

Writing Learning Outcomes: Beyond a Compliance Exercise

Course learning outcomes identify the learning that the students will be able to demonstrate at the threshold (base line) level by the end of a course.

Course learning outcomes refer to broad content or skills and the ways in which we would like students to be able to engage with designated learning material.

Introduction

The expectation that higher education teachers should provide clearly-defined learning outcomes is well-established. While many academics have commented that developing learning outcomes has given them a purposeful and structured approach to designing their courses, others engage with learning outcomes less constructively. Views of and approaches to learning outcomes may include some of the following:

- They are a pedantic compliance requirement of bureaucrats that have nothing to do with the actual quality of the teaching and learning experience.
- They are just another way of documenting the content to be covered (or the textbook)
- They curb the spontaneous evolution of a course that can take place in the dynamic interaction between teacher, students and subject
- They are restrictive because the focus on demonstrable competencies is not helpful in relation to the learning of more intangible qualities and dispositional attributes.

The purposes and benefits of Learning Outcomes

There is no perfect design solution for teaching and learning. Every teaching and learning encounter involves a complex process with influences at work that go far beyond the cognitive mastery of particular ideas and concepts. Learning outcomes need to recognize this complexity but they don't purport to capture it. They simply provide a basic map to establish the route of the course and the key directions for following the route and completing it.

Learning outcomes can:

- Provide the basic framework for building a logical, structured course
- Ensure that the different parts of the course work together so that students can enjoy a well-integrated learning experience
- Indicate the way students will be able to engage with the content as well as the broad content area
- Provide direction for the design of assessment and learning activities

- Provide a way of communicating the direction of the course and its goals for the students
- Provide a tool for building a programme so that courses at different levels are working towards programme goals and university goals.

What are the components of a Learning Outcome?

Moon (2002) provides a simple description of the key components of a learning outcome. They are:

- A verb** to indicate as precisely as possible how we would like students to engage with particular content or skill (including the level on the intellectual hierarchy)

Examples: Describe; Apply; Analyse; Calculate; Discuss critically; Assess; Evaluate; Problem solve; Design

- An object:** The content or skill to be learned

Examples:

- Describe the key events in a historical period
- Apply a SWOT analysis to a corporate organization
- Analyse the multiple factors leading to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War

- A context/condition/level statement**

Examples:

- at an introductory level.
- including ...
- such as ...
- in the Pacific Region.
- recognizing diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.
- applying relevant theories

Writing Learning Outcomes

The accepted starter sentence for learning outcomes is:

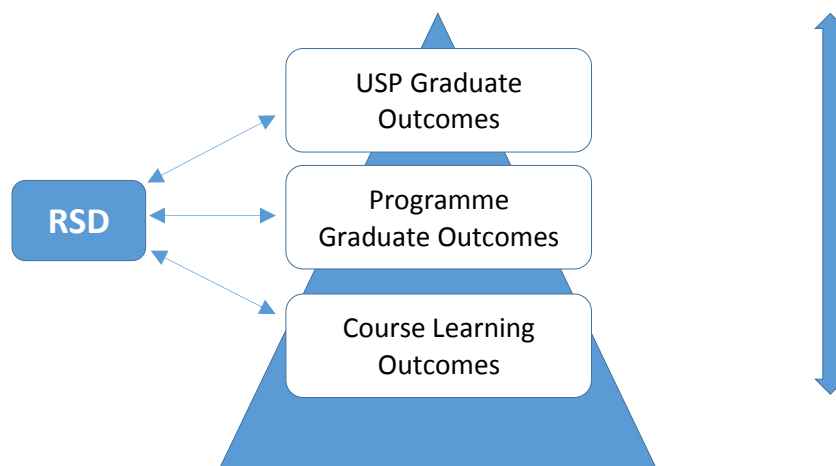
Students will be able to:

Moon (2002) suggests using “expected to be able to” as we cannot guarantee the attainment of outcomes.

