Implementing Outcome-Based Education (OBE) Framework: Implications for Assessment of Students' Performance

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Abstract

This paper initially traces the roots of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and introduces key concepts at the level of school-wide implementation based on Spady (1994). It then proceeds with defining what outcomes are and discusses how the definition of outcomes demands paradigm shift in assessment and evaluation practices. Finally, the paper tackles important implications of carrying out the framework for the practice and methods of assessment and evaluation of students' performance in schools. These implications are meshed with discussion of the four operating principles of OBE.

Keywords: outcome-based assessment, outcome-based evaluation, outcome-based education

Introduction

In response to the need for standardization of education systems and processes, many higher education institutions in the Philippines shifted attention and efforts toward implementing Outcome-Based Education (henceforth OBE) system on school level. The shift to OBE has been propelled predominantly because it is used as a framework by international and local academic accreditation bodies in school- and program-level surveillance, on which many schools invest their efforts into. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) even emphasized the need for the implementation of OBE by issuing a memorandum order (CMO No. 46, s. 2012) entitled, "Policy-Standard to enhance quality assurance in Philippine Higher Education through an Outcomes-Based and Typology Based QA". Then, in 2014, it was followed

by a release of the Handbook of Typology, Outcomes-Based Education, and Sustainability Assessment.

Given the current status of OBE in the country, this paper intends to shed light on some critical aspects of the framework with the hope of elucidating important concepts that will ensure proper implementation of OBE. Also, the paper zeroes in on inferring implications of OBE implementation for assessment and evaluation of students' performance.

What is OBE?

Outcomes-based education as defined by Spady (1994, p. 12) means "clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experience."

The definition explicitly specifies certain markers, which should serve as bases of actions and procedures that schools must undertake to ensure the proper institution-wide implementation of OBE. Tucker (2004) further emphasized this in his description of OBE as a process that should involve the restructuring of curriculum, assessment, and reporting practices in education. The changes that OBE entails put emphasis on students' demonstration of learning outcomes rather than accumulation of course credits. Also, these definitions of OBE emphasize the need to accordingly align all aspects of educational processes and systems to the expected outcomes that all students should be able to proficiently exhibit at the end of the curriculum, and that outcomes should not be viewed synonymously with grades or simply curricular completion, but rather authentic demonstrations of expected competencies as a result of significant learning experiences.

It can be surmised then that the implementation of OBE requires consistency across desired outcomes of education, teaching and learning activities, and assessment methods and practices.

To organize everything in the educational system (curriculum, resources, facilities, curricular and co-curricular activities, etc.) and align them with the desired outcomes of education, it would be necessary first for schools to have a clear understanding of what outcomes are. Thus, the next section addresses the following questions: What are outcomes and how are they derived and stated? The next section of this article will provide thorough discussions on the *outcomes* according to the OBE framework.

What are Outcomes?

The term *outcome* is lexically defined as *"something that follows as a result or a consequence", "an end-product or a result",* and *"the way a thing turns out".* One common denominator among these definitions is that they all concur that outcomes happen as a product or an end-result of processes or any antecedent factors or events. In education, outcomes are viewed as the learning results that students are expected to demonstrate across the curriculum. Hence, outcomes in education may vary in terms of levels or forms. According to Killen (2000), some outcomes are expected to be demonstrated at a course level (subject-related academic outcomes), and some are at the program and institutional levels (cross-discipline outcomes). However, according to Spady (1994, p. 49), the most important form of outcomes with which other forms or levels of outcomes should be aligned are those that reflect real life roles that learners will perform the moment they exit the education system – these are called' culminating outcomes.'

Simply, the course/subject-related and program level outcomes should be fundamentally linked to the culminating or exit outcomes of education. This practice ensures that education prepares students to perform future life-roles. Thus, the focus of OBE is more on the results or products of education, rather than on the content and curricular processes (Morcke et al., 2012).

In an OBE set-up, the first thing that should be identified and explicitly stated is the culminating or exit outcomes, *what we want our students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning journey in school.* Again, these culminating outcomes should be based on life-roles that students will perform in the real world. One of the operating principles of OBE in Spady's (1991; 1994) framework is the *Design Down* principle, which should be simultaneously applied together with the other operating principles (i. e., clarity of focus, high expectation, and expanded opportunity). The design down principle is like a top-down approach of formulating and stating outcomes. The culminating outcomes should be stated first, followed by some enabling outcomes (program level), then by some discrete outcomes that are measured in terms of specific learning tasks (course level). The backward design of outcomes would somehow guarantee that all the forms and levels of outcomes across the curriculum are systematically and intentionally aligned and connected. Then, the implementation of this design should be forward.
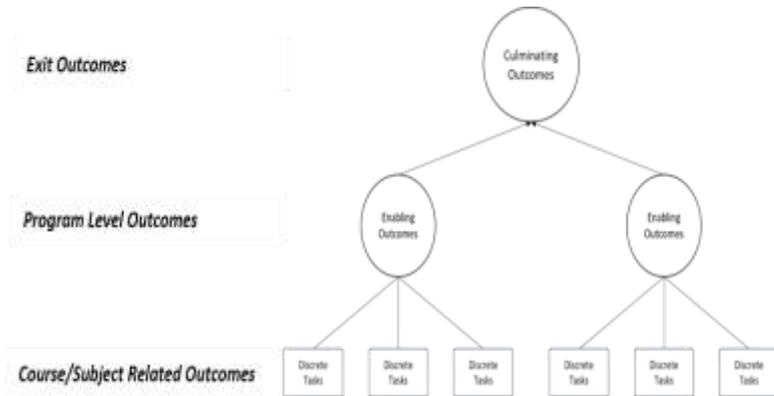
Figure 1. Levels of Outcomes of Education

