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Presentation #10: Part II. Student Learning Outcomes:  
What's the Benefit?  
Janet Fulks, January 23, 2004  
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When I was hired as a microbiology instructor at Bakersfield College I did not anticipate that some day people outside of my campus would demand accountability for what goes on in my classroom. Ten years later, I am finding that the educational landscape in California community colleges is changing. The primary reason for the change is the new ACCJC-WASC accreditation standards requiring each college to address student learning outcomes (often referred to as SLOs) and assessment plans for every course and program in the institution.

Bakersfield College will undergo accreditation in 2005 and must display evidence that assessment has occurred at the course and program level.

Because the new standards are consistent with those held by other accrediting bodies and focus teaching on the widely endorsed learning paradigm, it appeared to me that these standards were likely to stay. The question became, "Do I develop and use learning outcomes because I am obliged by accreditation?"

Initially, yes. "Do I identify learning outcomes in the courses I teach because they represent the latest educational panacea or state-of-the-art edu-babble?" Hardly! My perspective on learning outcomes has been molded by distinct advantages I have seen as a result of trying them out in my classes over the last year and benefits from campus-wide discussions. Learning outcomes have worked for me and my students, as well as served as a nucleus for dynamic and valuable dialogue with colleagues.

Here are a few examples of those benefits:

Learning outcomes have enabled me to determine relevant and contemporary content to use in my course. I teach microbiology, a field exploding with new information on a daily basis. It is nearly impossible for me to stay current with all the new data and I have to admit that I struggle with displacing the old and comfortable aspects of my discipline, that I know so well, and selecting appropriate new material to incorporate. Why not just add more? There is simply not enough time!

· Learning outcomes help define the content and coverage for my course in a dynamic way. I find as the factoids of science change and new information slowly reforms our understanding of essential biology content, my learning outcomes keep me honestly abreast of the information I need to cover as it relates to the overall picture.

- Material that does not contribute to my student's ability to reach the learning outcome, while interesting, really has no role in my course and should be eliminated.

- Learning outcomes are written with an overarching perspective of the course and represent an integration of the content. In this way learning outcomes provide a boundary or definition for the material I include, and more useful for me, the material I exclude.

I have seen permanent and significant advantage in the classroom interactions with my students and what appears to be significant learning achievement as a result of clear and focused purposes.

- Students have shared that they more clearly understand what I expect them to do rather than what the course will cover. As a result students have more clearly identified areas of difficulty for themselves rather than depending upon me to guess the areas in which they are lacking.

- Learning outcomes define what my students should be able to do at the end of the course thereby guiding and enabling the students to selectively pick and choose methods to study, digest, and synthesize a large volume of new information.

- Students feel they know the whole picture at the beginning of the semester and can use their studying more efficiently by focusing on items of value that contribute to the learning outcomes.

- SLO's have provided the foundation for my exams, particularly the final exam. Thus, while learning outcomes take time on the front side, they have actually saved me time and work later in the semester.

- Students are now saying that they no longer can find excuses for not doing the work, because they clearly understand the expectations throughout the course and for the final. This is a wonderful turn of events compared to the often heard complaint that they studied for hours and got a poor grade, intimating I, as the instructor, am to blame.

- Students realize the final course products are behaviors and skills rather than a stack of notes and a collection of course assignments. They are less likely to see the grade as something

they earn by effort but rather as a clearly defined expectation which they must meet.

- Learning outcomes represent full course disclosure and as a result student visits to my office have been invested in discussing strategies for studying more often than answering the dreaded question, "Will this be on the test?"

Identifying and articulating learning outcomes has provided a means of investigating and producing constructive data to determine ways to improve what goes on in my classroom. Learning outcomes have represented a litmus test for the effectiveness of course activities.

- Learning outcomes represent an ultimate measurable goal therefore I am able to analyze feedback from students concerning their mastery of material and their ability to integrate information at a higher level of thinking e.g. evaluation and analysis of material versus memorization.

- Learning outcomes define the type of data collection I do. When the outcome is a skill, I now have the students perform the task rather than simply tell me the task in an essay question or answer multiple choice questions about the task.

- Assessment methods have provided me with skilled diagnostic techniques to determine changes in my approach to material. I found that some activities, while fun, required too much energy in comparison to the actual benefit as measured by the outcomes. In some cases I was able to tweak activities to maximize learning and involvement from the students.

- Dynamic learning based on outcomes has sometimes required that I take unexpected detours, spend more time on a subject, turn a lecture into a discussion, or create another assignment. Because I am focused on learning outcomes this may mean I have to skip some content or reduce the time spent on some material. With the learning outcomes as my guide I find this task easy because I can prioritize what material is most beneficial to achieving the outcomes.

Discussion with my colleagues has been stimulating and very helpful, in contrast to the typical complaining that we used to banter about. Learning outcomes have contributed to a focus on diagnostic tools and constructive strategies to reach outcomes.

- The intuitive course framework I historically operated on has been fleshed out in the process of articulating the course learning outcomes. The students and my colleagues know the most vital goals and outcomes for the course. As a result they have provided more specific and detailed help when I have questions or problems.

- Within my discipline area we discovered that to a large extent we agree and operate on the same outcomes but use widely varying vehicles and methods to get there. This was exciting and has allowed us to share strategies and expand out repertoire.

- A common theme on campus is that faculty have seen the importance of incorporating General Education outcomes in their courses even when approaching their own particular field of study.

- My experiences were echoed by a Bakersfield College faculty survey that revealed learning outcomes are most valued by faculty because of the benefits in the classroom and because they stimulate opportunities to dialogue with other faculty.

To be sure some faculty are reticent, and even antagonistic, to address the task of writing learning outcomes. But after only 12 months, and I am still on a steep uphill learning curve, I find my work more enriching and rewarding. I welcome the thoughts and views of members of this learning assessment listserv as to how assessment of student learning is affecting your work.