



Sound IDEAs for teaching and learning

December, 2016

Learning Outcomes: the debate continues

In this episode we explore the use of learning outcomes and the resistance some faculty have toward using them.

Teaser

MAN: Learning outcomes I think just state in a way that I find problematic what is obvious and what any competent teacher is always is going to be doing in any case.

MAN: If you start out saying you need to come up with learning outcomes I think people are always going to see that as some kind of top down thing not something that is part their professional day to day approach.

MAN: Writing learning outcomes can be done in a mechanistic form and without any training I think that is what people often end up doing. But it doesn't have to be that way.

From IDEA, this is Sound IDEA.

David Pollock: Mention the importance of developing good learning outcomes to faculty, and you might get everything from nods of agreement and even "amens," to rolled eyes or out right hostility. In the eyes of some, the practice has interfered with good teaching and taken up valuable time for a pointless end. While others passionately argue that you cannot construct a good course without them. It's learning outcomes. In this edition of Sound IDEA. I'm David Pollock.

So here are our learning outcomes for today. After listening to this podcast, the listener should be able to: 1) differentiate between those who like and dislike learning outcomes; and 2) decide for themselves if learning outcomes are a good or bad thing.

Developing learning outcomes like this is hardly new in education. The idea has been around for at least the last century or so in a variety of forms. The more recent emphasis on learning outcomes for programs and entire colleges has brought the discussion to a new level of

discourse. And the emphasis on creating a culture of evidence at colleges has pushed the assessment of outcomes to new light as well. But it has hardly been without resistance.

NOONAN: I just think that leads to people who think like robots and don't think. They execute commands.

David Pollock: Jeff Noonan is a professor of philosophy at the University of Windsor. He says specifying learning outcomes, among other things, limits creative thinking and the free exploration of ideas.

NOONAN: Is it always so abundantly clear what it is that will emerge in this particular course, this semester as opposed to any past semester. Is it always so clear and do we want to tie ourselves down so completely and have administrators or deans or heads police what happens in a classroom. Do we want to tie things down so clearly and so mechanically that if the compare and contrast is boring the students to death and nothing is happening that we say forget about that. The ideas are leading here, let's follow the ideas where they go.

David Pollock: In other words, Noonan argues that a reductionist, mechanistic approach to designing learning, by specifying learning outcomes in detail, thwarts not only students' ability to pursue ideas wherever they take them, but it also limits the instructor's ability to adapt a course as needed.

NOONAN: So again, I come back to the very real possibility it seems to me that a rigid insistence on learning outcomes, designing the course with the learning outcomes in mind. So not letting anything happen that is not already spelled out in advance that seems to me fatal to further development and deepening of human thought and creativity.

David Pollock: Being so prescriptive about what learning should happen in a course, from Noonan's point of view, is somewhat like painting by numbers. You would get something at the end, but is it organic, creative thought?

NOONAN: Where would science be if scientists simply stuck with experiments as designed? Often times, the greatest insights have resulted from mistakes, from provoking completely and radical rethinking of assumptions. Obviously, you can't build into a learning outcome complete and radical rethinking of all assumptions. I mean that is an accident. That is an emergent property of a free exploration of a discipline.

David Pollock: Fellow philosopher Ron Cooper, professor of humanities at the College of Central Florida, agrees.

Cooper: Years ago, The American Philosophical Association came out with a statement opposed to learning outcomes because one thing they saw was that it was kind of restrictive in a class that you hope develops organically.

David Pollock: But the argument against learning outcomes often heard is not just that they are limiting. The complaint at times is that faculty are forced to use them whether or not they believe they are useful.

COOPER: If you start out saying you need to come up with learning outcomes then I think people always going to see that a top down thing not something that they see as part of their professional day-to-day approach.

NOONAN: You know it produces bad faith. People just do it to get it out of the way because someone told them they have to and then they carry on.

David Pollock: Noonan adds that the push for learning outcomes has been detrimental to the campus climate.

NOONAN: Nothing that contributes to cynicism in an institution is good for students or anybody.

David Pollock: But some say institutions have not only a right, but a responsibility, to ensure that the learning they claim is happening actually is.

FINK: There needs to be some coordination of that and that's not happening in a totally laize fair, do your own thing, whatever you want to do kind of policy.