Implications to Learning Assessment Practices

As discussed in the preceding section, the implementation of OBE in the institution level would entail restructuring of relevant systems and procedures to constructively facilitate the attainment of the desired outcomes of education. This includes the critical restructuring of assessment methods and procedures employed by educators and institutions in evaluating student performance, which serves as evidence of the attainment of outcomes.

Assessment plays an important role in the educative process. It serves as basis for determining the rate of learning progress of students as well as the source of information of opportunities for further improvement. One of the most comprehensive definitions of assessment is provided by the American Association for Higher Education (Angelo, 1995, p. 7):

> An ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance.

In OBE schools, assessment, when implemented appropriately, would have manifold purposes and benefits. Aside from providing educators ideas about the progress of students, it also informs them about the effectiveness of their teaching methodologies and approaches. Moreover, assessment results in an OBE school are used as bases to improve educational services and systems on an institutional level (Bresciani et al., 2012).

Proper implementation of OBE both in the classroom and institutional levels would demand paradigm shift. The following summarizes the shifts of assessment practices moving from the traditional practices to OBE practices:

Paradigm Shift 1: Teacher-Centered to Learner-Centered Approach

Assessment in outcome-based education require a shift in mindset of educators and educational leaders. The shift requires a turnaround of approach from teacher-centered to learner-centered education (Bresciani, 2012; Bresciani et al., 2009; Ramoroka, 2006; Nieburh, 1996).

Table 1
Assessment: Traditional vs. OBE

Traditional	OBE
• What are our (educators) practices	• What our students have become and able to demonstrate
• Teaching (inputs, content)	• Learning (demonstration of skills and competencies, outcomes)
• Teaching and Learning (TLA) as the end	• Teaching and Learning (TLA) as the means to an end
• Practice determines the outcomes	• Outcomes inform the practice

Paradigm Shift 2: Being Outcomes-Minded

Needless to say, in outcome-based education framework everything should be based on outcomes. Thus, assessment methods and techniques should be consistent with the stated outcomes of education. According to Bresciani (2006), outcome-based assessment is a systematic and intentional process. This means that the assessments used in this set-up are deliberately designed and administered in pursuit of outcomes attainment. Along with teaching and learning activities, assessments used in OBE classrooms should be constructively aligned with the outcomes that are expected to be

successfully demonstrated at specific stages and curricular levels (Biggs, 2011; Biggs & Tang, 2007).

Spady (1994) specified four operating principles that will guide educators and academic leaders in the implementation of OBE. When applied consistently, systematically, creatively, and simultaneously the efforts of shifting to OBE can be almost guaranteed.

The four operating principles of OBE and their implications for assessment are as follows:

Clarity of focus. Educators should be made aware and conscious about the outcomes of education each student must manifest or demonstrate at the course level and that these outcomes at the classroom level are connected to the attainment of higher level outcomes (i. e., program/institutional outcomes and culminating outcomes). Thus, at the initial stage of academic or course planning, the higher outcomes serve as guide for educators in defining and clearly stating the focus of the course/subject. This principle implies that the criteria of attainment of learning outcomes (students' learning performance) that can be elicited through assessments should exhibit a particular standard that applies to all learners. In effect, this standardizes the assessment practices and procedures used by educators in specific subject/course.

High expectations. As stated in the clarity of focus principle, learning outcomes at the course level are necessarily connected to higher level outcomes. These connections warrant educators from eliciting high level of performance from students. This level of performance ensures that students successfully meet desired learning outcomes set for a course, and consequently enable them to demonstrate outcomes at higher levels (program or institutional level). Thus, the kind of assessments in OBE learning context should challenge students enough to activate and enable higher order thinking skills (e. g., critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, etc.), and should be more authentic (e. g., performance tests, demonstration exercise, simulation or role play, portfolio, etc.).

