The Stages of Grief and Outcomes-Based Education: What stage are you in?

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Dr. Margaret A. Miller, professor in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, recently produced a paper for the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) likening our approach to Student Learning Outcomes or Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Miller conducted a survey of literature and corresponding trends that track these stages.

DENIAL

Miller saw that in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the literature focused on denial of this approach to education. She found that the few proponents thought that OBE would rapidly become ensconced in education and change the face of higher education within a very short period of time (approximately 5-10 years), whereas the majority “believed it would take about that long for the ‘fad’ to run its course” (4).

Almost forty years later, I think we need to agree that OBE is not going to go away. The Bologna Tuning Process, which has shaken the roots of education in Europe, has taken a firm hold, especially with educational powerhouse nations such as Norway, Finland, and Sweden leading the charge. The process has begun to branch out into parts of the Middle East and northern Africa. Japan, too, has fully bought into the system of OBE, especially with its approach to math instruction at all levels. I don’t expect it will be long before it begins to creep into China, if it hasn’t already.

Furthermore, a U.S. Tuning Process is already taking shape in Minnesota, which has now formed a cohort with Indiana and Utah and has begun tuning work in two areas: biology and graphic design.

We can continue to deny it – and some of us will – but OBE is not going to go away.

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1 1st publication: Learning Assessment News, March 2012. 2nd publication & footnote updates added for Department SLO Facilitator training

2 The Tuning process went to Russia and Latin America kicked-off late 2012.

3 Outcomes-based education and problem-based learning provide the basis for the newly adopted Common Core Curriculum at the K-12 level.

4 Tuning CA arrived with a kick-off at CSU San Bernardino in May 2013. Participating institutions include CSUs San Bernardino and Pomona, UC Riverside, Riverside CC, and Copper Mountain College.
Rapidly following denial is anger, and Miller found plenty of evidence of that as well in the literature of the early and mid-1980s. She discusses the “sullen anger” on her own campus – the University of Virginia – as both faculty and administrators fought this change to OBE. Why? Because OBE requires accountability, and Miller sees one of the biggest problems with this approach is our “collective intellectual hubris. We are shocked—shocked!—that anyone should question our work.” The “college professor” has held a vaunted position in society as the untouchable, all-knowing scholar and shaper-of-minds, yet our best professors – those who are the most engaging and popular and successful - are often the first to admit how much they have to learn.

Ross Edgerton suggests also that “we were at that time so far from being accountable that we hadn’t even ‘developed a language for discussing these matters in a way that is intelligible to external constituencies.’” (qtd. in Miller). Certainly that language has developed, yet not everyone has learned it. How do we know? At the last Learning Assessment Committee meeting, we asked committee members to participate in a fill-in-the-blank exercise using the vocabulary of assessment and accountability. The collective results for the group fell around the “D+” area.

Anger also stems from the mistaken impression that OBE is standards-based education. Many have assumed that in buying into OBE, we lose our academic freedom, but that is not the case. We know that students learn in different ways and through different approaches, so it doesn’t make any sense to force rigid standards such as those found in some of our most poorly performing K-12 systems.

Actually, outcomes-based education celebrates innovation, new approaches, and change. It calls for more flexibility and fluidity while embracing academic freedom. That is why, rather than a laundry list of objectives, OBE calls for one or two all-encompassing outcomes that describe what a student will know or be able to do at the end of a course, and it ideally suggests that the assessment of those outcomes should be authentic— that is, allow the students to demonstrate their knowledge or skills in a real-world way as well as providing instructors with a means to identify gaps in student knowledge and abilities.

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5 Reference to the February 2012 meeting.
BARGAINING

Miller then noted that in the early to mid-1990s, there is evidence of “bargaining” in the literature. She explains, “institutions were bargaining, in effect saying to both state officials and accreditors, ‘We’ll minimally comply with your demands if you’ll then leave us alone.’”

Looking at our own history, I think we’re about ten years behind in the movement through these stages; however, I noticed that all of Miller’s references discussed east coast schools. We certainly have pockets of denial and anger on our campus, and we definitely have a large pocket of faculty still in the bargaining stage. These are faculty who argue the process of assessing learning outcomes is redundant work already accomplished by giving grades.

This may in fact be true. However, this argument is often offered by instructors who also assert that learning outcomes are separate from curriculum, and that a student can earn a passing grade in a class without achieving the learning outcomes.

There are some flaws in this argument. It seems that if we take grades as demonstration of what students know or are able to do, then a student would not be able to pass a class without achieving the stated learning outcomes, since learning outcomes should represent the culmination of knowledge and skills a student would develop. If we take this approach, then disciplines need to have clear criteria that defines what each grade means, and that means creating standards.

Truthfully, this argument is a form of bargaining that circumvents embracing OBE and the positive changes that can come from it. It’s a way of saying, “just accept my grades and leave me alone.”

DEPRESSION and ACCEPTANCE

Beginning around 1998, Miller sees both depression and acceptance appearing as threads in the literature, in many cases, side by side. As institutions accepted OBE, Miller suggests, “the early descriptions of how this would work were simplistic and unrealistic: Institutions would assess their students’ learning, see how it stacked up against their learning goals, and adjust their programs accordingly.” Does that sound familiar? It’s the process we at East have established.

Miller then explains that even in acceptance there still seems to be a disconnect because “the ongoing, puzzling general failure to use the results in decision making was still being noted” by Trudy Banta and Charles Blaich as recently as January 2011. Miller credits this disconnect in the most vital part of the process: facilitating better student learning by tying together assessment results and institutional planning. Little thought is given to how that process actually takes place so that gaps are identified, dialogue ensues, comprehensive reports are developed, and institution-wide resources are re-allocated for these purposes.
However, she is not without hope as she describes how some of our nation’s top institutions have embraced OBE and changed their cultures. One such school is MIT, which worked against not only faculty resistance but also student resistance as MIT’s culture moved towards active learning heavily supplemented by technology that allowed instructors to quickly judge student knowledge, skills, and abilities and make instructional adjustments. Approximately ten years after MIT began this movement, the university has developed such confidence in their technology-based learning process that they have opened it for the public at large to experience.

NILOA recently recognized approximately ten schools for their innovative approaches to OBE, and a new model for learning outcomes assessment is emerging.

The schools that have embraced OBE and created institutional change as a result of learning outcomes assessment have done so by taking a broad approach. These schools have worked hard to define collective learning outcomes, either by openly adopting the AACU’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes or by creating collective outcomes through faculty and student surveys and focus groups (Mesa Community College, AZ). By carefully defining the institutional learning outcomes, they have defined the learning experience, and so most have turned to the model of how and where a course fits into that whole learning experience rather than how a course serves only a smaller population of students (Portland State University). Some have abandoned summative assessments (end-of-course results) except at capstone courses and instead have turned their focus to formative assessments (during-the-course results) and created opportunities for dialogue on how the learning experience is modified to meet the present needs of students (University of Texas at Austin).

In making these changes, these schools have been able to use learning outcome assessments to help explain why students perform the way they do and what effective remedies will help them succeed.

In many ways, the OBE movement is much like scientific-inquiry or detective work. It can be used to investigate problems and test solutions. It can be used to tell us far more about our students and the barriers and challenges they face than we can get from our traditional interaction. It can help us identify solutions that work by providing evidence of success in engaging and innovative practice.