Rethinking Learning Outcomes

Review of Trevor Hussey & Patrick Smith (2003) 'The Uses of Learning Outcomes', Teaching in Higher Education, Vol. 8. No 3, pp. 357-368

Picking up the baton from their earlier article *The Trouble With Learning Outcomes*, in which they detailed a persuasively cautionary account of the dangers inherent in using learning outcomes as tools of audit rather than of education, Hussey and Smith (2002) return on a mission: 'to develop an account of learning outcomes… that is more realistic and conducive to educational purposes' (p. 232).

As detailed in the abstract, the declared intent of this article is to produce 'a new model… that starts from the idea of an articulated curriculum, and embraces both intended and emergent learning outcomes'. This new model will employ 'the distinction between predicted and unpredicted learning outcomes, together with the distinction between those that are desirable and those that are undesirable', the aim being 'to aid understanding of the nature and proper use of learning outcomes in teaching and learning'.

In the first part of the article, the authors provide examples of manifestations of the tensions between a drive for clarity, transparency and specificity on the one hand, with the realities and complexities of the classroom on the other: 'We argue that too tight a focus on learning outcomes is at odds with notions of good learning, good teaching and empirical experience' (p.359). Indeed, in their earlier article, Hussey and Smith (2002) argued that 'the most fruitful and valuable feature of higher education is the emergence of ideas, skills and connections which were unforeseen even by the teacher (p. 228).

Expanding on their argument to lay the foundations for their new flexible model, Hussey and Smith examine the broader context of curriculum. They lead us through Forest's complexity of classroom dynamics, along McAlpine *et al*'s 'corridor of tolerance', quickly skipping past Biggs' 'notion of Constructive Alignment', before travelling up Bruner's Spiral Conception of development to emerge at Megginson's Emergent Learning Outcomes. Collectively, these references generate the strong sense of an argument in support of reflective practitioners, alert to the interests, educational needs and aspirations of the students, ever mindful of the published intended learning outcomes towards which they should all be moving in order to secure validated accreditation.

However, things take a puzzling turn as the authors examine Intended and Emergent Learning Outcomes as part of the preparation to launch their own model, the articulated curriculum, which 'represents more realistically what happens during both the planning and implementation phases of the curriculum' (p. 361). Hussey and Smith go to great lengths to establish the relationship between emergent learning outcomes and intended learning outcomes, reducing classroom dynamics to a range of pigeonholes, marking out separate slots for contiguous learning outcomes, related learning outcomes and incidental learning outcomes. It would be interesting to know where they might place negotiated learning outcomes, of fundamental importance in the subject of Art and Design (Davies, 2003) and

recognised in other fields as providing a valuable strategy to empower students in the shaping of their own learning.

Beyond this, we arrive at an examination of the Predictability and Desirability of Emergent Learning Outcomes, a section which is both puzzling and alarming. On the puzzling side are the hoops through which the authors are prepared to jump to state what seems obvious: 'The predictability of the emergent learning outcomes will… depend to some extent upon how close they are to those that the teacher pre-specified' (p. 364). On the alarming side, one of the most striking examples is the suggestion that some emergent learning outcomes 'might well be disruptive and dysfunctional' (p364), leading to 'seductive misunderstandings, cul-de-sacs and diversions that are best avoided' (p364). Is it not doing the students a great disservice to suggest a teacher should steer them around known peril rather than alerting them to its presence?

Far from being helpful, these 'models' conjure up an image of a teacher frozen in action, struggling to decide into which learning-outcome pigeonhole to slot each student comment, and whether or not it falls within their corridor of tolerance, before the next comment comes along. Is this their interpretation of Schön's reflection-in-action?

