



Are Percents Appropriate in Program Objectives?

When writing educational program objectives at PJO time, I am constantly frustrated by having to guess what percent to use to qualify the target audience. For example:

40% OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS who participate in a program will discuss one of six water quality issues at their local monthly government meeting within 6 months.

I discussed this concern with my CED who concurs. Any guidelines?

You and your CED are correct. Percents create problems. They don't have to however. Let's look at the problems and a solution based on the educational literature.

PROBLEMS

Agents and specialists say the following about using percents in educational objectives:

- "Why is a program being designed for only part, or a percent, of the target audience who participates? Designing a program where only a certain percent is expected to benefit when all in the target audience contribute to the problem doesn't make sense. Such an objective appears to discriminate."
- "Why is extension designing a program for only a portion of the people coming to a program?"
- "As an educator, I sometimes feel I have no idea what percent to put in an educational program objective and feel it is pretty much a 'guessing game' or 'shot in the dark'. This is especially true with new programs or a new target audience."
- "As an educator, I feel I am in a Catch 22 situation. On the one hand, I want to make the percent as high as possible so that the program is designed to be effective for a goodly percent of the audience. Otherwise it looks bad professionally to say that only a certain amount of the participants will be impacted. On the other hand, I feel I will be evaluated against this percent and thus want to make it as low as possible so that I can:
 - achieve it or
 - surpass it, thus making my programming efforts look good.
 - "Making the percent low however, also reflects poorly on me and the organization."

SOLUTION

Understanding the components of an educational program objective sheds light on a solution to the percent problem (Mager, 1984; Morris et al., 1978).

One component of an objective is the performance; it comprises the heart of the impact and it is the knowledge, skill, attitude, intention or behavior that an educator wants participants to achieve as a result of the program. In the above objective, the performance is **"will discuss. . .water quality issues at their local monthly government meeting. . ."** These words denote what the educator wants the participants to be skilled in, and to do, as a result of the program.



A second component is criteria. Criteria should qualify the performance and apply to all potential participants. In the above objective, the criterion is: **one of six** (water quality issues). In this objective, the criterion establishes that all government leaders that participate are not expected to discuss all six water issues in their community as a result of the program, just one.

Why are criteria important? What role do they play in an objective? Criteria are important because they fulfill the primary purpose of an educational program objective: to design an effective program. The design of a program will change depending on the criteria. For instance,

. . . local government officials who participate in a program will discuss ONE of six water quality issues. . . . Based on the criteria in this objective, it would seem logical for an educator to design a program and have the government officials break up into six groups so each official will learn about one issue and the techniques on how to discuss it with their government council back home.

But, if an objective had a different criterion such as

. . . local government officials who participate in a program will discuss TWO of six water quality issues. . . . the program would have to provide double the amount of programming for each participant. The design of a program changes depending on the criteria of the performance.

You may be asking by now, what does criteria have to do with establishing percents?

The important point is that the criteria associated with the performance, as in the example . . . local government officials who participate in a program will discuss one of six water quality problems . . . should be THE criteria in the objective. To add a percent in front of the target audience adds a second criterion to the objective which qualifies the target audience, not the performance! You don't need a second criterion.

Thus the solution to the percent problem, based on educators who recommend how objectives should be written, is to drop the percent entirely. That's right; you don't have to use any percent in front of the target audience because the criteria are already associated with the performance. The following objective has all the necessary components.

Local government officials who participate in a program will discuss one of six water quality problems at their local monthly government meeting within 6 months.

CONCLUSION

The PJO process of writing educational program objectives has many benefits for the educator and the organization. Using a percent in an educational objective to qualify the target audience however, and thus adding a second criterion, can result in false notions of criteria and cynicism. One solution, stemming from an understanding of the components of an objective, indicates that a percent is not needed. Eliminating the percent eliminates many problems. It also helps to focus the discussion of the evaluation results on program refinement.

You may ask: **are percents ever appropriate?**

An appropriate place to use percents is in a marketing objective regarding the participation of the target audience (which is different than the educational impact objective discussed above). For instance,

- At least 65% of the participants at the water quality workshop will be homeowners in Marion County.
- 10% of the volunteers recruited for 1999 will be Latinos.
- 70% of participants attending the Cholesterol Program will have a cholesterol reading of greater than or equal to 200.



For further reading on the topic:

Mager, R. F. (1984) *Preparing Instructional Objectives*. Belmont, CA: Pittman Learning, Inc. (Call #LB1028.5M2 1984, Central Pattee Library Level 7 Blue).

Morris, L. L. and C. T. Fitz-Gibbon (1978). *How to Deal with Goals and Objectives*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publishing. (Call # LB2823.M56, Central Pattee Library Level 7 Blue).

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