Does Outcomes Based Teaching and Learning Make a Difference in Students’ Learning Approach?

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Abstract. This paper investigates whether instructors’ adoption of outcomes based teaching and learning (OBTL) has any impact on university students’ deep learning approach, which is highly correlated with students’ learning outcomes. A multi-method model with a combination of qualitative and quantitative design was adopted, using document analysis, interviews, and survey. The analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) results suggested that regardless individual differences, students would adjust their learning approaches and study behaviors in response to the classroom teaching and learning environment. Students in more “OBTL courses” were more likely to adopt deep learning approaches in their study of a particular course.

Keywords: OBTL, Student Learning Approach, Student Learning Experience.

1 Introduction

Higher education in Hong Kong has been going through tremendous changes since Hong Kong’s re-integration to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. The education reforms have covered nearly every aspect of the entire education system -- academic structures, curricula, teaching and learning, assessments, and financing. One of the most profound moves was initiated by funding and monitoring agency of the tertiary sector -- the University Grants Committee, which recommended that Hong Kong’s eight publicly funded tertiary institutions adopt an outcome based approach to student learning (OBASL) in order to provide a learner-centered educational experience for students.

The higher education community of Hong Kong has been hiring external consultants, conducting workshops and seminars and providing various resources to promote the implementation of OBASL. Despite these efforts, some academics have been resistant to the adoption of a unified pedagogical approach. Although successful experience of using OBASL was reported from other countries, such experiences were largely from K-12 education [1]. The Western Australian government’s recent move to abandon most of its outcome based education (OBE) system for upper school [2] has further discouraged the university community in Hong Kong to adapt to the OBASL.
Previous studies on OBASL were largely perceptual and anecdotal and there is a lack of empirical data for the argument that the application of the OBASL approach would have any positive impact on students’ learning approaches or would lead to enhanced students learning experiences. Our current study explores whether instructors’ adoption of outcome based teaching and learning (OBTL), as the project is called in our institution, has any impact on university students’ learning. The result of the study will help the higher education community in Hong Kong to make objective choices as to whether to embrace this paradigm shift to student-centred teaching and learning.

2 Literature Review

Outcomes based teaching and learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the achievement of the pre-determined learning outcomes. It is concerned with curriculum design and tries to ensure that the course contents, delivery, activities, and assessments are all aligned to help facilitate students’ achievement of specific intended learning outcomes [3]. OBTL corresponds closely to the outcome based education (OBE), which has its roots in the competency-based movement introduced in the late 60’s and has been recognized as a model to restructure education, mostly at K-12 level. OBE focuses on measuring students’ performances empirically irrespective of teaching styles, whereas OBTL is concerned with the process of teaching and learning: teaching is not a matter of knowledge transmission but of engaging students in active learning [4]. However, OBTL has been mistakenly regarded as OBE and been criticized by various scholars [2, 5].

One of the major underpinning concepts of OBTL is constructive alignment, which is derived from the principles of the constructivism in learning and the alignment in the design of teaching and assessments. Biggs and Tang [4] stated that instructors adopting constructive alignment shall clearly specify intended learning outcomes, design the learning activities that are appropriate for the tasks so that students could construct their knowledge and achieve the outcomes, and establish assessment criteria for giving feedback to the learners. According to Biggs and Tang [4], criterion-based referencing for assessment is regarded as a major principle under the framework of OBTL.

OBTL, as a pedagogical approach, has been taken as an effective and pragmatic way of designing curricula, delivering teaching and documenting the results of students’ learning [6]; it also has been criticized for imposing a rigid model and excessive demands on teachers in terms of specification of outcomes, assessment and record keeping [7]; restricting and inhibiting emergent learning outcomes [5]. OBTL has further been blamed for giving a false sense of accountability when assessment method was used inappropriately [2]. Very few empirical studies address whether OBTL has any impact on students’ learning.

Despite the various criticism of OBTL, the aim of any pedagogical approach is to facilitate students to achieve learning outcomes, which are directly associated with both the teaching context and students’ learning approaches. Schmeck [8] took learning approach as an unchangeable style regardless of immediate learning context and tasks, and Marton and Saljo [9] regarded it as entirely contextual and situational.