Returning to Biggs' Constructive Alignment, it seems to present a method by which Hussey and Smith can draw up the learning outcomes to which they aspire, being 'more realistic and conducive to educational purposes'. But rather than acknowledge this, the authors instead seize on the term 'entrapped', declaring they are 'wary of creating conditions that entrap the students' and that 'establishing [a context] which requires their passive adherence appears antithetical to the processes of learning and education' (p. 361). In making such a statement it seems they entirely misrepresent Biggs' philosophy, which sees 'the learner as central in the creation of meaning, not the teacher, as the transmitter of knowledge' (Biggs, 1996, p. 348).

In her article examining the implications of outcome-based assessment in higher education, Ecclestone makes a key distinction between two approaches:

- outcomes expressed as broad aims for teaching and learning… a useful aid in curriculum planning… and for making assessment criteria more rigorous and accessible to learners.

- outcome-based assessment… expressed as detailed, standardised definitions of learning outcomes, accompanied by similarly specific assessment criteria. (Ecclestone, 1999, pp. 30-31).

Hussey and Smith consistently focus on the latter. They seem unshakeable in their conviction that by choosing to accommodate the interests of the students, to maximise the opportunities for deep learning, a teacher automatically reduces the chances of achieving the pre-specified outcomes.

I find this approach difficult to understand as my own experience falls within the former category. When, as a developing practitioner, I first grasped the concept of learning outcomes, I experienced something of a Eureka moment. The flexibility and depth they offer as a general teaching tool had a major impact on me. Among other things, the use of learning outcomes helped me define clear targets and teaching strategies, and how to identify appropriate assessment tasks. This had a direct impact on my capacity for reflection-in-action, giving me more confidence in responding to and developing

unexpected lines of student enquiry as I was clear about how each element fitted into the 'bigger picture'. I realise now that I had found in learning outcomes a key to implementing constructive alignment.

I am aware that the field in which I work provides the context for me to view learning outcomes in this light. Art and Design does not readily lend itself to 'traditional' forms of assessment, long employing strategies such as active learning, authentic assessment tasks, group work and individually-negotiated projects. Many of these approaches are seen to encourage a deeper approach to learning and, as such. reflect the principles of 'innovative assessment', sharing a common goal 'to improve the quality of student learning' (Mowl, 1996).

This approach is supported in the QAA Subject benchmark statement for academic standards in Art and Design, which is 'deliberately couched in ways that permit interpretation in curricula terms at the local level of the specific discipline, thus allowing institutions to update and innovate in terms of programme design, content, delivery and assessment'. (QAA, 2002, p2: 1.3). But it is not just within this subject-specific context that the QAA encourages such flexibility: 'The Agency wishes to encourage innovation and diversity in assessment practices', stressing that universities need to ensure that 'assessment supports student learning'. (QAA, 2000). The Higher Education Academy (2004) also applauds Biggs' 'idea of aligning learning intentions with the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment processes and resources to support learning', stating that the 'idea is implicit in the QAA programme specifications and subject benchmarking which encourage curriculum designers to make these sorts of connections'.

Given there is such clear support from the organisations responsible for ensuring the quality of assessment in higher education, it is surprising that Hussey and Smith claim so insistently that for a teacher to frame learning outcomes 'more broadly and flexibly' they do so 'in the full knowledge that such outcomes pose problems for assessment' (p. 367). I believe the authors' approach is, to some extent, explained in their earlier article where they claim that many academics 'may state their expected learning outcomes if obliged to do so, but this is seen as a chore, rather than a useful exercise. Once the QAA visit is over they will hardly be looked at again. If learning outcomes are so practical and useful, why is there this resistance?' (Hussey and Smith, 2002, p224). I would suggest that, if it is so easy to provide a suitably plausible veneer of auditing competence, then there can be no problem with learning outcomes *per se*. The real issue is with the approach adopted for implementation.

Hussey and Smith's 2002 article played a major part in helping me understand the complexities and potential negative aspects which could arise from the mis-use of learning outcomes. However, it seems the authors have become locked into that viewpoint, choosing to overlook a positive solution to their conundrum which already exists in the shape of Constructive Alignment.

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