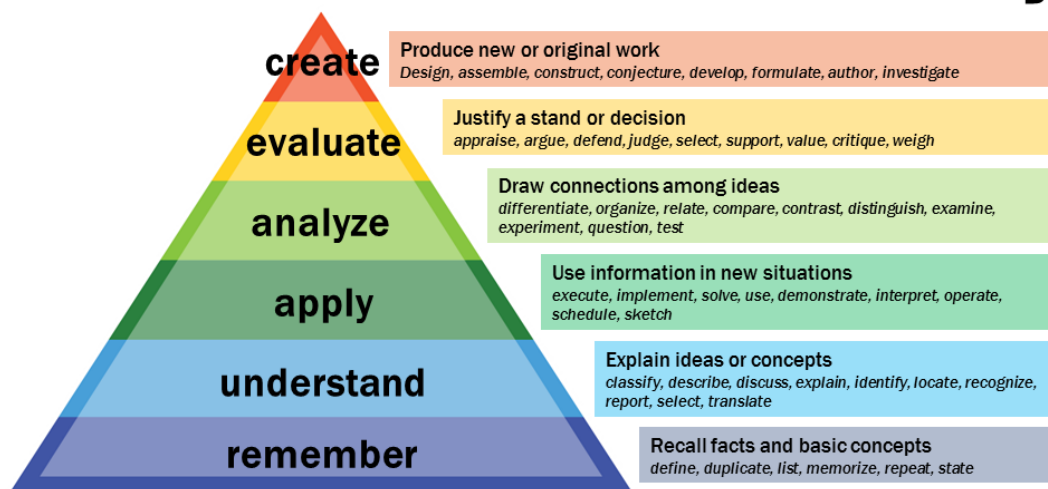
1. Using the Big Picture to inform Course Learning Outcomes

Finding the right verb is often the most challenging part of writing a learning outcome as it determines both the way something is assessed and taught. In trying to peg the learning outcomes at the appropriate level, consult the rubrics for the USP Graduate Outcomes which indicate the expectations for the different competencies at different levels. The programme and USP Graduate Outcomes also help to define the competencies that need to be developed at each stage of the programme. The Research Skills Development (RSD) framework is also a good tool for estimating the appropriate research-related competencies that should be attained at different academic levels and is congruent with the USP Graduate Outcomes. Bloom's Taxonomy is helpful for deciding on the appropriate word for the verb. Also consider the programme as a whole and the outcomes for courses at the same level and at different levels.

Connected Design: The Big Picture



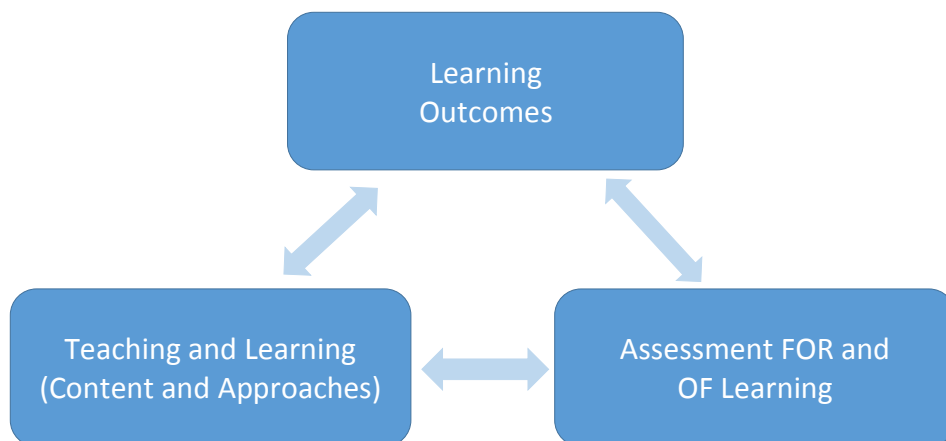
Bloom's Taxonomy



2. Course Learning Outcomes and other Course Components

Course learning outcomes should not be written in isolation but planned concurrently with the design of teaching and assessment. Outcomes are only a constructive and purposeful part of a course if they work in conjunction with all these aspects. For example, when thinking of a particular outcome, consider how teaching would need to be designed to support the development of a particular intellectual competency or skill, for example, problem-solving, and what kinds of assessment would best support its development and evaluate its attainment.

Connected Design within a Course



3. Questions for Evaluating Outcomes

- i. Are the proposed teaching strategies appropriate for developing these outcomes?
- ii. How do the outcomes complement learning outcomes in other courses in the Programme at the same level?
- iii. How do the outcomes relate to outcomes in the Programme for other levels?
- iv. How do the outcomes contribute to Programme Graduate Outcomes and USP Graduate Outcomes?
- v. How do the outcomes accommodate student diversity in terms of culture, nationality, language, educational experience?
- vi. Are the resources available for the implementation of these outcomes?
- vii. Are the outcomes manageable within the time frame of the course?
- viii. Are the outcomes manageable in terms of student and staff workload?
- ix. Do the outcomes accommodate the requirements of relevant professional bodies and external stakeholders?
- x. Is the learning expected in the outcomes compatible with both academic goals and future workplace requirements?
- xi. Are there appropriate and practical types of assessment for evaluating and developing these outcomes?

