A Brief Guide
to

Outcomes Based Assessment

Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning
A Brief Guide to Outcomes Based Assessment

Introduction

The Rhodes University Policy for the Assessment of Student Learning (see Appendix 1) promotes an outcomes based approach to education and points out that this has profound implications for the assessment of student learning. The policy emphasises that the choice and implementation of assessment procedures should be valid in terms of the outcomes set for a course or module.

The purpose of this booklet is to identify some of the characteristics of an outcomes based approach to assessment. What distinguishes this approach from other more traditional approaches and how can we ensure that our practices are reliable and valid within this paradigm? Practical steps are given for aligning one’s assessment practices with the outcomes set for a course after which guidelines for constructing a criterion referenced marking guide are presented.

1. Features of an outcomes based approach to assessment

1.1. Emphasis is on outputs or end products

Outcomes based assessment emphasises the assessment of student outputs or end products as opposed to lecturer inputs. Knowledge or content of courses is no longer the principal focus but instead the focus is on the application of that knowledge and the demonstration of the required skills and values within specific contexts. These outcomes have to be explicit to ensure that learners clearly understand what is being assessed and what is to be achieved.

Outcomes based assessment is also characterised by criterion as opposed to norm referencing.

1.2. Outcomes based assessment is criterion referenced

There has been a complete shift away from the tendency to use a normal curve as the basis for making decisions about individual performance. In contrast to norm referenced testing which is designed for the purpose of comparing students with one another, criterion referenced assessment is a form of assessment in which judgements are made about learners by measuring their work against set criteria that are independent of the work of other learners. Even if grades are given, learners’ achievements are graded in terms of whether they have satisfied the criteria for assessment.

Criteria are specified in terms of the outcomes set for a course. By putting in time and effort at the beginning of a course, reflecting on and specifying criteria and communicating these clearly to students, one is in a better position to facilitate learning by giving learners feedback on the extent to which they have, or have not, met those criteria.

1.3. Outcomes based assessment is continuous

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Outcomes based assessment focuses on using frequent and varied assessment techniques to guide students towards achieving the outcomes set for a course. In contrast to continual assessment in which one merely assesses repeatedly, continuous assessment makes use of a variety of assessment practices during a course or module with the intention of understanding where the learner is. Feedback from assessment enables the lecturer involved to provide as much guidance to learners as possible. This feedback guides learners on their strengths and weaknesses and advises them on how to progress. This kind of assessment need not be formal. Its intention is to inform the students on the success of their learning so far.

1.4. **Outcomes based assessment is used for formative and summative purposes**

Outcomes based assessment makes use of both *formative* and *summative* assessment. Formative assessment is used to chart the learner’s progress as he/she works towards achieving the specific outcomes to become competent. If students have not met the criteria, they would not be competent yet and the onus would be on the assessor to specify what learners have to do in order to meet the criteria and become competent. Summative assessment is formal assessment that is administered at the end of a learning programme. Judgements are made with reference to the criteria set for the assessment tasks (see 1.2.)

1.5. **Outcomes based assessment is concerned with issues of reliability and fairness**

Traditionally, reliability refers to consistency of measurement. Outcomes based assessment is conducive to reliability in that specific outcomes and criteria are the basis upon which assessment is planned and administered. These are constant regardless of who is assessing and who is being assessed. Laying down these specifications makes it necessary for the assessor to use them as a guide in planning, developing and administering assessment. Because they are specific, known and clearly understood by all, they act as an in-built mechanism against assessor inconsistency and assist with the transparency of assessment and description of standards.

1.6. **Outcomes based assessment practices are valid**

Assessment methods and criteria have to match what is to be assessed. Judgements or results showing measurement outside of what is stated are viewed as invalid. For example, the use of correct grammar is often used as a criterion when assessing assignments. If this criterion was not mentioned (i.e. was not stated either in the outcomes or prior learning required) it would not be valid to take this factor into account when assessing student assignments. Many of us may have consciously or unconsciously “marked down” a student’s assignment due to his or her incorrect use of grammar. It would be invalid to reward or punish a student for this if it was not specified as a criterion. It would also be unfair.

