

OUTCOMES-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING (OBTL)

What is it, Why is it, How do we make it work?

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What is OBTL and how does it differ from “traditional” teaching and assessment?

Traditionally, teachers used to plan their teaching by asking such questions as: What topics or content do I teach? What teaching methods do I use? How do I assess to see if the students have taken on board what I have taught them?

Teaching here is conceived as a process of transmitting content to the students, so the methods tend to be expository, and assessment focused on checking how well the message has been received—hence the common use of lectures and demonstrations, with tutorials for clarification, and exams that rely on reporting back.

OBTL, on the other hand, is based on such questions as: What do I intend my students to be able to do after my teaching that they couldn't do before, and to what standard? How do I supply learning activities that will help them achieve those outcomes? How do I assess them to see how well they have achieved them?

As its name suggests, OBTL starts with clearly stating, not what the teacher is going to teach, but what the outcome of that teaching is intended to be in the form of a statement of what the learner is supposed to be able to do and at what standard: the Intended Learning Outcome (ILO). When students attend lectures, however, their main activity is receiving, not doing. Hence we need to devise Teaching Learning Activities (TLAs) that require students to apply, invent, generate new ideas, diagnose and solve problems—or whatever other things they are expected to be able to do after they graduate. Similarly we need Assessment Tasks (ATs) that tell us, not to how well students have received knowledge, but how they can use it in academically and professionally appropriate ways, such as solving problems, designing experiments, or communicating with clients. It is often difficult to assess these applied and higher order outcomes in the examination room context.

Where does Constructive Alignment fit it?

In a professional course at Hong Kong University a few years ago, students were required to place items in a portfolio that they thought showed how they could apply theory to their professional practice. Listening to lectures didn't help them much, so they reflected on their current practice and discussed amongst themselves about reflecting and applying theory. In other words, the verbs in the ILOs led to TLAs that embodied those verbs so that the students were more likely to achieve the intended outcomes. The assessment tasks (ATs) likewise embodied those verbs, by assessing *how well* they reflected or applied the theory. Constructive alignment was born. “Constructive” refers to the idea that students *construct meaning* through relevant learning activities; “alignment” refers to the situation when teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, are aligned to the Intended Learning Outcomes by using the learning activities, expressed as verbs such as ‘apply’, ‘reflect’, ‘design an experiment to ...’, that are stipulated in the ILOs.

OBTL in itself does not say *how* to align ILOs, TLAs and assessment tasks, only that they *should* be aligned. Constructive alignment provides the “how-to” by stating that the TLAs and the assessment tasks activate the same verbs as in the ILOs.

Why use OBTL?

The short answer is that OBTL is logical, effective and both teachers and students find it more satisfying than traditional teaching. A benefit for students, possibly even more than teachers, is that the ILOs tell them precisely not only *what* they are supposing to be learning, but *how* and to what *standard*.

For these reasons, OBTL is used in university teaching in several countries, and in the UK and in Hong Kong also for quality assurance. It is now widely recognized that effective teaching and assessment requires an aligned system. The UGC is strongly encouraging universities to adopt OBTL in order to enhance teaching and learning.

But isn't OBTL more resource intensive?

At first, yes it is. The intended topics in the curriculum need to be reworked into the form of Intended Learning Outcomes, which does require time and good cooperation between course leaders and programme coordinators. The TLAs need to be thought over, and *practicable* changes made in the current teaching method so that students' learning activities are more likely to lead them to achieve the ILOs. Obviously, what is practicable in a class of 40 students may not be practicable in a class of 200 – but there are better ways of handling the latter than unalleviated lecturing. Assessment tasks need then to be redefined and grading criteria (rubrics) worked out by colleagues. The main difficulty here is a change in *mindset*, rather than resource-demanding activities.

Initially, setting up OBTL takes time, but once OBTL is up and running there should be little difference in teacher time between this and “the old way”.

Doesn't OBTL atomise the curriculum into independent low level competencies, making higher level outcomes unattainable?