Examples of Learning Outcomes from selected USP Courses

ED321: Developing Inclusive School Communities (FALE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate effective teaching behaviours that are appropriate for children with special education needs.
2. Identify the ways in which special educational needs may be created or negatively impacted upon by organizational, curricular and/or pedagogical factors.
3. Formulate practical teaching strategies as a positive intervention in learning and teaching environments.
4. Transform their learning and teaching spaces so that children within their care will be able to realise their fullest potential.
5. Work collaboratively with other professionals to develop strategies for developing individual educational plans where necessary.

HY305: Special Topic (FALE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Discuss the pattern of US colonial expansion and retreat in the Pacific Islands from the 1790s to the present day.
2. Engage with historical readings, identifying key arguments and assertions and communicating responses in coherent written form.
3. Interpret contemporary US involvement in the Asia-Pacific region in the light of historical factors, such as economic policies, legal frameworks, political negotiations, social and cultural influence, presenting these responses in a creative manner.
4. Evaluate key debates in Pacific and American historiography in the form of a well-structured essay that follows correct referencing conventions.

SO300: Research Methods in Sociology (FALE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Identify the critical issues and debates in social research methods and tools of social research, especially in the Pacific island countries.
2. Apply skills in social research to explore aspects of development challenges and policy issues of relevance to contemporary Pacific islands.
3. Interpret research results using appropriate analytical approaches.
4. Communicate research findings effectively in a range of oral/written and virtual formats including a presentation, and a report that follows discipline research conventions.
5. Critically reflect on research activities and learning in the context of a fieldwork journal.
6. Provide peer feedback on classmates' research at key junctures in the research process in the context of an online discussion forum.

MG201: Organizational Behavior (FBE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Examine individual behavior principles and competencies as a predictor of employee work behavior.
2. Assess group behavior principles and collaboration techniques as a predictor of workplace team behavior.
3. Apply the contribution of research as it relates to effective management and leadership behavior in the Pacific Region.
4. Compare best OB practices in various organisations in PIC governments, businesses and NGOs.
5. Explain solutions on how to manage organizational change and challenges in the Pacific Region through individual and group presentations.

TS302: Strategic Services Management in Hospitality (FBE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Discuss critically core concepts such as services, strategic management, quality management, services marketing, service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, empowerment and the internationalization of services.
2. Analyse critically, using primary and/or secondary research, the services offered by a small resort or hotel by applying the SERVQUAL or RATER model.
3. Evaluate critically, with reference to the literature, strategies for meeting profit and growth goals simultaneously with achieving customer satisfaction and value.
4. Examine critically a range of emerging issues affecting the management of hospitality businesses in the Pacific and elsewhere.
5. Compile a collaborative report based on primary and secondary research of a hotel or resort.
6. Present critical collaborative presentations of primary and secondary research findings related to key core strategic services and management concepts.

MM312: Solid Mechanics (FSTE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Apply the theories of stress, strain, strength and elastic and plastic deformation of solid structure and/or element in relation to a design.
2. Analyse failures of machine components and/or structures under multiple loading conditions.
3. Use recent Finite element method computational software for analyzing and designing machine components and/or structures.
4. Design structures and/or machine components predicting their life service.
5. Work effectively as a team in completing and preparing a project report.

CH201: Organic Chemistry (FSTE Course)

On successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Use molecular orbital theory in the rationalization of the structure and behaviour of simple aromatic systems, and in the mechanistic interpretation of selected cycloaddition reactions.
2. Explain the structure and reactivity of the common functional groups in organic compounds.
3. Apply theoretical knowledge of functional group Chemistry (from CH102) in manipulating these functional groups through simple reactions in the context of practical labs.
4. Propose simple reaction mechanisms for organic compounds.
5. Determine the stereochemistry present in organic molecules such as in alicyclic compounds and sugars, recognizing its importance in terms of the chemistry of these molecules.
6. Use the fundamental process involved with nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy to interpret simple ^1H NMR spectrum.
7. Explain the structure and bonding found in organic molecules.

Reference

Moon, J. (2002). The Module and Programme Development Handbook. London: Kogan Page.

Compiled by

Dorothy Spiller, Consultant - Programme Review & Assessment, Office of the DVC LTSS, USP.