

Outcomes based learning: Issues and implications



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What is Outcomes Based Learning?



- **Definition:**
 - Descriptions of what students can do at the end of learning – focus on applications of knowledge not on acquiring knowledge per se.
 - Clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all student to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organizing the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens (Spady, 1994:1).

What is Outcomes Based Learning?



- OBL is not a single approach to curriculum and assessment but rather a range of ways of thinking about curriculum design and assessment.
- There are lots of terminological differences: outcomes, standards, benchmarks, competencies, graduate attributes, attainment targets.
- All OBL approaches take a criterion-based view of assessment and focus on what students can do with knowledge after a period of learning.
- OBL moves away from an input view of curriculum (what will be covered) to a student achievement perspective (what students will do). In reality inputs and outcomes are not strictly separable and are mutually influencing

What is Outcomes Based Learning?



- Focus on applications of knowledge is not new – many traditional approaches to learning have been outcomes based.
- Modern approaches have mainly been developed in the context of vocational education – subsequently applied to school education and tertiary education because of emphasis on education as preparation for work.
- Applying OBL to tertiary education is not simply the adopting of a particular model: it involves articulating an outcomes perspective with an academic program.

What is Outcomes Based Learning?



- Features of outcomes-based education systems:
 - Creation of a curriculum framework that outlines specific, measurable outcomes.
 - Standards-based assessment that determines whether students have achieved the stated standard.
 - ✦ Assessment may take any form, but must measure whether the student can use the required information to perform the required task.
 - A commitment that all students of all groups will ultimately reach the same minimum standards – although within a flexible time frame.

Implementing OBL



Identifying
outcomes

Determining
assessment

Designing
curriculum

Identifying outcomes



- Processes for identifying outcomes:
 - Consultation with profession:
 - ✦ needs perceived by end-users/stakeholders
 - Educators judgments:
 - ✦ needs perceived as a basis of professional practice
 - ✦ theoretical constructs of the discipline
 - Research:
 - ✦ empirical examination of professional practice
- Each approach may identify different (even conflicting) needs.

Identifying outcomes



- The nature of outcomes:
 - Developmental outcomes:
 - ✦ staged and taught/learned in a sequence
 - ✦ each stage is a precursor to each next stage
 - ✦ provide information for teachers (areas of focus, etc. for individual students)
 - Exit (terminal) outcomes:
 - ✦ provide end points only
 - ✦ define required competencies for all students
 - ✦ ignore developmental processes
 - ✦ although framed as minimum achievement, risk becoming descriptions of maximum achievement

Identifying outcomes



- Determining the level of the outcomes:
 - Macro-level:
 - ✦ very generic and less explicit
 - ✦ permit blurring of boundaries between criteria
 - ✦ difficult to assess explicitly
 - ✦ subject to different interpretations by assessors
 - Examples:
 - ✦ English major outcomes: Bridgewater State College, Massachusetts, USA
 - ✦ English subject outcomes: University College Cork, Ireland

Identifying outcomes



- Determining the level of the outcomes:
 - Micro-level:
 - ✦ very detailed and consequently complex
 - ✦ risk atomising complex, inter-related behaviours
 - ✦ easier to assess explicitly
 - Example:
 - ✦ British Columbia ESL secondary level standards (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/esl/standards.pdf>)
 - ✦ Australian TAFE Diploma in Interpreting and Translating (extract)
 - ✦ Australian TAFE Certificate I in Transport & Logistics

Identifying outcomes



- Macro and micro level outcomes:
 - Many outcomes cannot be witnessed directly only inferred from behaviour under certain circumstances – macro level is harder to observe than micro-level.
 - Micro-level outcomes provide more evidence but require much more assessment data than macro-levels.
 - Micro levels of scaling fragment knowledge and ignore interrelationships between components. Macro-level outcomes ignore the components of a process and focus only on the total product.

Constructing assessment



- Relationship between outcomes and assessment.
- Issues:
 - Will all outcomes be formally assessed?
 - Will all formal assessment assess only outcomes?
 - What processes will be used for assessment?
- An assessment approach based only on outcomes (as opposed to content knowledge) implies:
 - an instrumentalist view of knowledge
 - a potentially narrowed curriculum

Constructing assessment



- OBL is usually assessed through a portfolio:
 - Collections of activities students have been engaged in – formal and informal assessment tasks
 - Records of observations of students' activities – informal assessment tasks
- Issues:
 - Amount of information collected
 - Comparability of data across students – especially in informal tasks
 - Timing of assessment – OBL assumes that assessment occurs when learner is ready, not on a schedule.

