for *each and every* learner in our schools and classrooms.

Success criteria provide the parameters that establish what success looks like for the learning intentions that day. In our dinner example, success criteria would have provided clear parameters about what a healthy dinner was or was not. Success

**Success criteria provide the parameters that establish what success looks like for the learning intentions that day.**

criteria would also have provided parameters for what makes an argument viable in mathematics, what makes evidence compelling in science, what it means to effectively use text textures, or what is an appropriate comparison of bias in historical documents. This very essential component of

teaching and learning is vital in both face-to-face and remote learning environments. Whether teaching and learning are happening in the brick-and-mortar classroom or through a learning management system (LMS), success criteria are necessary for providing a clear view of what success looks like for any process, task, or product.

To be clear, this is not a new idea nor do we pretend that we are all not at least familiar with success criteria in the classroom. The term *success criteria* has appeared in classrooms and conversations around learning as far back as the late 1950s. In 1968, Paul Harmon defined success criteria as a necessary component of any performance objective associated with student outcomes. He stated that a performance objective must be accompanied by “a paragraph describing the *success criteria* by which student’s behavior is to be judged as acceptable or unacceptable” (p. 85). What is most fascinating—and relevant to our discussion here—is that Harmon follows his definition with, you guessed it, a set of parameters that defined quality success criteria. In other words, he provided success criteria for what makes good success criteria. He expected that

the paragraph will detail, if relevant:

- a. the time allowed to complete the performance;
- b. the number, percentage or proportion of total test items that must be answered correctly to pass;
- c. the actual responses that will be considered acceptable;
- d. the person who will judge or evaluate the performance; and
- e. the distinct point in time at which the performance is considered acceptably completed. (Harmon, 1968, p. 85)

Although we have come a long way from this conceptualization of success criteria, you likely have noticed that some challenges arise with the creation and implementation of criteria for success in your own classroom.

We agree. In our work with schools and classrooms around the world, our experiences with classroom walk-throughs, PLC+ professional learning community meetings, and coaching sessions with instructional leaders, teachers, and students

suggest that something is not working in our quest to ensure that both we and our learners know what success looks like.

Cathy Youell, a veteran and master elementary teacher, shared feedback with John about this exact concern. Through conversations during grade-level and PLC+ meetings, Cathy noted that her learners continually struggle with answering the question *How will I know that I have learned it?* In most cases, they simply did not answer the question or gave a default response: “When my teacher says so.”

Kateri hears this same reflection from teachers. They have practiced setting learning intentions, but describing what it looks and sounds like when students have met those learning intentions is an intimidating challenge. Teachers wonder how to make success criteria specific enough to be measurable while broad enough to allow for student voice and choice. Teachers want to address the “so what” element of learning, but they are not always sure themselves why the content matters beyond their current grade level or outside of school. Doug and Nancy also noticed a decrease in the percentage of learners who could answer this exact question during their classroom visits (Table I.2).

**TABLE I.2** Responses to Questions About Learning

	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES							
	WEEK OF 10/18	WEEK OF 11/1	WEEK OF 11/8	WEEK OF 11/15	WEEK OF 11/22	WEEK OF 12/6	WEEK OF 12/13	WEEK OF 1/10
What am I learning?	80	80	75	60	75	80	80	85
Why am I learning this?	75	60	65	65	65	70	70	70
How will I know that I have learned it?	50	55	70	60	55	65	65	70



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Before we move forward in this playbook, let's do a preassessment to see where you and your learners are in describing *how* they will know if they have learned the information. Using an entrance ticket, one-on-one conferencing, or a computer-based survey (e.g., Mentimeter, Google form), ask your learners the following question: *How will you know that you have learned the information or met the day's success criteria?* Use the space below to summarize their responses and your reflections about their responses.



What percentage of your learners could answer this question? What trends did you notice in the responses? Hold on to these data, and we will revisit this question again in an upcoming module.

Learners appear to struggle when asked to describe *how* they will know if they have learned the information. Through our work in schools and classrooms across the globe, we have found that this struggle differentially affects learners with certain background or demographic characteristics. For example, English language learners may struggle to describe how they know if they have learned the information because of how we create and implement success criteria. How we create and implement success criteria may inadvertently narrow the access and opportunity for learners with a disability to demonstrate their learning progress. If success criteria should provide both the teacher and the learners with a clear understanding of what success looks like, the evidence suggests we are falling short with all learners. Success criteria have an average effect size of 0.88 (Visible Learning Meta<sup>x</sup>, 2020). Falling short on providing learners with a clear understanding of what success looks like eliminates the potential to double the rate of learning in our classrooms, which therefore limits the access and opportunity for *all* of our learners to meet the day's learning intentions.

The difficulty our learners have recognizing and articulating criteria for success may be a reflection of our struggle with developing and using success criteria in our classroom. Addressing this struggle is the goal of this playbook. How can we better approach the creation and implementation of success criteria to ensure we and our learners know what success looks like? The answers to this question lie in the modules of this playbook.