David Pollock: Dee Fink, formerly of the University of Oklahoma and a consultant on learning in higher education says institutional assessment of learning is necessary. Without it, how do you know for sure that graduates have the skills and knowledge you say they do.

FINK: One of the major publications on this was done by Derek Bok the former president of Harvard University where he took about 8 to 10 major learning outcomes like that most people would agree that student ought to be learning in college. He did a meta analysis of research data on how well that's happening. And with every one of them his conclusion was each one of those students are learning some of that but not nearly as much as most people would think they ought to be learning and could be learning if we used better forms of teaching. So I think we do have a problem with people doing what they want to do and a lot of times students don't get enough writing, don't get enough practice in critical thinking and when they do we have totally different forms of what that means, part of which is good but we also need to say and what do we mean by that that we are trying to promote for our graduating seniors.

CORRIGAN: The devil's in the details with a lot of this.

David Pollock: Paul Corrigan, an Assistant Professor of English at Southeastern University, supports the need for evaluating outcomes, but offers some caution.

CORRIGAN: You don't want state legislators determining the specifics of course content, the specifics of how faculty are evaluated. But I do think it's within their right to say, 'Alright faculty,

you determine what you want to teach and then you look to see how students are learning and let us know.' So I think the higher-ups have a right and a responsibility to see that faculty/professors/programs are looking into the quality of our teaching. But to go beyond that and start dictating was exactly how that should be done, I think is very dangerous.

David Pollock: But it is precisely this confusion between top-down mandated learning outcomes and course-level outcomes that has given a black eye to the whole idea of learning outcomes for many Corrigan says. Just because using learning outcomes has been mandated in many cases, doesn't mean they are not useful. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

CORRIGAN: I think if you're against outcomes, you really have in mind, and maybe for good reason, something other than what people who are advocating the use of this practice have in mind. Outcomes can help us make sure all the parts of our courses make sense and fit together, we can design activities that are purposeful, we can communication that purpose to our students more clearly. Remember, these are the goals for the course, this is how I want you to grow and this assignment ties into it in this way.

AMANDA DICKENS: [classroom sounds] So Welcome. Are you'll excited to be here at 8am?

David Pollock: Amanda Dickens teaches biology and marine biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

AMANDA DICKENS: So this is where we are going to be at 8am for the next four weeks. But don't worry, you have...

David Pollock: Like most instructors, she spends the first part of her course introducing herself and getting to know students.

AMANDA DICKENS: Alright, my name is Dr. Dickens. I'm a marine biologist.

David Pollock: Then by probing, students current knowledge she builds the reasoning behind the learning outcomes in her course.

AMANDA DICKENS: What make ourselves so special? Why can we going swimming and not have water just come into our bodies and bloat us all up? Membranes. Ok we are going to learn a lot about membranes.

David Pollock: She further explains that the course learning outcomes are interconnected.

AMANDA DICKENS: I am going to have them listed when we go over chapters, which ones we are specifically covering because I want you to realize that's what's being addressed because it is all connected. Everything I teach you in chapter 2, you are going to use at some point throughout the class. What we learn in chapter 3 about organic molecules is going to be used.

When we talk about the cell organelles, we're going to use those later. So everything is interconnected and builds upon the previous stuff.

David Pollock: She uses the discussion to preview the course and set the stage for what's ahead.

AMANDA DICKENS: That is one thing we're going to learn about. Most of us think DNA, everyone knows DNA right? Anyone into crime scene shows? OK, this is going to be a lot of fun when we get to that point because you will get to do a crime scene lab in lab, it's all a mystery.

David Pollock: During the discussion, Dickens maps the outcomes for students and makes one final request of them.

AMANDA DICKENS: So these are your major learning outcomes. Is there anything else that you thought you would like to learn about that isn't up there?

I think if they are written correctly and approached correctly, they are effective.

David Pollock: For Dickens, her course learning outcomes are useful in a number of ways.

AMANDA DICKENS: One of the first things I do in class is ask the student "what do you expect to learn?" So if you are planning on going into science why is it important to study a cell. Or why is it important to study biology? And what do you need to know about a cell in order to best understand an organism? In that way I kind of walk through the learning outcomes by asking them what is important to know?

