

Outcome-Based Education: Lessons from the Iowa Outcomes and Assessment Task Force

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THE END

"Begin with the end in mind and design down. . ." Those who worked on the Iowa Department of Education Outcomes and Assessment Force learned that "the end" had arrived on May 7, 1993. On that date an article in the *Des Moines Register* announced that the DE "is abandoning its plan to establish statewide student performance goals because the effort became too controversial."

There is much that has not been reported. As a member of that task force, I wish to take this opportunity to share my perspectives on Outcome-Based Education and the work of the International Understanding subcommittee of this task force. I hope that these comments will be helpful for others who will now begin this process at the local level.

THE BEGINNING

In December 1991, Sue Donielson, who led the task force, sought volunteers for this project. She outlined a plan based on a document from the National Center for Educational Statistics. *Education Counts: An Indicator System to Monitor the Nation's Educational Health* was to be the basis for our work.

Education Counts is an excellent document and I recommend it highly. The "end" in the minds of its authors was to develop a system to track the progress of America's educational enterprise over long periods of time, one which would not be subject to bandwagons and changes in political priorities (such as America 2000, OBE, TQM, etc.)

and which could yield useful data for those who set educational policy at the national and state level.

Listed below are the six "issue areas" identified in *Education Counts* (p. 28) and their respective corresponding "main concepts" that should guide the development of "indicators."

1. **Learner Outcomes:** Core Content, Integrative Reasoning, Attitudes and Dispositions.

2. **Quality of Educational Institutions:** Learning Opportunities, Teachers, Condition of Teacher's Work, Schools as Places of Purpose and Character, School Resources.

3. **Readiness for School:** Status of Young Children and their Families, Educational Services.

4. **Societal Support for Learning:** Family Support, Community Support, Cultural Support, Financial Support.

5. **Education and Economic Productivity:** Education Pipeline, Economic Consequences of Education and Training, Workplace Support for Education, R&D Role of Higher Education.

6. **Equity:** Student Demographics, Educational Institutions, Education Services.

As members of the task force, our job was to draft statements of Learner Outcomes in the areas of Core Content, Integrative Reasoning, and Attitudes and Dispositions (International Understanding fit under Integrative Reasoning).

Those interested in OBE should consider this passage describing Learner Outcomes from *Education Counts* (P. 29).

The guiding principle in this issue can be found in the question: What do most parents hope education will do for their children? The answer is reasonably straightforward. Most parents expect that schools and colleges will help develop their youngsters into reasonably happy, competent young people, equipped with the ability to make a start in adult life. At high school and college commencement exercises every year, most parents hope for little more; and most are willing to settle for little less.

The authors of *Education Counts* continued (p. 30) by defining the three "major concepts" under the heading of Learner Outcomes that would guide the development of "indicators". . . What follows is a very abbreviated version of this section.

Core Content: Traditional subject matter, facts and knowledge; English, mathematics, science, humanities, social sciences, music, arts, foreign language . . . The panel believes we need to know how much of this traditional knowledge students have accumulated and can use, and how they can reason with this information within the context of each discipline . . .

Integrative Reasoning: This incorporates skills that cut across knowledge in specific fields. The critical component here is the faculty of integration, the ability to reason about, and apply insight to, complex issues, drawing on knowledge from distinct areas of core content . . . (1) workplace competence, (2) science and technology, (3) international understanding, and (4) social diversity and cultural pluralism.

Attitudes and Dispositions: This concept has to do with the human qualities that everyone hopes schools and colleges will nurture, including honesty, tolerance, a sense of community, self-directedness, teamwork and cooperative learning, commitment to craft . . .

With respect to assessing learning outcomes . . . encourage the development of state-of-the-art assessment technologies . . . samples of students at the state and national levels . . .

A NEIGHBOR WATCHING OVER US

The Iowa Outcomes and Assessment Initiatives Task Force organization chart had eight ovals, thirteen circles, nineteen solid lines, and four dotted lines. The International Understanding subcommittee was a circle attached by a solid line to an oval titled Integrative Reasoning and Lifelong Learning and included ten members and one neighbor. Members included Peggy Guitter, Brent Hanna, Sue Palmer, Diana Reinsmoen, Dianne Dillon-Ridgley, Vincent Smith, Bob Thomas, Louis Thrun, and Cordell Svengalis. In February 1992, as we wrestled with words to define "outcomes of significance," the spirit of Sue Palmer's eighty year old neighbor joined us. "Make it so she can understand it," Sue repeated and repeated. By March we had developed five outcomes.