Reporting assessment



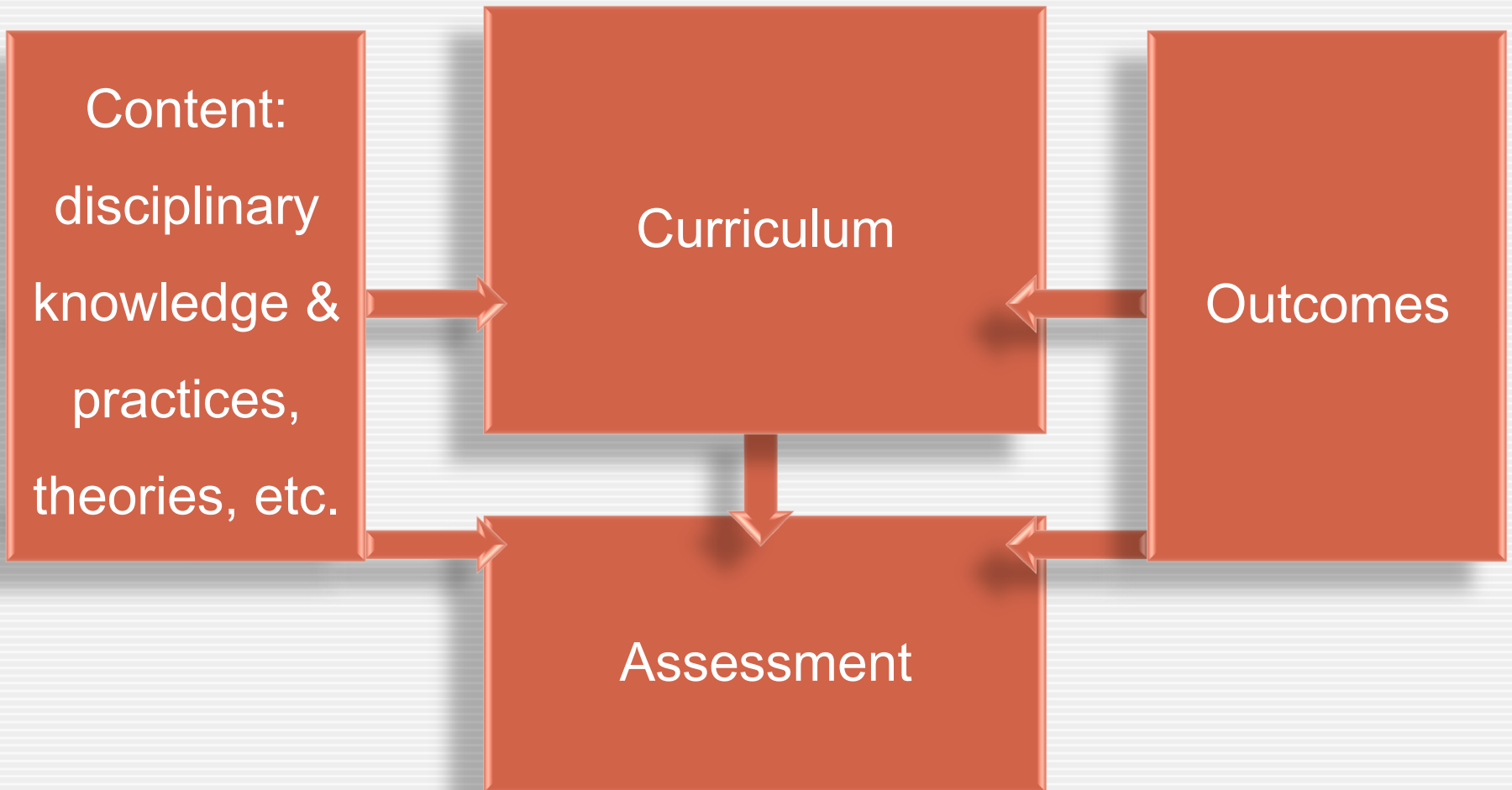
- Reporting:
 - Outcomes are designed to create a descriptive profile of capabilities but reporting often requires only an aggregate (e.g. a grade or mark) – implications for interpretability of assessment.
 - Outcomes assume a pass/fail assessment not a graded assessment – implications for assessment systems which require differentiation of results.
 - Modes of reporting needs to be sensitive to audience and purpose.

Designing curriculum



- In OBL designing curriculum involves determining the input necessary for students to acquire the ability to perform the outcomes.
- This may lead to:
 - Narrowing the curriculum focus
 - Teaching only instrumental knowledge
 - Focus on application rather than theory
 - Teaching only those things which are assessable/assessed.

Alternative ways of implementing OBL



OBL in programs and modules



- At program level:
 - All identified outcomes are taught and assessed in core modules.
 - Different components of the program teach and assess different outcomes.
- At module level:
 - Program outcomes identified for the module are taught and assessed.
 - Subject specific outcomes (criteria) are taught and assessed.

OBL in programs and modules



- Considerations:
 - At program level:
 - ✦ Program outcomes can be macro-level and generic.
 - ✦ Number of outcomes can be limited.
 - ✦ Each outcome is operationalised through modules.
 - At module level:
 - ✦ Program outcomes provide structure for curriculum but don't determine it.
 - ✦ Program outcomes provide overall coherence for a course of study.
 - ✦ Subject specific considerations inform curriculum and assessment.

OBL in modules

