

Learning Outcomes: Why are they important for staff?

Scottish Bologna Conference, 21–22<sup>nd</sup> February 2008

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**Introduction**

The title of this—and of the other talks in the opening session—is question-begging. It would perhaps be heretical in the context of the Bologna process to ask the implied question: Are learning outcomes important?, but even if we do not, others will. I'd like to begin, therefore, by picking up two critiques of LOs, one humorous but with serious intention, the other serious in intention, but perhaps more polemical in effect. The two examples also illustrate my own successful mastery of two of the Learning Outcomes indicated by this presentation: to demonstrate the ability to find relevant material from a diversity of sources, and the ability to evaluate critically my findings! First from the internet, passed on to me by a colleague with apologies to those of you who have seen this item before. The setting is that of Matthew chapter five, the Sermon on the Mount; I quote:

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and, gathering them around him, he taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven;

Blessed are the meek;

Blessed are those that mourn;

Blessed are the merciful;

Blessed are those that thirst for justice;

Blessed are those who are persecuted;

Blessed are those who suffer

Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven.

Then Simon Peter said, ‘Are we supposed to know this?’, and Andrew said, ‘Do we have to write this down?’, and James said, ‘Will we have a test on this?’, and Philip said, ‘Does this count for the final grade?’, and Bartholomew said, ‘Do we have to hand this in?’, and John said, ‘Other disciples didn’t have to learn this.’, and Matthew said, ‘I can’t make it; my Granny has died’, and Judas said, ‘What does this have to do with real life?’

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’s course documentation and inquired of Jesus, ‘What are your intended learning outcomes and your summative and formative assessment methods?’

### **And Jesus wept!**

My second example is from a marginally more reliable source, the Times Higher Education for February 14<sup>th</sup>, in which a researcher, Trevor Hussey, is quoted as describing the ‘craze’ for spelling out detailed learning outcomes as ‘a futile bureaucratic burden’. The strapline reads ‘Report identifies bureaucratic “craze” that fails academics and institutions’, and Hussey is quoted at the end as saying:

It seemed that this was a very questionable fad, favoured more by managers than by teachers and academics.

Do either of these represent a serious challenge to the validity of our conference theme? Have we been pressurised by the faceless bureaucrats of the Quality Assurance Agency, Bologna, and the Higher Education Academy into a purely cosmetic exercise in which we decorate our course and module outlines with spurious outcomes based on nothing more substantial than the career-building jargon of staff development professionals? With due apologies to colleagues in staff development for that egregious cliché, it nonetheless represents a not uncommon response from some of our more Neanderthal colleagues. Having said which, should I also apologise to Neanderthals?

Moving on, and taking a closer look at both sources, it turns out that Trevor Hussey’s position is much more nuanced than the scare headlines imply. His concern really is

with the misuse of LOs, not their usefulness in principle, and some of his critique is well founded. I will return to them a little later; let me simply note now that (from a staff point of view) a crude insistence on the application of learning outcomes at every level and in every circumstance can be counterproductive and can lead to the devaluation of their real value. Jesus's practice is, ironically, somewhat harder to defend! He is prone to blanket statements which arguably do not cash out in real terms (are the poor, the meek, those who mourn or suffer, the merciful, the just and the persecuted any better now as a result of this most famous of teaching sessions?), and he depends on the kind of charisma that few working academic can summon! We are all familiar with the teacher who claims that there is nothing wrong with the old-fashioned fifty minute lecture, and that he (it is, oddly enough, nearly always men who make this point) has no problem holding his audience while he deposits pearls before them. Perhaps an exit questionnaire might be appropriate.

