

The Role of Outcomes in Learning Communication Skills: A Quantitative Investigation of Learners at the University of Johannesburg, RSA

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Abstract

This paper explores the role played by outcomes in the effective teaching and learning of the subject Communication Skills. Communication Skills is offered as a service subject to learners at various institutions of higher learning.

Although learners generally benefit from learning Communication Skills, the researcher has found that a considerable number of learners doing the subject, do not exude the envisaged enthusiasm and dedication when they are still doing the subject. Research was, then, conducted to investigate the link between the clarification of outcomes (or lack of it) by educators and the learners' enthusiasm in the subject Communication Skills.

A quantitative research approach was used, in which questionnaires were distributed to 156 learners registered for the Subject Communication Skills during the 2004 academic year at the University of Johannesburg.

The results reveal that outcomes play a crucial role in arousing enthusiasm and motivation in learners.

Introduction

Communication Skills is offered as a service subject to learners at various institutions of higher learning (e.g. universities, universities of technology and colleges). Various institutions use different names to refer to the subject (e.g. Communication, English Communication, Business Communication, Communication in English, Communication and etc.). In this paper, the subject is referred to as Communication Skills. Even though the subject's name may differ from institution to institution, the contents and outcomes are basically the same. A service subject is one that does not provide learners with career specific technical skills, but gives them a range of skills that they need to have in addition to their career-specific skills, in order to help them to become better professionals in their chosen careers. The subject combines language,

interpersonal and organisational communication skills. The main aim of the subject is to improve learners' communication and language skills, thereby moulding them into well rounded professionals who will contribute meaningfully to both the South African and global economies.

South African society constantly undergoes change and the education and training arenas are no exception. There has been a radical transformation of education and training. One of the most challenging aspects of this transformation is the adoption of an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) approach that underpins the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (Le Grange & Reddy, 1998:1). OBE is mainly based on the attainment of learning outcomes. Outcomes are the end products of the learning process. They state clearly what skills, knowledge and values a learner should be able to demonstrate and apply appropriately (Le Grange & Reddy, 1998:38). Assessment, which is central to the achievement of outcomes, is the way information is gathered to decide whether the learning outcomes have been properly attained.

Statement of the Problem

Although learners generally benefit from learning Communication Skills, the researcher has found that a considerable number of learners doing the subject, do not exude the envisaged enthusiasm and dedication when they are still doing the subject. In fact, some of the learners consider it a soft subject that deserves the least of their attention. It is only when entering the workplace, after completing their studies or during their experiential learning, that they realize how important the subject is.

Literature Study

According to Jacobs, Vakalisa and Gawe (2004:89) the outcome refers to the statement of desired tasks, skills or set of behaviours which learners are required to demonstrate at the end of a learning experience. Outcomes make it clear that the focus is on learners learning rather than on educators teaching.

Since OBE is meant to be transparent, the way in which educators teach and the learning materials they use need to always make the outcomes clear to learners (Sieborger & Macintosh, 2004:56). Outcomes need to clearly state what learners need to do and how they will be assessed. Once the outcomes have been clarified, educators will be able to trace their steps backwards from that outcome. Thus, OBE designs learning backwards from the end and not forwards from the beginning - hence the Design Down/Deliver Up principle. According to Kramer (1999:26), the intention behind the Design Down/Deliver Up principle is that we never lose sight of the outcome we are trying to achieve.

According to Lubisi, Wedekind, Parker and Gultig (1997:10), the way in which outcomes are formulated is crucial. They should be clear to educators, learners and anyone else. There should be no ambiguity as to what the outcome is and what it will look like when it has been achieved. This means that outcomes must be worded in clearly understandable, measurable and observable language. Outcomes must state what learners do, not their ability, because we cannot see anyone's ability, we can only see what they do (Kramer, 1999:25)

Since a learner's performance is measured against outcomes, which are themselves criteria, the outcomes can be used by the learner to make judgements about his/her performance.

According to Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe (2004:90), outcomes motivate learners to achieve purposes contained in the outcomes. They can even transform the most demotivated learners into enthusiastic learners if their educator continuously reminds them what the intended outcomes are, allows them to experience a growing confidence and status as their own competence increases (Muthukrishra in Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe, 2004:90).

Outcomes instill a sense of purpose in both educators and learners by enabling them to distinguish between trivial and important activities, and make them aware of the priorities on which they need to focus (Jacobs, Gawe & Vakalisa, 2000:30).

Outcomes provide educators with practical guidelines on the content, methods and media that need to be used (Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe, 2004:90).

