On what learning outcomes aren’t

*Dr Emma Kennedy on the value of well-articulated learning outcomes.*

It’s pretty easy to discern what Jeff Noonan thinks about learning outcomes from the title of his blog post, ‘Ten theses in support of teaching and against learning outcomes’. For Noonan, where learning outcomes are present, teaching can’t happen. He claims that learning outcomes ‘state the obvious, i.e., that a class on Greek philosophy will cover Greek philosophy, and a class that involves essay writing will enable students to learn how to write essays’.

This might have been true several decades ago, but the scholarship of learning outcomes and curriculum design has moved on considerably since then. The very first thing we teach people about writing learning outcomes is that they don’t just state what will be covered, but how they will be covered. A good learning outcome does not say that a class ‘will cover Greek philosophy’ but rather specifies what students should be able to do with Greek philosophy when they’ve taken the class. They might be able to identify a range of Greek philosophers, analyse a piece of philosophy or reflect on the utility of Greek philosophy in helping us to solve a problem. It’s important to tell students these things not because they are ‘consumers’ (‘consumerism’ is a favourite word in Noonan’s lament) but because they are interested, critical learners who might want something to aim for in their learning.

Noonan’s view of teaching is a seductive one, especially for fans of Dead Poets’ Society. For Noonan, ‘The desire to think is awakened in students if the teacher is able to reveal the importance of the discipline as a way of exposing to question established “solutions” to fundamental problems of human experience, thought, activity, relationship, and organization. Teaching does not instruct or transmit information, it embodies and exemplifies the commitment to thinking.’ Notice here that it’s the teacher who does most of the work. Students only gain the desire to think if the teacher does certain things, according to Noonan, and it’s the job of the teacher to ‘exemplify the commitment to thinking’ – the student doesn’t bring anything to the table, and they need the teacher to teach them to think.

This is the kind of view that John Biggs wanted to challenge in his book *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, and precisely why he subtitled it ‘what the student does’. His point is that it’s very easy for teachers to get so caught up in what they are doing that it doesn’t occur to them what the student is doing. A teacher may be giving a great performance in a lecture, or declaiming loudly in a seminar room. They may even, in their
own opinion, be ‘exemplifying the commitment to thinking’ – but their students may be doing nothing that remotely resembles thinking. It’s like being a personal trainer and assuming that because you’re tired and sweaty after a session, your trainee has had a great workout. But you won’t actually know this is true unless your trainee is similarly tired and sweaty – and the same is true for students.

Well-written learning outcomes actually enable you to articulate what your student should be doing. So you wouldn’t write that students ‘will learn how to write essays’ – what you might do is break the essay-writing process down into stages, specifying at what level students are learning, and how you will know they are learning it. It’s important for students to know this as well. Giving them information on what they should be learning and what (in a well-designed curriculum) you’ll be assessing allows them to be not ‘passive, consumeristic’ (as Noonan characterises students under learning outcomes) but active learners, taking responsibility for their own learning. This is another example of centring the student rather than the teacher. If I have woolly goals such as ‘learn to think’, which depend upon my own notion of what ‘thinking’ is and the level at which students ought to think, students in my class have no idea what ‘success’ looks like. They have no sense of where they should be heading, what they should be striving for in class, or what skills they will have gained from being in class.

This last point about skills is another reason that learning outcomes are important for students. Noonan claims that learning outcomes ‘confuse the ends (thinking) with the means (content and skills)’. Ask a student why they come to class, and they might tell you something about thinking, but they will probably also answer in more concrete terms as well; they’re interested in a subject, so they’re probably open to learning some content, and they would like to get some kind of recognition for their proficiency, so skills might be on the agenda as well. To reduce the ‘end’ of education to such a subjective, woolly concept as ‘thinking’ might well satisfy someone with tenure at a university – but it probably isn’t good enough for students graduating in an uncertain economy who would like, at some point, to earn enough to live.

Don’t confuse this with the often-peddled ‘employability agenda’ (about which I have actually written here). I’m not saying that we should replace Dickens modules with modules on spreadsheets, or teach only what employers want. Rather, I want to defend subjects such as English Literature (my own). It’s entirely inadequate to say that a module on Dickens gives one only knowledge of Dickens (‘covers’ Dickens, as Noonan might say). Learning outcomes enable those teaching in higher education to tell students about all the wonderful benefits they can gain from studying our subject – which includes content, but also includes analysis, reflection, synthesis of ideas and even creativity.

I think Noonan and I are actually on the same page when it comes to what’s good about learning. It is really important that students learn to question established wisdom and to think for themselves. Where we differ is the role that we assign to learning outcomes. For Noonan, outcomes are nothing but a prison which limit what can be taught. My experience in teaching and learning about curriculum design has taught me that they actually provide a valuable way to articulate what is important about learning, and to
communicate this to students. Far from being ‘quantitative’, as Noonan dismisses (I’ve literally never seen a quantitative learning outcome, but I’ve seen many excellent teachers in the humanities who measure learning outcomes on a qualitative basis) learning outcomes enable us to specify qualities and to get students thinking about them too. They also allow us more freedom, not less. If the purpose of a class is simply to ‘cover Greek philosophy’, then that’s all we can talk about; with outcomes such as ‘reflect on the utility of Greek philosophy in addressing contemporary political issues’, then students are able to bring in their own experiences and beliefs, taking ownership of the subject. They can do this in the knowledge that they are still doing what’s asked of them, because it’s been articulated clearly enough that they know what is asked.

I want to end with an anecdote about some teaching I received as an undergraduate. It was a course on literary theory for first-year undergraduates, and asked us to address such meaty questions as ‘what is literature?’ with reference to critical theorists. This is a pretty challenging thing for those coming into higher education from school – my school education (the standard A Level taught in England and Wales) had lots of great stuff on literary texts, but not much on theory, or on thinking through theoretical ideas. So I struggled, and I went to my tutor for advice. She confirmed what I thought (that my essay wasn’t good enough) and her advice: ‘be a bit braver – maybe write somewhere different? I don’t know – just be a little freer’. I sort of know what she meant now, after three degrees in the subject and several years’ teaching experience. Then, I had absolutely no idea what being ‘brave’ meant in this context. It’s incredibly distressing to receive advice like this, which relies on subjective notions and things understood only by those in the know (i.e. not you). I learnt very little from that course, and though my essay marks improved, I had no idea what I was doing better. To this day I couldn’t tell you what I gained, other than a dislike of academics who talk in woolly terms that students don’t understand.

Noonan is right that students aren’t just consumers, and that we shouldn’t treat them as such. They’re not consumers; they’re intelligent, interested people, who have sacrificed time and, yes, money, to come to our university, study our degrees and learn from us. The least we can do in return is to have a conversation with them about what they might learn and how that learning will be assessed, so that they can make well-informed use of their time and energy. Luckily for students, very few learning outcomes are as badly-articulated as those Noonan caricatures – but if they seem familiar to you, have a look at them and think about it from the student’s perspective. Perhaps even talk to your students about it. If you don’t want them to be consumers, treat them instead as partners in learning – and for goodness’ sake, don’t tell them to be ‘a bit braver’.

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