Chapter 2

The Outcomes-Based Approach: Concepts and Practice in Curriculum and Educational Technology Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to discuss the emerging trend of an outcomes-based approach to curriculum improvement in higher education in recent decades; consider its practical considerations for curriculum and educational technology design; critically review the advantages and disadvantages of adopting an outcomes-based approach; and finally discuss the caveats of inappropriate use in curriculum and instructional design in higher education. As any other models of educational or instructional design, the outcomes-based approach has limitations, as well as promises for guiding better instruction and curriculum. It remains as a matter of how skillfully it is used to maximize its benefits and value while diminishing its limiting effects that could educationally trivialize the kind of learning and education that it purports to promote in the first place.

INTRODUCTION

The outcomes-based approach is completely student-centred, which focuses on what students know and can actually do. Sharpening the focus onto student learning outcomes goes beyond mere tinkering with traditional structures and methods; it really constitutes a paradigm shift in educational philosophy and practice. To discuss and critically review such paradigm shift from teaching to learning, this chapter is organized around four objectives. Firstly, it begins with a summary of
developments in institutional assessment and curriculum improvement in higher education in recent decades. Secondly, it identifies instructional principles that characterize the outcomes-based approach for curriculum design in higher education. Thirdly, practical pedagogical considerations are drawn from the outcomes-based approach for curriculum and instructional design, providing an example in the context of educational technology for effective assessment of outcomes. Fourthly, the approach is critically reviewed for its value from the perspectives of both practical and philosophical considerations. In so doing, it is directed to the heightening of sensitivity as to the manner and situations in which the outcomes-based approach may be employed.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades there is a widespread interest in the outcomes of educational experiences and how those outcomes meet a variety of societal needs.

Learning outcomes are important for recognition ... The principal question asked of the student or the graduate will therefore no longer be 'what you do to obtain your degree?' but rather 'what can you do now that you have obtained your degree?' This approach is of relevance to the labour market and is certainly more flexible when taking into account issues of lifelong learning, non-traditional learning, and other forms of non-formal educational experiences. (Purser, Council of Europe, 2003)

International trends in higher education show a shift away from the teacher-centred model that emphasizes what is presented, towards the learning-based model focusing on what students know and can actually do. As aptly pointed out by Ewell (2008), the vogue of outcomes-based approaches in higher education is in fact arising from the so-called ‘assessment movement’ that began in the mid-1980s in the United States with government calls to examine the effectiveness of the funds invested in public institutions of higher education by looking at how much graduates had learned by the point of graduation. With the assessment movement in higher education focusing on student learning outcomes as the emerging measure of institutional excellence and effectiveness, ideas about what constitutes a high-quality education have shifted from the traditional view of what teachers provide to a practical concern for what learners actually learn, achieve, and become. Indicators of student learning outcomes as part of the larger accountability framework have become prominent in the early 1990s first in the United States, which then spread to many countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and South Africa.

The outcome-based approach has been increasingly adopted within credit frameworks and by national quality and qualifications authorities such as the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) in the UK, the Australia, New Zealand and South African Qualification Authorities. (Gosling & Moon, 2001)

One recent example of the widespread international interest in outcomes-based approaches is the cross-national effort at standards alignment currently underway in Europe under the auspices of the Bologna Process that seeks to create a common model for higher education in Europe, in which learning outcomes should play an important role (Adam, 2004, 2006). As a result, the directive is that, by 2010, all programs offered by higher education institutions should be based on the concept of learning outcomes, and that curriculum should be redesigned to reflect this. Through the development of national frameworks of qualifications, all degrees (Bachelor and Masters) would be described in terms of learning outcomes, workload, level, competences and profile (Kennedy, Hyland & Ryan, 2006).

Central to the outcomes-based approach are the performance indicators of efficiency and effectiveness as the means of attaining the specified