# The Trouble with our Learning Outcomes
# : with apologies to Hussey and Smith

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of intended learning outcomes into programmes within Glasgow School of Art has been largely without incident or change to student success rates. In the five years since, they have become embedded in Stage inductions, Studio briefs and introductions. They appear in the Definitive Programme documents, Course handbooks, specific project briefs, and are the focus for assessment. They are what we reach for to remind ourselves what we claim we set out to teach our students and expect from students in return. Why then our anxiety?

The use of learning outcomes should have made the curriculum more transparent to learners, and by implication improve student progression rates. Looking back to Course documents prior to this, it is difficult to reconcile how little information students were given to describe what they were expected to learn. While the incorporation of intended learning outcomes has countered this, there are still other areas for concern. Staff remain uncomfortable about the generic language - we don't yet feel we have ownership over our own documents and by implication their intentions. We are also unclear how closely outcomes translate into assessment criteria. While it is true to say that ILO's have become a critical part of learning and teaching within the institution, it is equally true that we are less than fluent in their use and therefore missing opportunities their development would present. This paper documents action research undertaken with student groups to test these assertions, and to better understand and reflect of the viewpoints of staff and students towards learning outcomes and their role in the structuring and delivery of a studio based programme.

INTRODUCTION

*'What is my concern?*
*Why am I concerned?*
*What do I think I can do about it?'*

McNiff, McGeady and Elliot 2001

So what's the problem with our learning outcomes?
The introduction of learning outcomes within programmes at Glasgow School of Art has been largely without incident or change to student success rates. They have become embedded in Stage inductions, Studio briefs and introductions. They appear in the Definitive Programme documents, Course handbooks, specific project briefs and are the focus for assessment. They remind us of what we set out to teach our students and expect from them in return. The expectation was learning outcomes would make the curriculum more transparent to learners, by implication improve student progression rates. Looking back to Course documents prior to the introduction of Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO's), it is difficult to reconcile how little information students were given to describe what they were expected to learn.

While the incorporation of intended learning outcomes has countered this, there are still other areas for concern. Staff remain uncomfortable about the generic language - we don't yet feel we have ownership over our own documents and by implication their intentions.
We assume that students have a clearer picture, but we seldom collect any evidence to test this hypothesis. With this is mind I attempted to collect evidence to test these assertions, in reflecting on how I contribute to the learning environment in my role as a tutor and in preparation for the task of revisiting the outcomes as a response to annual programme monitoring.

1. BACKGROUND

Learning Outcomes became part of the learning & teaching structure of our undergraduate and graduate programmes in seeking compliance with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. SCQF is not the only external factor to influence on our programme design. As programmes leading in part to professional qualification, our curricula are subject to validation and prescription by Architect's Registration Board and Royal Institute of British Architects.

SCQF compliance and subject benchmarking have allowed greater correlation between the structure and pacing of our programmes, and the levels of our programmes and the greater HE context beyond Architecture. This in turn has meant that while staff's main preoccupations and interest may lie in theoretical and practice developments in Architecture and Architectural education, the horizon has now expanded; we are explicitly linked to the greater Higher Education leviathan driving funding, pedagogic development and implementation.

The development of outcomes based curricula can be traced to 'A Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives' first published in 1956. Bloom's Taxonomy classified learning in terms of cognitive expressing differing the types of thinking involved; knowledge comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Subsequently developed and expanded to include other forms of learning, the taxonomy is the basis of the widespread use of outcomes based curricula. The Dearing Report (1997) resulted in significant reform across the UK sector, and did much to raise awareness and acceptance of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Developing learning outcomes required consideration of the programmes holistically rather than as a series of discrete elements, and considered from the student's point of view, what was necessary, desirable and sustainable. In retrospect our previous curriculum took a subject-teacher centred approach, didactic in character, based on a traditional pedagogy. To adopt a more student centred approach we moved from an 'instructional paradigm' towards a 'learning paradigm' which 'enables students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves' (Barr and Tagg 1995). While our curriculum is sited somewhere between these two poles, it was clear from the outset that ILO's in themselves could not drive change entirely. Both a change in mindset and the teaching practices of the staff would also be required.

Learning outcomes, described on a year or stage by stage basis, are shared across all subjects within the programme. Learning outcomes can refer to learning events in more than one course (or subject), so are seldom the sole territory of one subject or group of staff. As Wisdom asserts 'defining learning outcomes is not a 'once and for all' activity, but an iterative process'. (Hussey & Smith 2003: 357).