In actual practice, outcomes facilitate communication between educators, learners and other interest groups. They also make it possible for educators to discuss and plan lessons together because they create common ground and terminology around which they can structure their decisions (Jacobs, Gawe & Vakalisa, 2000:31).

The assessment of learners centers entirely upon outcomes because outcomes describe the goals that the learners are supposed to achieve. A central role of assessment is to determine whether or not these outcomes have been achieved (Lubisi, Wedekind, Parker & Gultig, 1997:14).

Outcomes form the basis for the evaluation of programmes, units and lessons. Since ends are more important than means in outcomes-based education, a programme is undoubtedly on the wrong track if very few or none of the learners in a class achieve the outcomes of the programme. When this happens, evaluators of the programme use outcomes as a starting point to investigate the reasons for the failure of the programme in order to revamp it (Jacobs, Gawe & Vakalisa, 2000:31).

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher used the quantitative approach in this study. Questionnaires were distributed to learners.

Population and Sampling

Population

The population consisted of learners registered at the Doornfontein campus of the University of Johannesburg. These learners were registered for the subject Communication Skills during the 2004 academic year. The necessary arrangements were made with educators for the selected classes for the distribution of questionnaires to learners.

Sampling

The researcher used simple random sampling as a probability sampling technique. Three classes in which learners were doing the subject Communication Skills during the 2004 academic year were selected. All the learners in this study were first year learners. The researcher selected 156 learners spread over three classes. These classes consisted of learners from the following departments: Civil Engineering, Radiography, and Somatology. Questionnaires were then distributed to learners in the three classes.

Data Collection

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed to the learners. The questionnaires included statements to which respondents had to respond by choosing from the following options: always, sometimes and never.

Literature Study

A literature study was done to determine the views of different authors on the role played by outcomes in teaching and learning.

Data Analysis

Cross-tabulations were the main statistical method used to analyse data. These were used to compare the responses of learners from different courses/diploma groups. Frequency tables were also used to illustrate the overall response of learners.

Results and Findings

Responses from learners

Table 1.1 shows the numbers and percentages of completed questionnaires that were returned by learners doing Civil Engineering, Radiography and Somatology.

Table 1.1 Frequency distribution for learners who completed the questionnaires

		Frequencies			
		Course			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Civil Engineering	65	41.7	41.7	41.7
	Somatology	27	17.3	17.3	59.0
	Radiography	64	41.0	41.0	100.0
	Total	156	100.0	100.0	

41.7% of Civil Engineering, 17.3% of Somatology, and 41.0% of Radiography questionnaires were completed and returned. A total of 156 completed questionnaires were returned.

Definition of outcomes

Question: The educator clearly defines the outcomes for each lecture (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.2 illustrates the learners' responses to the question about how often the educator clearly defined the outcomes for each lecture.

Table 1.2 Definition of outcomes

			The educator clearly defines the outcomes for each lecture			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	40	24	1	65
		% within Course	61.5%	36.9%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	7	18	1	26
		% within Course	26.9%	69.2%	3.8%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	38	26	0	64
		% within Course	59.4%	40.6%	0%	100.0%
Total	Count	85	68	2	155	
	% within Course	54.8%	43.9%	1.3%	100.0%	

Most of the Civil Engineering and Radiography learners indicated that their educators clearly defined the outcomes for each lecture, while a minority of Somatology learners said so. On the whole, Somatology learners felt that the outcomes were not always clearly defined.

Different assessment methods

Question: Different assessment methods are used by the educator (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.3 illustrates the responses of learners to the question about how often different assessment methods were used by their educators.

Table 1.3 Different assessment methods

			Different assessment methods are used by the educator		Total
			Always	Sometimes	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	58	7	65
		% within Course	89.2%	10.8%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	19	7	26
		% within Course	73.1%	26.9%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	57	7	64
		% within Course	89.1%	10.9%	100.0%
Total	Count	134	21	155	
	% within Course	86.5%	13.5%	100.0%	

Respondents from the three groups generally felt that different assessment methods were used by their educators, although the response from Somatology learners was relatively less positive.

Encouraging active participation from learners

Question: The educator invites us to actively participate during lectures (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.4 illustrates the responses of learners to the question as to whether the educator invited them to actively participate during lectures.

Table 1.4 Encouraging active participation from learners

Course		The educator invites us to actively participate during lectures		Total
		Always	Sometimes	
Civil Engineering	Count	50	15	65
	% within Course	76.9%	23.1%	100.0%
Somatology	Count	16	10	26
	% within Course	61.5%	38.5%	100.0%
Radiography	Count	48	16	64
	% within Course	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	114	41	155
	% within Course	73.5%	26.5%	100.0%

On the whole, all the groups responded positively to this question. There was, however, somewhat of a difference between Somatology and the other two groups, since Somatology learners responded a little less positively. As expected, a higher percentage of Somatology learners than Civil Engineering and Radiography said that their educator did not always invite them to participate actively during lectures.