Definitely not. Competency-based assessment as used in vocational courses may look similar superficially, but OBTL is quite different. Competency-based assessment is skill-based, whereas the outcomes in OBTL are what you decide them to be, as high level as you can reasonably expect. Outcomes with verbs such as “apply to unfamiliar contexts”, “invent”, “generate”, “create” and so on are obviously not trivial.

OBTL requires a major rethink of university assessment methods.

Yes, it does! To be maximally effective, OBTL requires a change from a quantitative and analytic mindset, that does atomise knowledge into marks, to one that uses and grades assessment tasks *qualitatively* and *holistically* wherever possible. High level outcomes, academic or professional, refer to whole acts, not to the independent components of those acts. Assessing the components of a task is very helpful in providing feedback to students,

but ultimately students have to be assessed holistically in a way that is authentic to their discipline.

Writing Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

Let us first distinguish between *declarative* knowledge, which is not the result of the student's activities, and *functioning* knowledge, which is. Declarative knowledge is what the teacher "declares" in class and is accessible in libraries and search engines; it is what has traditionally been heavily emphasised in university teaching. It is of course most important that students do have a sound and well structured declarative knowledge-base but equally if not more important is that they can *use* that knowledge to give them control over their world. Functioning knowledge refers to how well students can put their knowledge to *work*, to solve problems, to operate more effectively in their particular context. Functioning knowledge is important in all programmes, especially in professional programmes but also in the basic sciences and humanities. In deciding what our ILOs are to be, therefore, we need to decide what ones are to address declarative knowledge and what functioning knowledge, as the verbs are very different: "describe", "explain", "compare and contrast" are typical declarative verbs, while "apply", "reflect", "design a software program that..." are typical functioning knowledge verbs.

ILOs need to be written at both programme and course levels. ILOs of both kinds contain two essential elements: a statement of what (the content areas) the student is supposed to be able to do at the end of the course or subject, and to stipulate the levels of understanding or performance in those content areas.

Programme ILOs are derived from several sources: attributes of the ideal graduate from the University, requirements of professional bodies, the judgments of programme committees. From these, the general *aims* of the programme can be listed in about 5 or 6 statements. The next task is to convert these into programme ILOs. The simplest way of doing so is to reword the aims into about 5 or 6 ILOs, each with a generic verb. In a Business programme such an ILO might read "Explain the conceptual framework and practical skills of the accounting profession." One or more courses may then be aligned to this programme ILO, each with their course ILOs (see below) that would address the targeted aspects of the accounting profession. A Programme ILO by Course ILO matrix can then be drawn up to check that all the intended outcomes of the programme have been addressed by one or more of the course ILOs, and to check that there are no redundant or overlapping course ILOs.

Course ILOs are where constructive alignment starts. It is here that the verbs and the standards of achievement need to be clearly worked out. The acid test of an ILO is: *does it make clear to the teacher what sort of task is required to assess it, clear to the student what he or she has to do, and are the standards required clear to both teacher and student?*

It is helpful to use the SOLO or Bloom Taxonomies (or both) in thinking about these verbs and standards. For example, "describe" basically means listing a "satisfactory" number of points, whereas "explain" requires a linking concept. These verbs refer to declarative knowledge: what students know about a topic. They do not tell us what students can do with

that topic knowledge, which a verb like “design a ...” does. The appropriate verb helps to establish the level of the ILO.

Course ILOs are where the action is. They define what is to be learned, and provide the link to designing TLAs and ATs (see below). Ideally, there should be no more than about 5 course ILOs, as each has to be aligned with a TLA and with an Assessment Task. In other words, when you teach a course, you would not normally expect students to learn more than five major outcomes.