### **Learning Outcomes—three aspects from a staff perspective**

My own experience of teaching stretches from the beginning of the eighties (before Mrs Thatcher applied her handbag to higher education) to the present, and incorporates extensive participation in the quality process from all directions. The first thing which any honest observer must say is that teaching practice in general has benefitted enormously from the process of quality review which began in 1995 and ended (at least as far as subject-level review is concerned) in 2001. Unlike the RAE, whose massive cost has delivered little in the way of tangible benefits, QA has effected a sea change in how teaching and learning are understood and delivered, with student needs and participants voices now an integral part of everything we do. There is not time in this brief presentation to spell this out, though I could certainly do so in personal terms. What I have been asked to focus on are the benefits from a staff perspective of the use of learning outcomes as a means of giving coherence to what we teach and meaning to its relevance to those we teach.

There are three aspects of course or module planning and delivery to which LOs have relevance. I should perhaps mention that terminology varies. In Glasgow University it is now customary to refer to the basic unit of delivery as a *course* (we have abandoned the term *module*) and the degree to which it contributes as a *programme*. Hussey's objections, on the basis of the THE article, are to what he sees as the inappropriate application of LOs to programmes and courses. Their most pertinent use (he claims) is in relation to individual lectures, seminars or other forms of teaching. I disagree with him on this point, since it seems to me that at the course level there is obvious relevance, and I shall spell this out in the time remaining to me.

First, in the actual planning of a new module, the requirement to consider what outcomes it is designed to produce (whether subject-specific or generic) imposes a useful discipline. It poses some very obvious questions at an academic level: is there a need for this course, is it academically or intellectually coherent, or is it just a makeweight lifted from the bottom drawer of notes and jottings which most of us keep for emergencies? Does it integrate with a wider programme or sub-programme? Is it likely to attract a reasonable number of interested students?

Secondly, depending on the particular nature of the module (lab-based, theory-driven, text-focused, etc), reflection on outcomes has an obvious input to forms of delivery. Can the factual content best be communicated on a website, or would it be preferable for content to emerge from experiment, discussion, close reading, etc.? Is there a role for up-front lecturing (there often is, but it should be consciously planned for, rather than a lazy default)? Might student presentations form a constructive part of the learning process? Like lectures, these are often a somewhat predictable default position, particularly in modules at levels three and above, where the class is left to do its own reading and to share the results. In the worst cases this can be a dereliction of duty on the part of the tutor, but properly handled, with good backup and feedback, student presentations are a powerful tool. The secret lies in a clear identification of what outcomes these are designed to produce; and here the Pandora's box of generic skills can too easily be opened to justify almost anything.

Assessment represents my third dimension. We are now well-used to the language of formative and summative assessment; what is less clear is whether we are quite as adept as we might be at relating reasonably objective assessment to properly defined outcomes. This is a large debate in its own right, and one which I cannot deal with here. However, it is clear from a staff perspective that if we claim to be producing students with a range of academic and generic skills, these do need to be evaluated at some point. The important thing is to be relaxed about how many can be dealt with in a single module—trying to prove omniscience on the part either of students or lecturers is doomed to failure, but a modest set of targets well integrated with the content and aims of the module can be positively helpful. Many of these outcomes are clear from the type of module, driven by the content and genre of the course. Trevor Hussey is undoubtedly correct to warn against outcomes which are ‘little more than an annotated list of contents’ (prefixed with the slogan ‘will be able to demonstrate knowledge of ...’!). But if the outcomes are sensibly defined it should be obvious how they relate to a variety of assessment options (formative or summative presentations which test both knowledge and communication of that knowledge, reflective essays demonstrating a degree of independent learning, examinations which test the ability to recall material and apply it without prior notice, lab work which measures practical skills, and so on). It is a tribute to the effectiveness of the QA movement that none of this sounds even remotely strange to any of you, yet little of it was well-established when I began my teaching career.

### **Conclusion**

In this brief review I have signally omitted a possible fourth dimension of the use of LOs in module design and delivery: their evaluation by the students for whom they are intended and who may or may not be aware that they exist. I expect that Jill Little will have something to say about this; let me admit that this seems to me to be the weakest aspect of the whole process. Perhaps that is a feature of a particular kind of institution—and so may reflect my own experience; but it is also something which I have noted in QA reviews in a wide range of institutions of various types. I look forward, therefore, to the next paper.