

The Trouble with Outcomes: Pragmatic Inquiry and Educational Aims

By Chris W. Gallagher

Outcomes assessment (OA) has become a familiar feature of the higher education landscape, and it is likely to endure into the foreseeable future. All of our accrediting organizations now require it. A wide range of disciplines have adopted it for evaluating student learning as well as their own practice—we are now seeing outcomes assessments for physical therapy, foster home placements, management practices, legal procedures, nursing care, and more. The current, laudable focus on learner-centered higher education has spawned a veritable cottage industry of books and other resources for outcomes assessment...

In short, OA is educational common sense. Define goals for student learning, evaluate how well students are achieving those goals, and use the results to improve the academic experience. Who could argue with that? And even if we were inclined to argue with OA, what good would that do? Indeed, it might do harm: if we don't define our own program and department outcomes and design our own assessments—to invoke one of composition studies' favorite assessment chestnuts—others will be happy to do so for us. Sure, many of us in English studies have our worries: that we're not clear on the exact difference between an outcome and an objective, or the time and effort we're devoting to OA might be better used in other ways, or institutional OA risks compromising the academic freedom of our instructors and programs, or that our curricula are being narrowed to what is assessed, or that experiencing standardization creep, or that bean counters will do nefarious things with the data we generate—but we're pragmatic enough to get on with it anyway, lest direr fates befall us.

Of course, "pragmatic" here means doing what is realistic in light of existing constraints. Conventionally understood, as Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald suggest, "the pragmatist looks for the most efficient means to an end, without stopping to question much since stopping would reduce efficiency and practicality" (32). If the pragmatist does stop long enough to recognize that the most efficient action might not be a desirable action, she or he will invoke "pragmatism"—often with of reluctant resignation—as an explanation (sometimes an excuse) for accepting presumed necessity of taking the less-than-ideal route. But as Roskelly and Ronald also show, this colloquial understanding of the term is ironic in light of philosophical Pragmatists' insistence that Pragmatism is precisely about slowing down and inquiring into multiple alternatives...

The value of outcomes, to this way of thinking, is they give teachers and students targets to shoot for. They provide focus, stability, transparency. Further, they are helpful for accountability purposes: measure and document students' performances vis-à-vis expressed goals. Again, this seems difficult to argue with: of course teachers and students should know what they are aiming for; of course our teaching and students' learnings should be given force and focus by our goals; of course we should assess students' work against those goals. However, OA's insistence that the formulation of outcomes before the educational experience commences should give us pause. According to educational Pragmatist John Dewey, when educational aims are formulated outside of the ongoing activities of teachers and students, "activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account" ("Chapter 8: Aims in Education" Democracy). This separation of ends and means, according to Dewey, leads to fixity and rigidity in the formulation of the ends; diversion of attention away from the existing conditions for teaching and learning; narrow fixation on singular results rather than openness to emergent consequences (some of which might turn out to be more significant for the learner than the specified, anticipated results); and imposition on students and sometimes on teachers as well.

My experience as a writing program administrator (WPA) and an assessment consultant for several English departments and writing programs suggests that OA harbors each of the tendencies Dewey mentions. In many programs, outcomes become isolated, over time, from the ongoing activities of teachers and students. Whether administrators and faculty begin with great enthusiasm or great skepticism (or, most likely, a mix), outcomes, once expressed, often stay in place for years, even as programs change. Teachers may dutifully reproduce those outcomes on a syllabus or assignment, and students may dutifully provide evidence that they've achieved them in their work products, but rarely do the outcomes become a meaningful and intimate part of teachers' and students' experiences. In these programs, outcomes—whether the hard-won result of intense consensus building or an administrative hand-down—tend to become enshrined in the bureaucratic machinery. Though some proponents of OA are careful to suggest that outcomes be revisited and perhaps revised regularly, many institutions and programs—whether out of ennui, conflict aversion, or a less than fully developed assessment process—ignore this recommendation. Rather, outcomes statements take on an aura of finality, of achieved and unimpeachable institutional authority. Thus, the outcomes on the books remain the central focus of assessment and documentation efforts, with little attention paid either to the always-evolving context in which those aims are pursued (shifts in student demographics, staffing policies, institutional resources, and the like: what OA enthusiasts sometimes derogatorily identify as "inputs") or to unforeseen and unexpected results of unfolding educational experiences. Under these conditions, teachers and students merely receive the outcomes; they experience them as imposed, whether they were formulated by a distant regulatory body, a professional group, or some earlier incarnation of the local faculty....

Measuring, documenting, and reporting outcomes—pegged to bureaucratically defined units (courses, programs, courses of study)—serves prevailing academic management priorities such as accreditation reporting and other forms of public accountability, strategic planning, and the identification of "programs of excellence." As Shari Stenberg and Darby Arant Whealy suggest, outcomes function within an "efficiency model" that privileges measurement for institutional purposes, often at the expense of inquiry for pedagogical purposes (684). Moreover, the insistence among proponents of OA that we shift our attention from "inputs" to "outputs" clearly serves the interests of academic management.

What did you read this week? How do your readings compare to what Gallagher is saying above? How do Gallagher's words connect to your classes at TCU (as a student or as a classroom teacher)?