

Outcomes-based education as a curriculum for change: a critical analysis

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Abstract

Outcome-based education (OBE) has an intuitive appeal that hooks people. Simply set the outcomes you expect students to achieve, then teach and research in as many different ways and for as long as it takes until everyone meets them. In its simplest form, the OBE process virtually guarantees every student an education.

Outcome-based education (OBE) has a potential for enrichment of cognitive, affective and psychomotor outcomes of learners. Outcome-based education Advocate that education cannot be done simply by the spread of knowledge from the teachers to the learners. Relatively, knowledge is constructed by learners through dynamic and intellectual process of development; learners are the builders and creators of meaningful knowledge. It refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves. In traditional scenario of education, teacher centered approaches were used in which a teacher transmits information to students who passively listen and acquire facts while during Outcome-based education, learner centered approaches are used in which students are actively involved in their learning to reach new understandings, so each learner individually and socially develop their skills to construct meaning as they learn. This new experience facilitates learners to modify their previous meaning about the phenomena; this reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

Key Words: Outcome-based education (OBE), Curriculum

Introduction

Outcome-based education (OBE) 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 book examines the issues critical to understanding and implementing OBE. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If



implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.



The genesis of OBE

- In 1989, 5 countries signed the *Washington Accord*. They are: Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Canada, Ireland & the USA.
- Later, many other nations assumed the status of full signatories. *India is now a signatory (No. 17) of this elite club.*
- OBE is mandated by several accreditation.

What is Outcome Based Education (OBE)?

- Concerns that the education system may not adequately prepare students for life and work have prompted a review of education.
- *Is Traditional Education (TE) adequate.*

Deficiencies of Traditional Education (TE)

- Pre-2004
- Content-oriented
- Focused on syllabi
- Based on Teaching and Examination
- Resultantly
- Graduates are not completely prepared for the workforce.
- There is a lack of emphasis on soft skills needed in jobs, e.g. communication skills, office skills, human relationships skills.

Questions addressed by OBE

OBE is a method of curriculum design and teaching that focuses on what students can actually do after they are taught.

It poses the following questions:

- What do you want the students to learn?
- Why do you want them to learn it?
- How can you best help students to learn it?
- How will you know what they have learnt?

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language, literature, history, customs,





traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

The focus of OBE

OBE focuses on student learning by:

- Using learning outcome statements to make explicit what the student is expected to be able to know, understand or do;
- Providing learning activities which will help the student to reach these outcomes;
- Assessing the extent to which the student meets these outcomes through the use of explicit assessment criteria.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as



learning information--some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student's progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

Implementing OBE Reform

- **It has program objectives, program outcomes, course outcomes and performance indicators.**
- **It is objective and outcome driven, where every stated objective and outcomes *can be assessed and evaluated.***
- **It is centered around the needs of the students and the stakeholders.** Every learning outcome is intentional and therefore the outcomes must be assessed using suitable performance indicators.
- **Program objectives** address the graduates attainment within 3-5 years after their graduation.
- **Program outcomes**, which consist of abilities to be attained by students before they graduate, are formulated based on the program objectives. Program outcomes address **Knowledge (K), Skills (S) and Attitudes (A)** to be attained by students.
- Teaching / Learning method may have to be integrated to include different delivery methods to complement the traditional Lecturing method. Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created. Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome.

Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.



On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

Transitional vs. Transformational OBE

OBE's instructional planning process may therefore be looked upon as a **reverse of that associated with TE planning.**

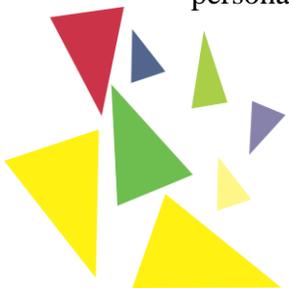
- The desired outcome is selected first and the curriculum, instructional materials and assessments are created to support the intended outcome.
- All educational decisions are made based on how best to facilitate the desired outcomes.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spade calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spade supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision--in their words, the whole student.



It is in devising learner outcomes that one's world view comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.



Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasionally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn't enough, one must use it.

If teachers want all students to learn well and to achieve specific outcomes, there are certain instructional procedures that must be followed, and each has implications for the way teachers plan and programme.

1. Teachers must prepare their students adequately so that they can succeed. This requires teachers to understand exactly what they want students to learn, to anticipate difficulties that students might have and plan to minimise these difficulties. One of the most common reasons that students are not successful is that they do not have the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills at the start of the period of instruction. You cannot simply ignore this and hope that





somehow the students will “catch up”. You must identify what knowledge and skills students need before they try to achieve the new outcomes you have set and, if necessary, review essential prerequisites at the start of each lesson. You might also have to provide additional time or assistance to those students who need it.

2. Teachers must create a positive learning environment in which students know that they will be helped in their learning no matter how easy or difficult they might find the learning process. To a large extent, this positive environment will depend on your relationship with the students, but it will also depend on your efforts to make the physical environment conducive to learning. For example, if you find that your class is overcrowded you may have to find some practical way of splitting the class. This might mean that you have less direct contact time with the students, but remember that the most important thing is what students learn, not how much time they sit in your class.

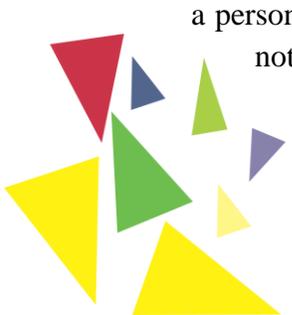
3. Teachers must help their students to understand what they have to learn, why they should learn it (including what use it will be to them in the future), and how they will know when they have learned it. Do not assume that students will see the relevance of what you are teaching just because you know why you are doing it. And never teach anything for which you can see no useful purpose.

4. Teachers must use a variety of methods of instruction in order to help each student to learn. You should not assume that all students can learn equally well from one particular teaching strategy, and you should not assume that any particular teaching strategy is a suitable way to help students achieve all learning outcomes. You need to select the most appropriate strategy after you have taken into account the outcomes you want students to achieve, the content you will use to help students achieve these outcomes, the characteristics of the students, and the resources that are available. You should not assume that the so-called “student-centred” strategies are always the best strategies to use in OBE. Often they will be appropriate, but sometimes more direct methods of instruction are appropriate (see Killen, 1998, for

examples).

5. Teachers must provide students with sufficient opportunities to practise using the new knowledge and skills that they gain, so that under the teacher’s guidance they can explore and experiment with their new learning, correct errors and adjust their thinking. It is essential for students to be helped to apply their new knowledge and skills rather than just accumulate new knowledge and skills. Of course, application of knowledge and skills is also an essential component of authentic assessment.

6. Teachers must help each student to bring each learning episode (lesson or group of lessons) to a personal closure so that they are aware of what they learned and where it is leading them. Do not assume that students can do this without your guidance.



If teachers want to be successful with their outcomes-based programming, they need to look at it from their students' perspective. Consider for a moment the questions that students might ask about any particular lesson (beyond the obvious "Is it in the exam?").

Some basic questions might be: What do I have to learn? Why do I have to learn it? What will I be doing while I am learning? Will it be interesting and useful? How will I know that I am learning what I should be learning? Will I have any say in what I learn? How will I be assessed? If teachers can answer these questions for their students they will be well on the way towards developing an effective outcomes-based approach to teaching.

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