Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning

A Concept Paper

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Background

OBE initiatives is a response to UCG’s interest to improve quality processes at institutions in recognition of the need for Hong Kong higher education system to remain internationally competitive and accountable to stakeholders. The current support for OBE necessitates the use of Outcomes to anchor curriculum planning and pedagogy. 334 provides a good opportunity to weave these outcomes into new curriculum. As the Institute moves to embed outcome-based approaches into its undergraduate teacher education programmes, it is useful to clarify the what, why and how of OBE.

What is OBE?

OBE is often expressed in terms of what students know, are able to do, or are like as a result of their education. It generally refers to a set of learner outcomes (what happens to individual students) as a result of his/her attendance at an institute of higher education and/or participation in a particular course of study.

Essentially, OBE is an approach to planning, delivering and evaluating instruction that focus the efforts on the desired outcomes of education, expressed in terms of individual student learning. As Spady (1994) puts it,

“Outcome-based Education means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is import for student to be able to do, then organising the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens.”

Four essential principles underpin this approach:

1. Clarity of focus

Traditionally, in planning their teaching, teachers tend to be more concerned with the “what” of teaching. What content or topics to teach? What teaching methods to use?
How to assess whether students have achieved what is taught to them? The focus is on teaching as a process of transmitting content and checking how well the content is learned.

In OBE, however, the focus is on student’s learning.

1. “What do I intend my students to learn after my teaching that they could not do before, and to what standard?” (Intended Learning outcomes)
2. What teaching and learning activities should I design to enable the students to achieve these outcomes?
3. How would I assess their attainment of these outcomes?”

2. “Designing back” or Mapping Backward

The starting point is not what the teacher is going to teach but rather the intended learner outcome (ILO) of that teaching, and at what standard. The teaching and learning activities are then designed to require the students to do what they are expected to do after they graduate. Similarly, the assessment task is developed to assess the extent to which the students have achieved the ILOs. This process is illustrated in the figure below:

![Diagram](from Biggs and Tang, 2007).

3. High expectations of students.

A key tenet of OBE is that it can help all learners to do difficult things well. Thus, teachers must set high, challenging standards in order to encourage students to engage deeply with the learning and to achieve the ILO. This high expectation is a necessary predicate of successful learning.

4. Diverse learning opportunities for all.
OBE is premised on the recognition that there is diversity of learners who learn in different ways and at different pace. Hence teachers should attempt to provide a range of teaching strategies or learning experiences that will enable them to achieve the ILOs.

**What Kinds of Learning Outcomes?**

Learning outcomes should reflect the attributes graduates are expected to possess that reflect the Institute’s vision and mission. At the same time, it must also reflect the range of attributes that are important to successful professionals, to enable them to live and work in changing contexts. These include personal and intellectual attributes that are best developed in the context of a particular profession or discipline.

Ewell (2005) described four key areas of competencies:

- **Knowledge and Cognitive Outcomes** (disciplinary or professional outcomes)
  - Breadth of knowledge
  - Knowledge of specific fields (depth)

- **Skills outcomes** (capacity to do some things)
  - Generic competencies such as think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, collaborate with colleagues, problem solving.
  - Professional or technical skills; ability to function in global and multicultural settings

- **Attitude or affective outcomes**
  - Changes in beliefs or development of certain values e.g. empathy, ethical behaviour, sound work habits
  - Attitudes toward self (self-respect)
  - Attitudes toward others (respect for others)

- **Relationship with society and particularly constituency outcomes**
  - Relationship with educational providers
  - With employers
  - With professions
  - With family/community/society

These student learning outcomes can be looked at in various ways (Ewell, 2006):

- Learning as Attainment in which specific learning outcomes are described in several broad categories, with a view to developing the whole person.
- Learning as Development in which achievement is seen in terms of growth or enhancement, and is associated with words such as ‘value-added’, ‘before-after’ and net effects.
How Does OBE Work?

Constructive Alignment

In using Outcomes to guide instructional planning, three steps are involved: (1) decide on the outcomes that students are to achieve at the end of a course or programme. (2) to facilitate the achievement of ILOs, select student-centred teaching strategies (such as inquiry learning, or discovery learning) that place an emphasis on learner’s role in the learning process; (3) design assessment tasks to judge if and how well students performance meet the criteria. All these judgments are then transformed into standard grading criteria. It must be noted that this is not a linear operation that proceeds from outcomes to teaching to assessment. Instead, it an iterative process in which content teaching methods and assessment are integrated around the common concern of what students will learn.

The Issue of Integration

Programmes should be guided by long-term goals that are not subject specific (e.g. key competencies). Such goals are often achieved through inter-disciplinary approach to achieving key competencies rather than through separate subjects.

Conclusion

OBE is not a panacea for educational reforms. There are advantages as well as drawbacks to OBE. On the whole, OBE seems to promise a high level of learning for all students as it facilitates the achievement of the outcomes supported by experiential active learning. A thoughtful outcomes-based approach may well reap many gains in preparing students for life and work in the 21st century.

References


Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007). Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning (OBTL). What is it, why is it, how do we make it work?”