1.7. **Outcomes based assessment includes integrated assessment**

The purpose of *integrated* assessment is to provide evidence that the purposes of a course/module as a whole have been achieved. It makes use of a range of formative and summative assessment methods to enable the learner to demonstrate applied competence. Integrated assessment incorporates foundation as well as practical and reflective competence while attempting to bring the overall purpose of the qualification under scrutiny. Learners should be provided with a variety of contexts in which to display their knowledge since a
once–off written examination does not provide for the assessment skills that are not suited to that mode of assessment.

1.8. **Outcomes based assessment is aligned with other aspects of the system**

Educators increasingly recognise that the major elements of an education system must work together to help students achieve higher levels of understanding. Outcomes set for each component of the course need to be aligned with the purposes and outcomes for the whole qualification. The methods of teaching and assessing that course must also be aligned with these outcomes. The following diagram attempts to illustrate these concepts:

![Diagram of alignment of assessment with other aspects of the curriculum]

**Figure 1: Aligning assessment with other aspects of the curriculum**

2. **Implementing outcomes based assessment principles**
While there is no direct “route” for implementing outcomes based assessment principles, the following steps might assist the process:

2.1. **Focus on one of the courses/modules which you currently teach and ask the question: “What are the specific outcomes which I expect students to demonstrate upon completion of this course?”**

Before planning one’s assessment strategies one needs to set specific outcomes for one’s course. An outcome, being a result of learning, occurs after or at the end of the learning experience to which it is tied. Outcomes require the ability to translate and apply the intellectual and psychomotor processes aspects of learning into tangible form. Pertinent vocabulary to be used in stating outcomes includes words like:

- Describe
- Write
- Define
- Analyse
- Explain
- Construct
- Organise
- Apply
- Evaluate

These verbs cover a wide spectrum of complexity so it is important to appreciate the level of demand you are placing on the student and be accurate in your choice of language and design of assessment tasks. In addition to setting specific outcomes for a course the SAQA Act requires “generic” or “critical” outcomes to be embedded in all curricula. It is important to plan and document how, over the course of their whole degree, students will realise these skills. These outcomes include the abilities to:

- Identify and solve problems
- Work in a team
- Organise and manage herself
- Collect, analyse and evaluate information
- Communicate effectively
- Use science and technology
- Recognise problem solving contexts

2.2. **Evaluate your current assessment methods for the course/module**

It may be useful to ask the following questions in relation to your current practices before attempting to implement outcomes based assessment practices:

- Have you set specific outcomes for your course?
- Do your current assessment procedures actually assess the specific outcomes set for your course?
- Does the assessment for this course/module guide students towards achieving those outcomes i.e. are your outcomes, learning activities and assessment practices aligned so that they mutually reinforce one another?
Is your assessment varied and frequent?
Are your students getting enough feedback? (see Appendix 1: Rhodes Assessment Policy)

Traditional assessment methods such as “assignments”, multiple choice and exams may still be appropriate to assess some of the outcomes we wish our students to demonstrate. However, we need to question whether these methods are broad enough and whether they cater sufficiently for the range of outcomes and the diverse learning styles/strengths of our students.

2.3. **Explore ways of modifying/expanding your current assessment procedures so that they are more aligned with the outcomes set for your course.**

Are there changes you could make in relation to how you phrase questions used in essays/tests/exams which would make instructions more explicit in terms of what you require students to DO (i.e. what explicit skills you require them to demonstrate upon completion of a task)?
Are there alternative methods of assessment that you could make use of which more accurately reflect the specific outcomes set for a course? Examples of alternative assessment methods might include asking students to write a report, keep a diary, engage in a debate, administer a survey, collect and analyse data.

2.4. **Set assessment criteria for the assessment of a task in your course. Suggest ways that you could negotiate these with students.**

In terms of an outcomes based approach towards assessment the most important thing to bear in mind is that the assessment criteria are developed in relation to the outcomes set for the course. There are different ways that educators go about setting criteria but, at the very least, criteria should be communicated explicitly to students so that they know exactly what is required. In the interests of transparency, fairness and student motivation, criteria should ideally be negotiated with students. The most effective way in which this can be done is to negotiate specific criteria with the students in the context of their assessment tasks.