Expanded opportunity. The first and second principles importantly necessitate that educators deliver students' learning experiences at an advanced level. In the process, many students may find it difficult complying with the standards set for a course. As a philosophical underpinning of OBE, Spady (1994, p. 9) emphasized that "all students can learn and succeed, but not on the

same day, in the same way." This discourages educators from generalizing manifestations of learned behavior from students, considering that every student is a unique learner. Thus, an expanded opportunity should be granted to students in the process of learning and more importantly in assessing their performance. The expansion of opportunity can be considered multidimensional (i. e., *time, methods and modalities, operational principles, performance standards, curriculum access and structuring*). In the assessment practice and procedures, the *time* dimension implies that educators should give more opportunities for students to demonstrate learning outcomes at the desired level. Thus, provisions of remedial, make-up, removal, practice tests, and other expanded learning opportunities are common in OBE classrooms. Methods and modalities of assessment can also be expanded depending on the types of learners. Students vary in many ways. One important aspect of diversity among learners for example is their thinking style. In studies on thinking styles (e. g., Abdi, 2012; Zhang, 2002), findings revealed that students vary on thinking or cognitive styles. These manifold styles when accommodated appropriately not only on the delivery of lessons but also on the type of assessments would yield more productive and successful results from students in terms of demonstrating the learned outcomes.

Design down. This is the most crucial operating principle of OBE. As mentioned in the previous section, OBE implements a top-down approach in designing and stating the outcomes of education (i. e., culminating --- enabling --- discrete outcomes). The same principle can be applied in designing and implementing outcomes' assessments in classes.
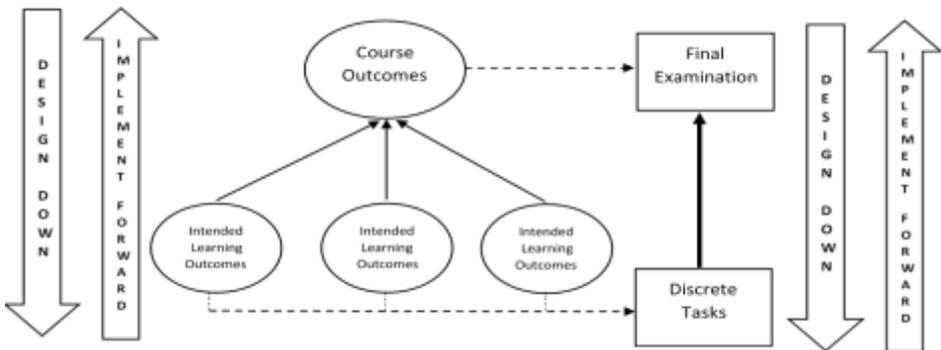
Figure 2. Backward Design-Forward Implementation: Course Level Outcomes and Assessments

Traditionally, the design of assessments for classes is done following a bottom-up approach. Educators would initially develop measures for micro learning tasks (e. g., quizzes, exercises, assignments, etc.), then proceed to develop the end-of-term tasks (e. g., major examination, final project, etc.). In OBE context, since the more important outcomes that should be primarily identified and defined are the culminating ones, it follows that the same principle should logically apply. Thus, the first assessment that should be developed and designed for a course is the final assessment; from this, smaller measures (discrete tasks) can be logically designed and progressively implemented. This process employs the top-down approach, which guarantees that all course assessments are constructively linked and aligned to the desired outcomes of the course/subject, and ultimately to the culminating outcomes of education (i. e., program/ institutional, and exit).

Discussion

Having discussed the fundamental concepts and principles of OBE, as well as the implications of this framework for schools systems and processes, the following can be deduced:

(1) The implementation of OBE in schools requires an academic organization to realign and adjust educational processes and systems in accordance with the desired outcomes of education. In effect, this necessitates major stakeholders of education (e. g., academic leaders, educators, academic external partners, etc.) to work together in determining, defining, and stating outcomes at various curricular levels (i. e., culminating, program, course outcomes).

(2) Proper implementation of OBE requires schools to undergo paradigm shift and consequently adopt some redefinition of the kind of education and educational services that they deliver to students. One of the shifts or changes that schools must adopt is learner-centeredness, not only in principle but importantly in practice. This change in approach cascades necessarily to assessment and evaluation practices. Another critical shift is not only on the awareness but on a serious adherence with the operating principles of OBE. To ensure proper implementation of the framework, these principles should be applied consistently, systematically, creatively, and simultaneously.

(3) Assessment plays a very important role in an OBE set-up. When implemented appropriately, assessment results serve as reliable bases in

determining whether students are on the right track in attaining the outcomes (formative) or have actually attained the desired outcomes at the course or program level (summative).

(4) Outcome-based assessment provides feedback and informs educators as regards the effectiveness of the teaching and learning practices that they employ in classes. This constructively and significantly redounds to the development of more responsive and adaptive teaching techniques that support students in attaining the desired outcomes of education.

Finally, it is clear that the optimal benefits of OBE can be realized if schools will seriously anchor the implementation of the framework on the philosophical underpinnings of outcome-based education. That is, everything in the educational processes and systems should be based on the outcomes; outcomes which extend beyond academics and reflect real-life attributes that the various stakeholders deem pivotal among students who graduate from schools and then integrate to the society as professionals. Teachers and academics must espouse the true-to-form purpose of OBE, which transcends accreditation and goes beyond preparing students for high-stakes assessments. This, in turn, challenges educators and assessment experts to develop and implement authentic assessments that measure real outcomes of education, be they quantitative or qualitative measures. Eventually, outcomes-based assessment should encourage the reshaping of the various levels of outcomes and the rethinking of teaching and learning and assessment tasks to ultimately prepare students not only for academic success, but also importantly for life success.

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