

## OBE for FET

SASHT Sept. 2005

The title of the talk was chosen partially tongue in cheek at a time when I was battling with aspects of textbook writing for the new FET syllabus. The problem with OBE was, I became convinced, that people did not agree on what it is or should be. Certainly much of what the publishers said was required of our team of authors in this line, seemed to me to have nothing to do with what I understand OBE to be. It did, however, cover the line taken by the Department of Education and if our work was to bear fruit in terms of acceptance and sales of the textbooks, then we would have to play along.

Outcomes Based Education has been called many things, often uncomplimentary but, as an historian, I tend to think of it in terms of the logical development of the argument over assessment that was causing so much heated debate when I first entered the profession. The issue then was the argument over whether assessment should be norm referenced or criterion referenced. Should we, as educators, be judging our pupils in terms of their peers (norm referencing) or against an outside standard that was not affected by changes in the pupil make-up (criterion referencing)? After much debate a compromise was reached in which aspects of both were combined. The logical progression from this was that, if pupils were to be assessed against specific criteria, it made sense to make mastering those criteria the aim of our teaching. The mastery of each criterion became the aim or outcome towards which we strove. Lo, Outcomes based education appeared.

So far, so good. Pupils were now being trained or taught to acquire the skills needed to manipulate and use knowledge rather than the body of knowledge itself. Rote learning had no place in this and examining took on a new dimension as stimulus material and lateral thinking became incorporated into tests to replace the old regurgitation of knowledge. Most subjects became far more interesting and challenging for both the pupil and the teacher.

Some proponents of this “skills based assessment” went so far as to argue that the content was irrelevant and any content could be presented to the test candidate and they would have an equal chance of doing well. An argument that does

however, changed again and they are now referred to as Learning Outcomes, not specific outcomes. The Learning Outcomes for FET History are:  
 LO1 The learner to be able to acquire and apply historical enquiry skills.  
 LO2 The learner is able to use historical concepts in order to analyse the past.

not hold up where there are distinct cultural and language differences as well as socio-economic differences as the background knowledge of the candidates is then too diverse to allow any sort of educational equality. An example of this would be to include in a test such sources as cartoons based on nursery rhymes or fairy tales familiar to one section of the population but not to others. (e.g. the depiction of Hitler goose-stepping into the Rhineland in 1936 as “Goosey goosey Gander whither do you wander .....” or the less well known cartoon depicting Hitler as Snow White and the small nations of Eastern Europe as the seven dwarfs. Most English speaking children will have come across both the rhyme and the story but few non-English speakers would know them).

Educational theorists then went a step further and began to argue that the outcome of the school education system should be to make the pupils of greater use to the labour market. This meant that other skills such as working as part of a team should also be included. They then developed a whole list of outcomes that schools should make sure that pupils had mastered by the time they left school. These outcomes were divided first into General Outcomes and then into Specific Outcomes for each of the eight different learning areas. (The rationale for moving from separate subjects to learning areas has never been clear to me and I tend to think cynically that it simply meant fewer learning areas so less work in generating specific outcomes was needed. My thinking here is supported by the fact that the Human and Social Sciences Learning area specified three outcomes for History and three for Geography).

The outcomes were linked to the end of compulsory schooling at the end of Grade 9 so what was left for the FET phase? Learning areas were replaced by specific subjects as education was more specialised in this phase. In terms of History the specific outcomes for FET were limited to four: basically the same three as for the GCE plus one on heritage. Terminology, LO3 The learner is able to construct and communicate historical knowledge and understanding. LO4 The learner is able to engage critically with issues around heritage.

Again we can say, so far, so good. These outcomes are linked to assessment standards and herein (as Shakespeare commented) lies the rub. The assessment criteria are not always very practically worked out and incidentally do not appear to have any relationship to the SAQA standards being generated. Perhaps because they had to be in place before SAQA had generated its standards for history and it does not appear to want to adopt the Education Department’s standards. The potential for confusion to reign is high.

The Assessment Standards have been carefully laid out in three different levels for each of the three years of the FET phase and at first glance this does appear to be sensible. The problem is that learners (as we are now to call out pupils) seldom work that way. The divisions are also often easier to see in theory than in practice. As an example one of the assessment Standards for the outcome of historical enquiry says for grade 10: *Engage with sources of information to judge their usefulness for the task, based on criteria provided.* For Grade 11 it says: *Evaluate the sources of information provided to assess the appropriateness of the sources for the task.* And for Grade 12 the standard says: *Engage with sources of information, evaluating the usefulness of the sources for the task, including stereotypes, subjectivity and gaps in available evidence.*

Assuming that the usefulness of a source is an aspect of its appropriateness then what we are really saying is that in Grade 10 we will provide the criteria against which to judge the sources; in Grade 11 we will provide the sources and expect the learner to determine the criteria against which to judge them; in Grade 12 the learners must find both the sources and the criteria for themselves. There is a progression of skills and abilities here but how does the teacher, fighting against time constraints in the classroom, implement this? Pressure of work will lead to a few examples of sources being given and some basic criteria for judging them. Wealthy schools with in class internet access may well be able to move beyond this but the schools without this luxury will battle. Many schools with internet access only have it available to pupils in library periods or after school with little or no help and searching the web for specific information can be very time consuming if one does not have the necessary background knowledge of the subject. Similarly can the textbook writer find a way of allowing this openness to the learner while ensuring that the prescribed knowledge base of the syllabus is covered?

