Macau University of Science and Technology

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Outcomes-Based Learning in Hong Kong Higher Education:

Cultural Transformation?

or

"Job done, now can we get back to work?"

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Outcomes-based Learning

1. Historical
2. Sector-wide application
3. Policy and practice at HKU
4. A teacher's view

Historical

- A UGC initiative
- Borrowed from the West
- A means of assuring quality (Ewell)
- A "solution to the local 'problem' of process-focused quality assurance" (Kennedy)
- Outcomes-based approaches as offering a sharper edge
- All 8 institutions expected to implement OBL- HK$65m allocated to the process
- Each institution has autonomy to develop their own framework
- See generally, K Kennedy, Conceptualising quality improvement in higher education in HK, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33:3, 205-218

In the meantime…

- Numerous workshops, symposia, conferences and learned articles
- Most institutions introduce and embed OBL in 3+3+4 Curriculum Reforms
- All institutions appear to have taken the process to heart
- SLEQ adopted cross-sector to measure outcomes achievement
- Detailed documentary requirements in regular QAC Audits
- Features prominently on institutions' T&L websites
- The establishment of a dedicated centre funded by UGC grant – see Lingnan University Centre for the Advancement of Outcomes-Based Education (CAOBE) – "to sustain the momentum of OBE within the other UGC funded institutions" http://tlc.ln.edu.hk/caobe/

So what is OBL?

- "A transition from content-focused to outcomes-focused instruction" (Stuckey)
- "an approach to programme and course design, and to teaching and learning, that is focused upon what the students are expected to learn and to do, rather than what the teacher expects to teach and do." (HKU CETL)

What is OBL?...

- From teacher-centred to learner-centred
- From teaching objectives to learning achievement
- It focuses the student's mind and provides a learning target to aim for
- It focuses the teacher's mind

Implementation

- Work backwards from learning outcomes
- Identify and formulate learning outcomes
  - for the program
  - for the course
  - LOs as "demonstrable actions and performances" (Spady, 1994)
  - LOs to integrate skills, knowledge and values
- Align them all:
  - Program LOs + course LOs
  - Within the course: LOs + learning activities + assessment
- This process makes (more) explicit to students what they are to do and how they are to do it (Biggs, 2009)

Implementation requires…

- A move from norm-referenced to standards-referenced assessment
- This means no limit to the number of students scoring in the highest grades (in theory, but in practice?)
- This means levels of outcomes' achievement must be made explicit in advance
- Can this be done?

Another view

"Why the obsession with learning outcomes and constantly emphasizing them to students? What about acknowledging that learning takes place in different, sometimes random and unpredictable ways, is personal, and spontaneous, and cannot (should not?) be controlled?"

(unnamed external examiner for commercial law program)

"By outlining specific outcomes, a holistic approach to learning is lost. Learning can find itself reduced to something that is specific, measurable, and observable." (Tam, 2014)

Back at HKU…

- April 2008, Senate approves adoption of OBASL, to be implemented in 3 phases:
- 2007-09 development of OBL framework
- 2008-09 Faculty-based piloting of courses
- 2009-12 Implementation of OBL for all new courses, and to existing courses in phases, with 100% take-up by 2013
- Implementation to be monitored by re-incarnated Curriculum Development Committee

Back at HKU…

- Fully embraced and implemented (administratively speaking)
- A flurry of activities
- Outcomes-writing workshops for all Faculties (but no training in re-designing assessments and learning activities)
- A dedicated CETL staff for all FTLQCs
- Standards-referenced assessment adopted
- References to OBL are everywhere, on every website, in every policy statement
- HKU Assessment Policy: the term "learning outcomes" is used 20 times

HKU Assessment Policy

Principle 2.

"There should be alignment between the programme and course learning outcomes and the assessment processes and standards. Decisions regarding assessment (including criteria and standards) need to be made collaboratively amongst teaching staff at the time of drafting programme and course learning outcomes and not at the end of a teaching cycle. They include the forms of assessment to be used, the expectations with respect to student achievement and how these are to be communicated to students at the outset, the determination of results of assessments, the feedback to students etc."

HKU Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning Form

5 out of 8 questions explicitly refer to learning outcomes:

Q. 8: "Overall, the course was effective in helping me achieve the course learning outcomes."

SLEQ Questionnaire: "The aim of this survey is to collect data about students' perceptions of their learning experience and learning outcomes in the University."

Reality on the Ground

- Minimal follow-up and monitoring of processes (other than when preparing for Audit)
- Despite SLEQ, minimal monitoring of outcomes achievement
- Failure to close the evidence loop
- Minimal design strategy for program LOs
- Poor alignment between program and course learning outcomes
- Learning outcomes written for all courses but no disciplined mechanism to formulate appropriate learning outcomes (teachers write what they like)
- No evidence that teachers have re-designed learning activities and assessment with a view to achieving LOs (despite HKU Assessment Policy Principle 2)
- For many a bothersome intrusion into valuable research time

My Experience

"It would be a mistake to dismiss OBL as mere window-dressing. It has the power to be transformative. It requires teachers to ask themselves, for most of them for the very first time, the question, what I am trying to do in my teaching and curriculum design? What really is my expectation of students in this course? What should be their goals? How can this be achieved in the current course design? If it is not likely to be achieved well or at all, what strategic moves can I make to help facilitate the achievement of these learning goals?" R Glofcheski, unpublished paper, 2011

My Experience

"If nothing else, OBL should arouse teachers to the idea that there should be a known plan or roadmap so that students have a sense of where they are going, and teachers too. At best, it should cause them to reconsider conventional ways, and to think of new and better ways of learning." RG, 2011

For instance, in the past, teachers might pop a quizz on their students. OBL would ask teachers to reflect on what might be the learning outcomes of such an activity, and whether they are the desired outcomes, and then pedagogy can thereby be improved." [self-directed learning? Experiential learning, etc]

This will trigger unexpected challenges, for instance how to assess complex assessment work. And it will require some resources, if nothing else, in monitoring.

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