The following questions may assist you in evaluating the process of setting criteria:

What are the learning outcomes for this component? What criteria do learners have to meet and what evidence of their achievement do they need to apply to be proficient/competent?
Are these criteria made known to learners in advance?
What opportunities do you give the learners to assess their progress in situations where you are able to inform them of their weaknesses and guide them towards improved achievement?
Are the criteria capable of distinguishing clearly between the learner who is not yet competent and the learner who is able to demonstrate sufficient mastery to move to the next level of competence in the discipline?
3. Constructing a criterion referenced marking guide

A criterion referenced marking guide is a detailed matrix specifying what is required for the completion of a task. Detailed descriptions are given of the various aspects of a task which are considered relevant. These are further defined in terms of what would need to be included if the task were completed at a highly competent, competent or less than competent level (or first class pass, second, fail etc).

The purpose of constructing a criterion referenced marking guide is to be explicit with students as to the requirements of a task. Clearly, setting up such a guide also has implications for intra- as well as inter-marker reliability as improved consistency is assured. Validity is also increased as there is clarity as to what is being assessed and more specifically what is required for students to achieve different marks.

A number of stages have been identified which may assist in the process of setting up a criterion referenced marking guide. They are as follows:

Begin with your outcomes

Design/select your assessment task

Identify appropriate sections of the assessment task

Set criteria statements

Take each statement and identify the categories where you require evidence to be produced

Take each category and describe what you would expect a “highly competent” candidate to produce in each of these categories

Do the same for a “competent” candidate

Do the same for a “not yet competent” candidate
3.1. Begin with your Outcomes

State your specific and generic outcomes for the course (see Section 2.1.)

3.2. Design/select your Assessment Task

The assessor must ensure that the selected task(s) align with the specific outcomes/criteria statements for the course (see Section 2.2. and Section 2.3).

3.3. Identify appropriate sections of Assessment Task

It is important to analyse the task in terms of its different components. One needs to be specific about exactly what is required by a task. For example, a task may include asking a student to define certain concepts. Following that they may be expected to discuss and critically evaluate these.

3.4. Set Criteria Statements

Criteria statements are statements of evidence required to show that the learner is capable of achieving intended outcomes. When converting outcomes into criteria statements the question should be asked: “How will I know a student has achieved these outcomes?” Assessment criteria must be clearly aligned with the course outcomes which, in turn, should be associated with the different components of the task.

3.5. Take each section and identify which aspects of the categories you require evidence to be produced

At this point one needs to be specific about what aspects of a subject should be defined. What type of discussion might be included in a critical evaluation in contrast, for example, to a description?

3.6. Take each category and describe what you would expect a “highly competent” candidate to achieve

When describing a “highly competent” candidate one should include a complete and detailed description of what would need to be demonstrated if a specific outcome being assessed for the course had been met. In addition to including a detailed outline of appropriate content, the description should include exactly what the candidate is required to demonstrate. Is a detailed outline sufficient for an answer to be “highly competent” or should the candidate’s answer include a critical analysis of the content?

3.7. Do the same for a “competent” candidate

The question that should be answered here is “What does a candidate need to demonstrate to meet the fundamental requirements of the task?” One may also ask what distinguishes a “highly competent” candidate from a “competent” candidate and omit those aspects which are included in the “highly competent” category. A “competent” candidate would need to demonstrate that she has met the outcomes required by a task in contrast to a “highly competent” candidate who would have exceeded those criteria.
3.8. Do the same for a “not yet competent” candidate

The criterion referenced marking guide should clearly outline the aspects of the task which have been omitted or are inadequately dealt with.

The above stages should not be regarded as rigid steps but rather as a process which has been found helpful by some as they engage in the construction of a criterion referenced marking guide.

Conclusion

This guide has attempted to outline the principles underlying an outcomes based approach to assessment. If you wish to obtain further information about assessment or you wish to know more about the process of becoming accredited as an assessor please contact CHERTL at or CHERTL-admin@ru.ac.za on 8171/3.