Some URLs useful for writing ILOs:

The following guide to writing ILOs elaborates the above; it comes from the University of Glasgow:

<http://senate.gla.ac.uk/academic/ilo/guide.pdf>

Tips for designing ILOs for effective assessment:

<http://tldu.waikato.ac.nz/resources/LearningOutcomestoAssessment.pdf>

Designing TLAs

When the ILOs contain verbs like “design”, “reflect”, “hypothesise”, “generate”, etc., expository teaching methods like the lecture may be important to tell the student *about* the task, but clearly other supports will be necessary to help the student *do* the task. The key is to provide a context that requires the same action by the student that is already contained in the ILO verb(s). The TLAs for “Solve problems in unfamiliar domains” involve presenting problems in contexts the students have not been taught directly to solve. This would probably need *enabling* TLAs, such as providing carefully structured hints either directly or by software. Students can then in groups or in a chat room discussion reflect on each hint, and out of their shared conceptions of the problem and the available information, work towards a solution.

It is worth remembering that making the students do the work is not only educationally sound—directly relating to the attribute of lifelong learning—it lets the teacher off being the constant source of information. TLAs can be teacher-managed, peer- managed or self-managed. Each has its place, serving different ILOs.

Some URLs useful for designing TLAs:

General and on-line:

<http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>

TLAs for active learning:

<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/active/index.html>

<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/guides/active.html>

Good TLAs in different subjects and disciplines:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/SubjectNetwork.htm>

For group work:

<http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/docs/wigintrou.html>

http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/downloads/small_group_rev2.pdf

And what all good TLAs should be doing, giving formative feedback to students:

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/firstwords/fw21.html>

Designing Assessment Tasks (ATs)

Assessment Tasks for a given ILO, or perhaps more than one ILO, are aligned to that ILO(s) by presenting the student with a task that requires them to use the operative ILO verb. In order to perform the assessment task the students have to enact that verb or a closely related one. The best form of alignment is where the TLA is itself the assessment, as in problem based learning. The students, or usually groups of students, are presented with a problem to solve, and with hints and resources to work out how to do it (the TLA); *how well* they do it is the assessment task. The summative assessment task may be the same kind of problem used in the TLA, or in final years, a different kind of problem, to test the students' ability to generalise. Not all ILOs need to be assessed where they are enabling higher order ILOs or that are subsumed by them. For example, if a student has been able to meet an ILO containing "explain", there is no need to assess "describe" or "identify", unless there is other good reason to do so.

There are two separate steps in designing suitable assessment tasks: 1. selecting a practicable task that embodies the target verb; 2. judging how well that task has been performed, and by implication, how well the ILO has been met by the student's performance.

Selecting a practicable task that embodies the target verb is relatively simple. Different assessment tasks address different ILOs. A range of assessment tasks may be required to address the range of course ILOs. The crucial point is to design assessment tasks that require students to enact the target ILO verbs. It may be that the traditional examination will be suitable for "describe" "explain" ILOs, but unsuitable for other ILOs. Further, the examination context itself (fixed time, invigilated) often distorts the estimate of the student's performance by time stress and reliance on memory although the latter may be mitigated by using open-book exams (but that may increase time stress). If there are reasons why assessment *has* to be carried out in an invigilated situation, reliance on memory can be lessened by presenting a novel problem or situation by video or a "gobbet", to which the student has to respond with "analyse", "interpret" etc.

The best assessment tasks reflect real life by being "authentic" to the profession or discipline, but non-invigilated or off-campus assessment may raise plagiarism fears. An answer to that is that the more the task requires *personal involvement* by the student - e.g., a case study during placement, a reflective journal - the less likely the student is to "get it off the Net" or from someone else.

Examples of assessment tasks may be also found in the websites below.

Twelve tips for good assessment practices:

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/07/index.html>

Good assessment practices by subject:

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/04/index.html>

Assessing group work:

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/firstwords/fw26.html>

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html>

Assessment ideas from HKUST:

<http://celt.ust.hk/ideas/afl/Mexam/index.html>

In many cases, the course ILOs are not of equal importance, some may be relatively more important than others. Care has to be taken that the weighting of the assessment task is appropriate in reflecting the relative importance of the ILOs. For instance, it is common in some universities to give the exam a weighting of 50%, every other task (“coursework”) 50%, which almost inevitably means the lower level ILOs are over assessed at the expense of the higher level ones. The obvious answer is to change the weights between exam and other assessment tasks or to give more than one AT to the more important ILOs.