The textbook writer is further confronted with the problem that the learners are unknown and their knowledge is uncertain. How much background needs to be explained and how simply must this explanation be worded? Language complexity is a major problem which the vagaries of English do nothing to help. Sources offered within the textbook have to be contextualised and this can be a major problem. Take, for example, the cartoon mentioned earlier of Hitler as Goosey Gander. One would need to give the nursery rhyme and

possibly some explanation of it - or learners could ask why the comparison is made. Whether the nursery rhyme would make any sense to the learner is questionable, it has uncertain origins and little clear meaning except that the gander wandered where it should not. The use of the image of Goosey Gander had also been made in a cartoon prior to World War I and whether including this information would help or confuse the learner is something the textbook writer (and editor) may well go grey trying to decide.

The problem for the OBE textbook is largely one, it seems to me, of finding a balance between allowing the learners the freedom to explore and to find for themselves the desired outcomes, and providing the necessary resources to allow pupils to achieve these same outcomes without access to resources such as libraries and the internet. The same textbook is unlikely to suit both the exclusive private school with every classroom having its own internet access and all pupils enjoying such access at home as well as a good library, and the rural black school with no electricity, library or any teaching aids. Perhaps the textbook publishers should agree among themselves who is going to aim their textbook at which target market. A utopian dream as market share determines profitability.

One of the saving graces for the OBE textbook writer is that the learners are aware of the required Learning Outcomes and the different Assessment Standards required for each outcome. They do know where they are heading and what they are expected to achieve. Their achievement is measured on a six point scale:

Rating code	Competence description	equivalent percentage
1	Inadequate	0-29
2	Partial	30-39
3	Adequate	40-49
4	Satisfactory	50-59
5	Meritorious	60-79
6	Outstanding	80-100

This adds to the challenge of textbook writing in working out rubrics for at least some of the activities provided. Even providing the activities can be a challenge as they have to conform to the LOs and link to the required Assessment Standards. Here again the issue of language level can be problematic as activity requirements must be totally unambiguous and clear in what is required. When in doubt about the clarity of what is required, extra explanations can be added in an accompanying Teachers' Book. There too one has to find a balance between too much explanation and too little. The Teachers' Book must never be open to accusations of being patronising, although there are always gaps in any teacher's knowledge and background.

One of the areas where I have found particular difficulty is in the area of the fourth Learner Outcome: The learner is able to engage critically with issues around heritage. The curriculum statement continues to state that this learning outcome is to introduce learners to issues and debates around heritage and public representations, and they are expected to work progressively towards engaging with them. Links are drawn between different knowledge systems and the various ways in which the past is memorialised. Learners also investigate the relationship between paleontology, archeology and genetics in understanding the origins of humans and how this has transformed notions of race. In a syllabus which dates back no further than the mid-fifteenth century, we do not find fossils or even ancient man so neither paleontology nor archeology is particularly relevant. The assessment standards do require varying degrees of awareness of these sciences in understanding heritage. Does the textbook writer now include some older bits of history to bring these sciences into the scope of the text? With the publisher very definite on the number of pages allowed for the book (and indeed for each chapter) this becomes

problematic. The other assessment standards for this learning outcome focus on the representations of the past in terms of monuments, ritual sites, museums which can be difficult to bring to life within the confines of the textbook yet many learners will have no other source for this. We should perhaps have broader assessment standards so that we can include different aspects of heritage.

The point I am trying to make is well illustrated by research done at the University of Michigan in the United States and reported in *The Star* of 14 September. They found that white Americans and native Chinese literally saw things differently when shown the same photograph. The Americans focused on objects while the Asians took in more context. The chief researcher, Richard Nisbett is quoted as saying: "The literally are seeing the world differently. Asians live in a more socially complicated world than we do. They have to pay more attention to others than we do. We are individualists." Japanese subjects in the research gave 60% more information on the background to the photograph than the Americans and twice as much about the relationship between background and foreground. That these differences are cultural (and therefore concerned with heritage issues) was the finding that Asians raised in North America were between the native Asians and European-Americans in how they saw the pictures. We need to try to show learners that heritage issues are not only about the past but that our heritage does shape the way we see things both literally and figuratively.

Instead of trying to link to paleontology and archeology, why should the syllabus not try to look at more contemporary aspects of heritage such as styles of art and writing. Traditional dress and dance are also of more interest to the learner than fossils that predate anything the learner is likely to care about. The heritage studies can be more interesting if one looks at cultural differences in

expressing the same idea: the exaggerated modesty of the Victorian age in Britain with its horror of sex with the exuberant celebration of virginity in the Zulu and Swazi reed dances. Both societies wanted to encourage virginity and abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage, but what a difference in approach. It would also be easier to bring such ideas to the learner in a textbook by an exercise involving the comparison of photographs.

If I am to be honest, one of my main concerns as far as the writing of OBE textbooks is concerned is the fear that the story of history might become less important than the learner outcomes. While fully aware that learners have to be convinced that there is a value in studying history, I am not sure that the prescribed learner outcomes and assessment criteria really answer this question for the learner in a way that the average 14 or 15 year old can understand. That is the age at which they have to make their subject choice as they enter the FET phase and we need to attract them to the subject. If we cannot promise them a really good story while teaching them to analyse, evaluate and synthesize information, what are we using to attract them? The textbook can have lots of pictures and attractively displayed sources, but it must also have a coherent story. I find the demands of ensuring that there are sufficient sources, activities and links to other subjects sometimes force the story to be cut. To keep it clear and understandable is one thing but to ensure that it remains interesting is another. W.S. Gilbert knew what he was saying when he spoke of “corroborative detail to add verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative” (Pooh-Bah in *The Mikado*).

I love the broad sweep of history with the patterns that repeat but always change and in trying to ensure that every outcome is covered in my textbook, I often feel that the learners, whatever else they do learn, will miss that broad sweep and will fail to see the wood for the trees.