

Using Outcomes-based Instruction: Impact on Curriculum and Assessment

by
Linda Calvin
Senior High School Social Studies
Urbandale High School
Urbandale, Iowa

Writing outcomes for my American History class which encompass all of the "Big Ideas" I hope to introduce my students to, and using "authentic" methods to assess the products and projects students use to demonstrate their understanding of those ideas, has brought about important changes in the structure of the classroom. These changes include major revisions of the curriculum used to reach outcomes, the resources used by students, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. The overall result is to reduce the "fragile learning syndrome" described by David Perkins as that situation where students go through the motions of education, but depart with little more than vague memories of rote learning which they cannot apply to their daily lives. Instead, the overall result has been to teach students to become life long learners, problem solvers, communicators and cooperative learners.

To illustrate the difference I offer the following before and after lesson concerning the War with Mexico in 1846.

Before:

Background material would be supplied in lecture form. Events, names and dates would be supplied with appropriate explanation of how they fit into chronological order with other historical events. With some attention to cause and effect, the unit would still be taught without much student "connection" to the subject within an overall context of a greater historical understanding.

Readings would be provided in terms of a set of primary source materials including documents written at the time, letters and diaries.

Students would be asked to participate in a debate: Should the U.S. have gone to war with Mexico.

Assessment: Multiple choice test...most questions at the basic recall level.

Even though the students were asked to form a hypothesis based on both lecture and reading, due to the type of assessment they were encouraged to believe that the basic information in terms of "facts" was the central issue of importance. They spent time memorizing facts knowing the assessment would be based on their ability to recall them. Successful use of habits of mind were necessary for the debate, but the students were unaware of criteria or standards for a successful debate. Only after they succeeded or failed would they become aware of exemplary standards.

A real opportunity for important learning was overlooked. Without a clear understanding of the reason for the particular subject studied (lack or larger outcomes) they did not see opportunities to apply important learning skills to other problems to be solved.

Present "outcomes" practice:

The students would be given the following task along with the rubric. I do not lecture to the students about the "facts" surrounding the Mexican War. I remind them of our year long "outcome": The study of democracy in America. I would remind them that we note growth and development as well as periods of encroachment upon existing democracy with a look at the "winners and losers" of democracy during various periods of American History. We read the task together and go over the rubric in an effort to make sure the intent of the lesson has been clearly articulated.

Following is the task and rubric the students receive:

Task: WAR WITH MEXICO 1846

The study of American History can be seen from several perspectives. One perspective often followed and taught is that the study of American History is the study of the growth of Democracy. We will look at a case study, the war between the United States and Mexico in 1846, to help determine if this is an accurate portrayal. You have been given several pieces of primary source material to help you arrive at a decision regarding this perspective. Your job is to look at each document, analyze it for meaning and for evidence to support your hypothesis.

Procedure:

1. Arrive at a hypothesis regarding the Mexican War as evidence for or against viewing America History as a history of the growth of democracy.

2. Read background (secondary source) information regarding the details surrounding the events.

3. Read and analyze the primary source materials, looking for evidence to support or refute your original hypothesis.

4. Be prepared to take part in a round table discussion concerning the thesis of Democracy and the Mexican War.

5. Your performance (written or oral) will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

Exemplary	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Arrives at a well developed, defensible hypothesis which addresses the Mexican War as it does or does not reflect the principles of American Democracy	Arrives at a defensible hypothesis which addresses the Mexican War as it does or does not reflect the principles of American Democracy. Hypothesis may not be clearly stated or developed fully.	Hypothesis may be unclear or vague. May be simply a declaration of whether or not the war was justified without discussion of the relationship to the overall concept of democracy.
Uses a wide range of source material to obtain information which is clearly reflected in arguments given to support the hypothesis	Uses several sources to obtain information from more than one point of view. Arguments could be better supported with more information or more persuasive information.	Too little evidence of use of more than one divergent source of information. Reliance on narrow range of information.

Exemplary (cont.)	Acceptable (cont.)	Unacceptable (cont.)
Clearly articulates the relationships between the thesis and information used in support of the thesis	Information given supports the hypothesis. Student does not fully explain the information, causing it to be less supportive.	Information poorly articulated. Listener unable to fully understand the speaker's point of view or relationship between evidence and hypothesis.
Uses inferences...able to arrive at significant insights to support the hypothesis	Some inferences are used...may be an over reliance on statements from source materials without adequate interpretation.	Little evidence of drawing inferences. Student repeats source information without clear interpretation or application.
Takes active part in the discussion...is able to respond logically to information given by others which is contrary to own hypothesis	Takes part in the discussion...is able to respond to opposition most of the time...misses some opportunities to refute the opposition.	Passive role during discussion...misses good opportunities to refute the opposition.
Responds to others with reasoned arguments...is considerate of others and their point of view	Uses logic in response to other points of view...demonstrates some defensive behavior.	Opinion and emotion used in place of logic at critical points in the discussion.

The students have been given a task which incorporates a much larger question...the question of democracy and its evolution in American History. This outcome has been the basis of their study from the beginning of the course. This gives the student an understanding of the relevancy of the issue beyond a simple understanding of the events of the Mexican War. Students are required to discover the "truth" on

their own, rather than having been given the information by the teacher. Content information is important but in the context of a more complex task. Several habits of mind are required in the successful solution of the problem. Standards have been clearly set and the students know exactly what is expected of them. The assessment is based on a student performance (debate or essay) and not on a standardized multiple choice test. Emphasis is placed on problem solving and higher order skills rather than discreet bits of information at the recall level.

By establishing course outcomes at the beginning, I have a clear idea of what curriculum and methods will best facilitate learning and how to evaluate whether or not the student has actually learned how to use the knowledge and skills they have acquired. The students have a clearer idea of what is expected of them and what good work looks like. Students now find intrinsic rewards for a job well done. They are more likely to see the importance and the relevancy of what is expected of them. Students feel comfortable in a learning situation that they can more easily adapt to their individual needs and abilities. They realize they are learning skills that will help them meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. The classroom has become an active learning environment where the student is a participant and not a spectator. I now find the classroom to be what I always knew it should be: a comfortable place for both me and my students...where important learning takes place.