In designing the matrix of learning outcomes an important consideration was to ensure that students could simultaneously meet the criteria for professional qualification and the learning outcomes. Against the structure provided by the SCQF for categorising the learning outcomes;

- knowledge and understanding,
- practice: applied knowledge and understanding,
- generic cognitive skills
- communication, ICT and numeracy skills
- Accountability, autonomy and working with others

were mapped the RIBA / ARB Outline Syllabus criteria:

- Design
- Technology and Environment
- Cultural context
- Communication
- Management, Practice and Law

In framing the Outline Syllabus, the RIBA also articulates its outcomes against those of other professionals within the construction industry. Watson indicates that in an attempt to promote greater teamwork and awareness of the professional roles across the sector, a set of shared learning outcomes has been in existence since 1997 to which fourteen professional bodies subscribe, including those representing surveyors, town planners, civil and services engineers and architects (2003: 205).

While being conscious of these other factors there must be an element of flexibility when approaching the writing of ILO's and their subsequent application. Maher indicates that the dangers of taking too rigid a stance on the application of learning outcomes where they become the obstacles to classroom interactions and limit discussion of ideas or questions that diverge form the focus of the learning episode. She warns "Rather than encouraging learner autonomy and deep engagement with the subject, learning outcomes may serve to restrict learning and encourage a reductionist approach where students merely aim to meet minimum threshold standards as specified in the learning outcomes" (Maher: 49).

Calibrating against Biggs' Solo Taxonomy, undergraduate stage 3 students are required to deploy both declarative and functioning knowledge to engage successfully with curriculum. A key objective at this point in the programme is that students can apply knowledge to their own situation and practice; the information does not sit in a vacuum. The demands of the programme require students to be at a multi-structural level in Biggs's hierarchy. While there is usually a predominance of deep and surface learners within each cohort, the focus on problem based learning and integrated studio practice mitigate against any level of success for surface learners. Most if not all stage 3 architects lie in the upper three 'qualitative bands; multi-structural, relational and to a lesser extent extended abstract' (Biggs: 49).

## II. ACTION RESEARCH: STUDENTS

My initial response to framing a piece of action research around Learning Outcomes was that it should engage both staff and students – the two main stakeholders. The first group to be approached where stage 3 students.

Students were invited by letter to attend a workshop at a relatively quiet time in the week, with the reassurance that it would take no longer than 40 minutes and that their input was not for assessment purposes. Of the possible 35, 15 students appeared, all of who subsequently contributed to the workshop.

A simple questionnaire formed the focus for the workshop, asking the participants to review a small number of stage 3 Studio learning outcomes. The questionnaire asked participants firstly to explain what they thought the learning outcomes meant. Following this, participants were asked to go on to write their own version of the learning outcome.

The students' reactions to the task were varied. Some were concerned that they might "not be good at this sort of thing" but were reassured that they could work collectively and that there were no right or wrong answers. One student raised the point that they thought the two tasks were one and the same thing, although the rest of the group disagreed. All submitted both tasks 1 & 2.

The significant outcomes/feedback can be detailed as follows:

- From the students perspective the workshop offered a first opportunity to discuss the ILO's with a member of studio staff in any discursive way. This could also be defined as the first induction of value they had encountered.

- Having been engaged on the Studio project for some time they could see the links between the learning outcomes and the vehicle that had been devised to explore and deliver these.

- With an understanding of these links, students were clearer about what learning they would have to demonstrate at the final submission i.e. they were demonstrating their understanding and abilities as a profile of themselves rather than just providing a solution to an architectural brief.

- With this knowledge they could start to tease out at what level they as individuals were operating at, i.e. they could begin to engage in criterion referencing against the Programme marking scheme rather than norm referencing against each other.

- The discussion offered an opportunity to raise areas of ambition or expectation that they felt the current ILO's did not recognise.

- The learning outcomes could reflect more than just the teacher's perceptions of what was required of a student.

- None remembered ever having had a discussion around the ILO's for any studio project, although they were aware of them from their Stage inductions, project introductions and briefs over the last three years.

- Having a discussion at the midpoint of the project was helpful, as they had some experience of the issues and the direction they were moving in but still had the opportunity to act on the insights the discussion had produced.