1. Students will develop an appreciation for differences and commonalities among cultures throughout the world.
2. Students will recognize the inherent interdependence in world economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological systems.
3. Students will act responsibly as effective citizens at local, national, and international levels.
4. Students will work cooperatively with others to reach consensus on issues and/or conflicts.

5. Students will recognize change as a natural part of life and be able to deal with it effectively.

INDICATORS

In addition to the five outcomes, we were challenged to develop a set of "possible" or "recommended" indicators by which to measure progress towards these outcomes. The International Understanding committee proposed a **dual track indicator system**.

Student Outcome Descriptors: Indicators in this area focus upon individual students and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they must demonstrate prior to certification of competency. These indicators are consistent with the OBE philosophy as it has progressed through its various evolutionary stages. One example in this area challenges students to "identify and explain an international issue within a local context." Another calls upon students to "gather, interpret, and analyze information using various technologies in the solution of international issues/problems." (In June 1993 one *possible* international issue teachers and students could select involved the trial of a Louisiana man who tragically killed a Japanese exchange student. The fact that Japanese students organized a drive that collected 800,000 signatures on a petition calling for Americans to enact gun control policies could trigger exploration of this topic. The "technology" aspect could include use of computers to communicate with Japanese students to learn their perspectives on this issue. A global/historical dimension could be added by researching how the Napoleonic Code became the basis for Louisiana law.) The assessment for student outcomes would be completed by teachers at the local level.

Program/Institution/Participation Indicators. "Institution" involves the learning opportunities available to students and "participation" addresses the choices they make such as enrollment in classes and involvement in extracurricular activities. Such indicators are alien to current OBE thinking yet provide very useful information for boards of education. One example at the state level involves the number of students enrolled in foreign language classes. According to information from the Iowa DE, in 1969 over 36,000 pupils were enrolled in foreign language classes in Iowa. By 1979 this had dropped to about 27,000. However, in 1990 this had climbed to 62,000 (47 percent of Iowa's public school students in grades 9-12). These data reflect a policy decision to require foreign language for admission to

Iowa's state universities. At the district level, a survey of seniors in Davenport revealed that 72 percent had taken at least one year of foreign language and 45 percent had taken four years of a single language. Assessment of Program/Institution/participation indicators could involve local and state level "report cards" or "reports" prepared for boards of education and advisory committees at all levels.

FIRST FORECAST: CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF SHOWERS

It is important to note that the outcomes and indicators we developed were **recommendations or suggestions, not mandates**. This distinction was not made sufficiently clear when the first draft of the outcomes and indicators from every committee on the task force was mailed to over 600 educators for critique and review during April and May of 1992.

The outcomes suggested by the International Understanding Committee were rated 3.34 on a 4-point scale that defined 4 as "most acceptable." The indicators averaged 3.12 on the same scale. This "first forecast" called for "partly cloudy with occasional chance of showers." It did not call for "severe thunder storms and scattered tornadoes!"

I organized eleven pages of narrative responses according to categories which emerged as I read them. In the category of outcome statements, one person referred to the outcomes as "logical outcomes that we would expect our students to possess upon graduation from high school." Another stated that "it will be easy for a district to form a model of accountability and integrate recommendations to fit district needs." That ray of sunshine felt nice and warm.

The assessment process in general and the Program/Institution/Participation Indicators in particular prompted the widest range of commentary. Some liked the distinction between these "input" indicators and individual student descriptors. However, this distinction is outside the realm of current OBE language and the negative responses were numerous. The kindest of these negative comments stated that the individual was "uneasy" with them. I concluded that the lack of explanation of this distinction contributed to the many negative responses.

But there were also early warning signs of future problems. A few expressed fear that these were "standards, mandates, and require-

ments" which would be difficult or impossible for many small districts to implement. A more experienced observer of the political process might have seen the hand getting ready to write on the wall of the legislative chambers.

One tiny cloud emerged on the distant horizon in June 1992 and I labeled "Politics and Correct Thinking." I described it this way: "Yes, political perspectives appeared in the comments. I believe the politically oriented comments will increase as the process involves more non-educators." In June 1992 there were only four comments in this category, one of which simply stated, "Will the Republicans let you do this?" The weather radar failed to reveal the tornado hidden within.

CONCLUSION

There will not be a set of "Iowa Outcomes." The arena now shifts to each local school district. I believe the work of the task force can be useful as parents, teachers, and administrators struggle at defining local outcomes. Copies of the outcome and indicator statements developed by each subcommittee and other useful documents are available from the DE. I also recommend reading *Education Counts* as a first step for each person involved in the process. Finally, I suggest that deliberations regarding "outcomes" be open to all in the community and that an emphasis be placed on communication of the process and product as a means to reduce any controversy which may emerge.

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