

The 2<sup>nd</sup> East Asian International Conference on  
Teacher Education Research

Title: Student needs and Objective Based  
Learning (OBL)—Tensions, compliance  
and professional Judgement

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## Main focus of the study

- What kind of tensions do university teaching staff perceive or encounter when implementing OBL courses? For example: Is OBL student-centred or professionally guided?
- How do they resolve them?
- Implications for OBL reform?

## OBL as student-centred

- Spady (1994) puts it,
- "Outcome-based Education means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for student to be able to do, then organising the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens."

## Phases of OBL

- First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviours, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created.
- Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome.
- Third, students will then be tested to see if they attain the mastery level of each outcome.
- Fourthly, upon completion of learner outcomes a student is proclaimed to graduate from the course.

## Methodology

- Interpretive—discourse analysis method
- 20 teaching staff at different professorial rank in the institute were interviewed as to such kind of possible or real tensions and the ways they resolved or prefer to resolve those tensions

## Interview questions

- Questions asked in the interviews included:
  1. According to the literature, OBL has been portrayed as student-centred? Do you agree to this view? In what ways do you think OBL courses are student-centred?
  2. In OBL learning framework, do you think students can have a say on the course intended outcomes, teaching and learning activities, teaching content and assessment methods? On what occasion? And when should professional judgment prevail over students' needs and voices? Why?
  3. Do you feel a kind of tension when students think otherwise in terms of the course intended learning outcomes, teaching content and assessment methods? How do you resolve the tensions?

## The downside of OBL

- Amidst its many criticisms, the Outcome-based learning (OBL) has been criticized as being designed by exclusive groups and then superimposed on cynical and defensive teachers and students (Robinson, 2003).
- Ecclestone (1999) remarks that the space for students and their teachers to think for themselves, to question, to challenge and to define their own outcomes is becoming the preserve of elitists, much to the negligence of students' needs.

In Smylie's (1999) 'Teachers' stress in a time of reform' in 'Understanding and preventing teacher burnout— a source book of international research & practice' edited by Vanderberghe & Huberman

- French and his colleagues (1974) define stress as 'goodness of fit' between an individual and the environment
- In other words, stress may occur if there is a lack of fit between the needs, goals and abilities of an individual on the one hand and the resources and demands of the environment on the other

- Stress as a derivative of conditions that are perceived to disrupt or pose risk to an individual's personal and social values or to their conceptions of meaning and order (Lazarus, 1966)

## Sources of stress, tensions and dilemmas for teachers— in Smylie

- Role conflict (e.g. Bryne, 1994)
- Role ambiguity (e.g. Greenberg, 1984)
- Constraints on autonomy (e.g. Dworkin et al, 1990)
- Overload (e.g. Sarason, 1985)
- Professional support and preparation (e.g. Woods, 1989)

## One source of tension particular to OBL— teachers' beliefs

- Teaching staff in the universities who argue for a more open-ended ways of defining what should be learned would feel a kind of tension over the issue '**Who has the right to decide what to teach?**'
- In other words, is OBL student-centred or guided by professional judgment?

## Another source of tension

- Another source of tensions may occur when students think differently about the specified course intended outcomes, teaching content and assessment tasks from those specified in the module handbook

## Findings

- Role conflict—little tension
- Role ambiguity—little tension
- Constraints on autonomy—**some tension felt**
- Overload—little tension
- Professional preparation and support—**some tension felt**

- Most of the respondents claimed they perceived or experienced little tensions
- Because most of the tensions can be resolved at the classroom level
- Still there are some cases in which stresses, tensions and dilemmas are almost insurmountable (see overleaf)

## Constraints on autonomy --sense of powerlessness or lack of control

- Case One—an SEN course
  - The cohort contains both teachers and social workers, creating a gap for what should be taught
  - In the end, the course needs re-examination at the programme level
- Case Two—a PGDE course
  - The teaching team wanted to try out an assessment-driven pedagogy by including short quizzes in the assessment tasks
  - The students showed disgruntle for there are more assessment than the previous years
  - In the end, teaching team had to use 'half-persuasion, half-coercion' to convince the students that the quizzes are good for their learning

- Case Three—an Ed.D. course
  - One student wanted to learn completely different things in a course on 'Critical study of curriculum policies'—how to write an academic paper
  - the lecturer concerned happily complied with his requests by giving him the necessary input

## Professional preparation and support

- Two of the interviewees felt they were left to experiment OBL on their own—a bottom-up initiative without clear guidelines and no blueprint to follow
- The Institute also failed to inculcate a supportive culture for colleagues to exchange views, practice and ways of solving problems of OBL

## Implications for reform practice

- More departmental and institutional support and dialogue in understanding and implementing OBL
- More teachers' and students' input in formulating the OBL outcomes and the components (teaching content, T/L methods and assessment tasks)
- An eclectic balance between students' needs and professional judgment by individual lecturers at classroom level