- Despite their lack of experience, many of the student generated learning outcomes that are articulate, well written and concise and accessible.

### • III. REFLECTION

I had assumed that the key factor was how the learning outcomes were articulated, how they were written and how this aided or obstructed the students understanding of them. In fact I had focused on the wrong problem. In the main the language demands on the students did not put them off. However, the students did identify a different series of problems or questions; how we as staff engage the students in a discussion around the learning outcomes; how we use the ILO's in our teaching practices; how we debrief at the conclusion of a project or reflect post-review?

So the workshop proved a diagnostic tool for me. What seems striking in retrospect was that I only had to ask the student and they would have told me.

One other issue that became apparent the extent to which the ILO's seem to exclude or ignore learning outcomes that the student might define or create themselves.

Hussey and Smith offer a solution to this lack of student ownership or involvement with the published outcomes. They state that rather than narrowing the outcomes to a narrow band of learning moments, readily assessed and easily anticipated by the teacher, but fundamentally at odds with notions of good learning, the learning outcomes should enable a expanding spiraling path of understanding as proposed by Bruner. They suggest that a mix of previously defined and emergent learning outcomes allows both issues emerging through the interaction of student, teacher and curriculum, and those framed by the student themselves is in reality a richer and more student centred approach. Students would be able to draw more from their own experience in order to learn in their learning and consequently assume for responsibility for their own learning.

### IV. ACTION RESEARCH; STAFF

In the second cycle staff responsible for a course or courses within the architecture programme and in the development and delivery of learning outcomes completed the same questionnaire, but without the focus of a workshop

The staff responses were much more varied in nature and content. The lack of the workshop meant that there was no opportunity to share experience or differing standpoints. Instead the individual had to frame their own response both to the tasks and to the overall question – 'Is there any trouble with our learning outcomes?'

Unlike the student experience there was no possibility or risk for the process to be mediated by the researcher.

Although it is difficult to interpret a small sample in too much detail, there are certain observations that can be made. Responses fell in to three categories; some advocated no change, some made straightforward explanations or new versions of the existing outcomes, some chose to expand on the existing outcomes often broadening the terms of reference or territory under debate and others uphold the status quo.

There was a certain consensus about what we mean and what we chose to do when we frame the curriculum. There was also a sense that learning outcomes cannot be too prescriptive – they cannot state exactly what is expected, they are not a formula for success. This is partly due to the nature of the field in which we practice, partly due to the iterative, slow burn process of reflection in action that the architectural studio requires. As Schon points out 'they may find it extraordinarily difficult to give explicit, accurate and useful accounts of the understandings implicit in gradually learned competences that have become intuitive' (1985).

Staff commented that;

• they had found the process far more difficult than they had first suspected, but thought provoking particularly in relation to their own teaching practice

• there was reticence about getting it 'wrong', despite the fact they were familiar with both the documents and the curriculum they related to.

• they would like to continue the discussion further and more frequently.

• focusing on a few ILO's rather than the whole matrix made the task comprehensible and achievable, but also offered a way in to the wider debate.

• V. REFLECTION

The feedback seems to suggest that an examination of the ILO's offers an opportunity to review and discuss our collective understanding of the direction of the programme, and the ambitions we have for the learning and teaching environment we wish to provide.

As with the students, the key to unlocking some of these issues would seem to be creating opportunities for dialogue and discussion both amongst staff, and between staff and students, and finding the most effective vehicles to promote that exchange.

As Davies indicates, one of the main criticisms of the outcomes model has been it operates effectively only when the outcomes specified can be readily measured.

If student generated outcomes are included how then are they to be assessed?

The issue of emergent outcomes also requires discussion with staff. Hussey and Smith note that between the intended and emergent outcomes there are a range of outcomes; contiguous, related and incidental, with different degrees of relevance to the existing curriculum. The extent to which staff engage with these added outcomes could be called their 'corridor of tolerance'.

Our current practice informally includes elements of contiguous and related outcomes, many of which the staff both welcome and seek or indeed encourage. A shift to a more formal integration would need careful consideration. While it would require a shift in both the staff and students roles in the learning episode, it would offer a step closer to a student centred curriculum.

As I write the action research continues. We are undertaking a second cycle of workshops with students and staff in preparation for the process of rewriting the learning outcomes for all five stages of the professional programmes, mindful that itself requires further cycles of testing and reflection.

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