Judging how well the assessment task has been performed - Marking versus Grading

Probably most teachers “mark” students’ work: that is, using a quantitative scale, usually in percentages, to rate how well students are doing, or to award marks “bottom up” as the student makes correct points. The final grade is allocated according to the number of marks accumulated.

OBTL fits most comfortably with grading, that is, allocating A, B, C etc. on the basis of the quality of students’ work, not on the number of marks accrued. Grading schemes that equate D with a “Marginal Pass” performance, C with “Average”, B with “Good” and A with “Excellent” are far too general. We need to generate grading criteria, or *rubrics*, to describe what an “Excellent” outcome may be for each task and for each ILO. These criteria are discussed in the following section.

Developing Grading Criteria (Rubrics)

The grading criteria, or rubrics, are the key to easy and successful grading. Such criteria need to suit the task presented. Generating them is a joint collegial responsibility so that all teachers in the department agree. The judgment is made according to the letter grade: if the performance barely makes the category it is a “minus”, if an excellent example of that grade of performance a “plus”. The numerical grade point can then be read from the grade point scale for the purpose of calculating final grades.

Some URLs useful in designing grading criteria:

What are rubrics, how are they designed, and a rubric bank:

<http://www.tcet.unt.edu/START/assess/rubrics.htm>

Rubrics for assessing cooperative learning:

<http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/profdev/rubrics.shtml>

Deriving Final Grades from several ATs

Final grades may be derived in different ways. A common practice is to convert grades to the numerical grade point, average the sum, then convert the averaged grade point back to a final grade. But this raises the possible case of a student who did moderately okay in a few ATs but failed in one will still get an overall pass. Worse still is that the failed AT may be assessing some more important high level course ILOs.

There are other ways of deriving a final grade holistically by considering student's performance in the different course ILOs addressed by the AT (see examples below).

Holistic Grading by ILO

In the following, 4 ATs are assessing 5 ILOs, 3 ATs contributing twice to the assessment of different ILOs, as for example a project or case study might so. The suggestions for awarding the final grade are for illustration only; obviously each teacher or course committee will have to decide the grading details for themselves.

ILOs	AT1	AT2	AT3	AT4	
1. Relate	√	√			Award Grade as follows: A – ILOs 1 and 2 'A', others B B – all ILOs B/C, an odd 'A' C – if ILOs 3, 4 & 5 achieved D – if marginal or only 2 ILOs are achieved
2. Apply		√	√		
3. Identify			√		
4. Explain				√	
5. Communicate				√	

A specific example

“Curriculum and Instruction” was a course in a programme for educational psychologists.

Grading will be based on students attaining the following ILOs.

1. Apply the principles of good teaching and assessment to chosen contexts.
2. Relate selected aspects of curriculum design and management to the educational system in Hong Kong.
3. Apply the content and experience in this subject to enhance your effectiveness as an educational psychologist.
4. Show examples of your reflective decision-making as an educational psychologist.

Final grades will depend on how well students can demonstrate that they have met all the ILOs.

- A. Awarded if all of the ILOs have been clearly met, evidence provided of original and creative thinking, perhaps going beyond established practice.
- B. Awarded when all the ILOs have been met very well and effectively.
- C. Awarded when the ILOs have been addressed satisfactorily, or where the evidence is strong in some ILOs, weaker but acceptable in others.
- F. Less than C, work plagiarised, not submitted.

Further Reading

Biggs, J. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* Buckingham: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

The concept of constructive alignment is fully discussed here, but the terminology (“objectives” for “ILOs”) is pre-OBTL. We are currently revising this text to bring it up to date, with a view specific to implementation in the current OBTL context, but this will hopefully be available in September this year.

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