David Pollock: Ensuring that students not only understand what the outcomes are but why the specific ones are there is important to Dickens.

AMANDA DICKENS: Connect it in a manner that the students understand as far as 'Oh, this is why we are learning this' and 'oh ya, this makes sense that we need to learn this before we can learn the next step. So I think that is the effective manner to use them.

CORRIGAN: Outcomes can help me frame what it is I want students to learn. How I want them to grow. And then I can use them to look into if that happens.

David Pollock: When faculty understand the purpose of Learning outcomes, Corrigan says, they can be very useful tools in making a course meaningful.

CORRIGAN: I've come to find a lot of value in them for a lot of different reasons. I think outcomes help us name aspects of our own expertise that have become so automatic to use as to be invisible. We know what we know so well that we forget we know it and we can't imagine not knowing it. But our students don't know it so to stop and do some serious introspection and

put names to the components to what it is that we know can help us stop assuming that things are obvious when they're not.

David Pollock: Dee Fink adds that the development of meaningful learning outcomes can help faculty put a course together that leads students where they want them to go through the basic backward design process.

Fink: If you can learn how to do that whole process; identify good learning outcomes, identify the necessary and appropriate activities for those learning outcomes and sequin them, the evidence suggests you're going to see a much higher rate of student engagement both coming to class and being engaged when they're in class. And a much higher level of student learning across the board of their individual differences then you would have seen to date. Good learning goals expand the possibilities of what students might learn beyond just foundation knowledge of basic applications. The second thing learning about course design can do for people is give them a toolkit for making that expanded possibilities in fact a reality for a much larger percentage of their students.

David Pollock: Corrigan describes how this process worked for him. In a literature course, he used to tell students that he wanted them to think critically about the texts they were reading. But it was not until he defined exactly what that meant, by being very deliberate about defining three learning outcomes, that he was able to create a course that actually led students there.

CORRIGAN: I wanted them to be able to ask concrete, meaningful, interruptive questions about the text they were reading. Be able to consider multiple possible answers or interpretations and be able to weigh evidence for and against those things. Now these three things, the questions, the multiple possible interpretations, the evidence, anyone who studies literature does these automatically and perhaps unconsciously. So without taking time to name them, there is a lot of assumptions happening where I can very concretely help students to learn to do those things but I didn't think to because I didn't take the time to name them. So I found that naming them and returning to them, building assignments around them and telling the students these are the goals, these are the component parts of this kind of critical thinking I want you to learn has been very helpful. I've seen my courses improve. I've seen the work that they produce improve as well as their own sense that they're learning.

Fink: It's a shift in mindset from focusing on topics to focusing on learning. And until you make that mindset change, you are going to have trouble writing learning outcomes. But once you do, then the door opens, the sky opens up a very exciting opportunity and possibility but then you got to learn how to do it and learn how to do it well.

David Pollock: Dee Fink and others say one of the problems with the application of learning outcomes is that faculty have often just not been adequately educated about their value or how to construct them.

Fink: I think writing learning outcomes can be done in a mechanistic form and without any training I think that is what people often end up doing. But it doesn't have to be that way and that's not the way it works when it is being done right.

NOONAN: If someone can demonstrate to me that putting putting some learning outcomes on my syllabus and conforming my teaching practice to them helps students learn better, I'll change my opinion, but as of yet and I've been making these arguments for about a decade since the conversation at my university first starting happening, I am happy to change my view but I haven't heard the argument yet.

David Pollock: And so, the debate continues. Ensuring that faculty are participants in the process seems to be one important component of promoting the use of learning outcomes on a campus. The top-down command to use them can turn off a lot of faculty. Another is developing ways of helping faculty understand the value of developing course level outcomes that help them construct an effective course. Until that happens, it is likely that faculty on some campuses will continue to resist. Or is it that learning outcomes are not for everyone, and those instructors should be left to their own devices?

What do you think? Do you have ideas for how to motivate and educate faculty about learning outcomes? How do you reconcile the top-down mandate for program level learning outcomes with the pedagogical value of course level outcomes? Let us know your thoughts on this podcast page or email us to share resources. For IDEA, I'm David Pollock