Langara.
THE COLLEGE OF HIGHER LEARNING.

Common Questions about Outcomes-Based Teaching & Learning

Outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL) is an approach that puts student learning at the centre of course design and delivery. It shifts the focus from what the instructor is doing to what the students are learning. Below we address some of the common questions and concerns about this approach.

Doesn't OBTL privilege lower-order measureable skills, over the development of abstract thought?

OBTL requires the development of observable learning outcomes, but these are not restricted to lower-order thinking. OBTL encourages us to consider not just what procedural skills a student acquires but also what *developing abstract or critical thought* means for students. In other words, if our students have acquired new abstract knowledge or higher order thinking skills, how will we know? How will acquiring this knowledge or these skills change their perspectives of or interactions with the world around them? What will they be able to do that they couldn't do before?

To demonstrate abstract knowledge in a discipline, we might ask students to explain and evaluate common themes across different areas within a discipline, reorganize the major findings in a discipline into a new model or structure, or synthesize existing research to propose a new hypothesis. Below are a few examples.

After successfully completing this course, students should be able to . . .

- **critically interpret and evaluate** information presented in popular media about psychological disorders by **applying** principles of scientific method and inquiry (Psychology)
- describe and **interpret** historical events that have shaped the landscape, society and daily lives of people in Japan (Asian Studies)
- **explain** metaphysical concepts such as necessity, reality, time, God and free will, and summarize and **evaluate** major philosophical positions in relation to each (Philosophy)

Isn't OBTL just teaching to the test?

Teaching to the test suggests that the test was designed before the learning outcomes were articulated. However, in OBTL, we start with the intended outcomes and then identify possible assessments that can be used to see how well students are able to achieve those goals. For example, if we want students to be able to analyze arguments, then it makes sense for us to design assessments that require students to analyze arguments (Suskie, 2009). In that context, spending time teaching students how to analyze arguments and giving them practice activities to develop this ability is a logical and valid approach.

Doesn't OBTL violate academic freedom by prescribing how a faculty member might teach a course?

Academic freedom means that students and instructors can express their ideas and opinions without fear of censorship or reprisal (CAUT, 2011). Academic freedom also gives us latitude in deciding how we want to teach a course (Nelson, 2010).

The OBTL approach helps to provide consistency across courses and course sections (O'Neill, Birol & Pollock, 2010). This benefits both our students and us. Students are assured that they are gaining the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in future courses or work settings regardless of which section of a prerequisite course they take, while we have a better idea of the level of knowledge and skills we can expect from students entering and exiting our courses.

Some may perceive this consistency in content as a constraint, but we always have constraints on our teaching (AACU, 2006). The latitude provided by academic freedom does not allow an instructor in accounting to transform his/her course into an exploration of the Holy Roman Empire. However, in the context of OBTL, we still have broad latitude to decide how we want to teach a course (Cain, 2014). We still determine the kinds of assessments that will allow us to effectively evaluate whether our students have achieved the learning outcomes in a course, and we choose the teaching and learning activities that we believe will best support students in their development of that knowledge and those skills.

Doesn't OBTL put student failure on the shoulders of the instructor?

OBTL is meant to clearly communicate to students what they should be able to do after completing a particular course or program. If we have clearly articulated and explained our expectations of learning to students, and we have designed teaching and learning activities that support students' development of these clearly articulated learning outcomes, the responsibility for success is shifted to the students. They are better able to take control of their learning when they clearly understand what is expected of them.

If situations arise in which students haven't been successful, we are able to explicitly point out how our expectations were communicated to them, how the learning activities we designed align with and support the achievement of the learning outcomes, and which specific learning outcomes students did not successfully demonstrate. This leaves little room for dispute.

Isn't OBTL inflexible and not student-centred because the learning outcomes are decided in advance by others?

OBTL outlines for students what they *need* to know and be able to do to complete a particular course or program of study successfully and the ways in which they will be asked to demonstrate that learning. We identify these *need to know* outcomes because we are the discipline experts. We know which concepts, theories, principles, methods etc. of the discipline students need to learn, particularly during the first few years of study. These outcomes are also often informed by guidelines or regulations laid out by professional associations (e.g., American Psychological Association) and regulatory bodies (e.g., College of Registered Nurses of BC) and consultations with employers and community partners.

However, mapping out what students *need* to know doesn't preclude the possibility of also adding a few *nice to know* points as well. Perhaps an instructor has a passion for a particular topic that is related to and even enhances or contextualizes the *need to know* content. This may be a nice addition to the course that students don't need to be assessed on. Outlining *need to know* learning outcomes also doesn't prevent us from giving students choices about how they explore and learn particular content or demonstrate their learning. In fact, the OBLT approach facilitates this type of flexibility.

Isn't OBTL being imposed from on high?

Outcomes-based education is widely used in K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions across the globe. OBTL has been used in universities and colleges in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Europe, the US, and Canada for decades. The BC Ministry of Advanced Education has even laid out clear standards to clarify the expectations of graduates at each degree level (Bachelor, Master, PhD). So, in some sense, using learning outcomes to design and deliver curriculum *is* being imposed from on high. But it's also being imposed from below (K-12) and laterally (transfer institutions), and this is because instructors and students at all levels of education have seen firsthand just how well OBTL can enhance student learning.

Isn't OBTL just another fad?

It is probably more accurate to think of OBTL as a central part of a major paradigm shift in education away from teacher-centred education towards a more learner-centred approach (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Spady, 1994). The OBTL approach has roots in the trades and apprenticeship models of learning, but many countries began to adopt OBTL in the context of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s, with some countries adopting the approach as early as the1950s. The impression that OBTL is a fad is likely in part due to its recent widespread adoption (Tam, 2014). The fact that it is being taken-up at various levels of education in countries all over the world suggests the shift in thinking is becoming more firmly entrenched in higher education, not less.

References

Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning—A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *27*(6), 12-26.

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. (3rd ed.) Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill.

Cain, T. R. (2014). Assessment and academic freedom: In concert, not conflict. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.* Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/OP2211-17-14.pdf on October 31, 2017.

Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). (2011). *Academic Freedom*. Retrieval from https://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/policy-statement-on-academic-freedom on October 31, 2017.

Driscoll, A., & Wood, S. (2007). *Outcomes-based Assessment for Learner-centred Education: A Faculty Introduction*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing

Jones, B. M., & Wehlburg, C. M. (2014). Learning outcomes assessment misunderstood: Glass half-empty or half-full. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, 15*(2) retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/439/ on October 31, 2017.

Nelson, C. (2010, Dec 21). Defining academic freedom. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/12/21/defining-academic-freedom on October 31, 2017.

O'Neill, A., Birol, G., & Pollock, C. (2010). A report on the implementation of the Blooming Biology Tool: aligning course learning outcomes with assessments and promoting consistency in a large multi-section first-year biology course. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *1*(1), 8.

Spady, W. G. (1994). *Outcome-Based Education: Critical Issues and Answers*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED380910.pdf on October 31, 2017.

Suskie, L. (2010). *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tam, M. (2014). Outcomes-based approach to quality assessment and curriculum improvement in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *22*(2), 158-168.

Image Attributes

Confused icon made by by Freepik from www.flaticon.com.

Networking, Exam, Exam, Desk, Hierarchical Structure, and Medal icons made by Vectors Market from www.flaticon.com.