Involving learners in assessment

Question: The educator involves learners in assessment (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.5 illustrates the learners' responses to the question about how often their educators involved them in assessment.

Table 1.5 Involving learners in assessment

			The educator involves learners in assessment			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	36	28	1	65
		% within Course	55.4%	43.1%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	8	14	4	26
		% within Course	30.8%	53.8%	15.4%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	33	23	8	64
		% within Course	51.6%	35.9%	12.5%	100.0%
Total	Count	77	65	13	155	
	% within Course	49.7%	41.9%	8.4%	100.0%	

Civil Engineering and Radiography learners, again, responded more positively than Somatology learners. Overall, Civil Engineering learners responded slightly more positively than the other two groups.

Learning from lectures

Question: I learn a lot from my lectures (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.6 illustrates learners' responses to the question as to whether they learned a lot from lectures.

Table 1.6 Learning from lectures

			I learn a lot from my lectures			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	46	18	1	65
		% within Course	70.8%	27.7%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	12	14	0	26
		% within Course	46.2%	53.8%	0%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	37	26	1	64
		% within Course	57.8%	40.6%	1.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	95	58	2	155	
	% within Course	61.3%	37.4%	1.3%	100.0%	

Most of the Civil Engineering learners felt that they always learned a lot from their lectures. There was, generally, a negative response from Somatology learners, with most of them saying that they did not always learn a lot from their lectures.

Learning from feedback

Question: I learn a lot from feedback provided by my educator (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.7 illustrates the learners' responses to the question about whether they learned from feedback provided by their educators.

Table 1.7 Learning from feedback

			I learn a lot from feedback provided by my educator			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	43	21	1	65
		% within Course	66.2%	32.3%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	10	15	1	26
		% within Course	38.5%	57.7%	3.8%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	33	27	4	64
		% within Course	51.6%	42.2%	6.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	86	63	6	155	
	% within Course	55.5%	40.6%	3.9%	100.0%	

Again, Civil Engineering learners responded more positively than the other two groups. Somatology learners, on the whole, responded negatively since most of the learners in this group felt that they did not always learn from their educator's feedback.

Understanding the importance of assessment

Question: I clearly understand the importance of my educator's assessment (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.8 illustrates the learners' responses with regard to whether they clearly understood the importance of their educator's assessment.

Table 1.8 Understanding the importance of assessment

			I clearly understand the importance of my educator's assessment			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	48	16	1	65
		% within Course	73.8%	24.6%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	13	13	0	26
		% within Course	50.0%	50.0%	0%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	39	21	4	64
		% within Course	60.9%	32.8%	6.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	100	50	5	155	
	% within Course	64.5%	32.3%	3.2%	100.0%	

Civil Engineering learners, once again, responded more positively than the other two groups, with over 70% of the learners saying that they always clearly understood the importance of their educator's assessment. Somatology learners, again, responded relatively negatively; half of these learners indicated that they did not always clearly understand the importance of their educator's assessment.

Understanding the importance of assessment

Question: I clearly understand the importance of my educator's assessment (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.9 illustrates the learners' responses with regard to whether they clearly understood the importance of their educator's assessment.

Table 1.9 Understanding the importance of assessment

			I clearly understand the importance of my educator's assessment			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	48	16	1	65
		% within Course	73.8%	24.6%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	13	13	0	26
		% within Course	50.0%	50.0%	0%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	39	21	4	64
		% within Course	60.9%	32.8%	6.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	100	50	5	155	
	% within Course	64.5%	32.3%	3.2%	100.0%	

Civil Engineering learners, once again, responded more positively than the other two groups, with over 70% of the learners saying that they always clearly understood the importance of their educator's assessment. Somatology learners, again, responded relatively negatively; half of these learners indicated that they did not always clearly understand the importance of their educator's assessment.

Provision of outcomes in learner guides

Question: Learner guides provide clear outcomes for each learning unit (always/sometimes/never)

Table 1.10 illustrates learners' responses to the question about whether learner guides provided clear outcomes for each learning unit.

Table 1.10 Outcomes provided in learner guides

			Learner guides provide clear outcomes for each learning unit			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	44	20	1	65
		% within Course	67.7%	30.8%	1.5%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	12	11	3	26
		% within Course	46.2%	42.3%	11.5%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	45	17	2	64
		% within Course	70.3%	26.6%	3.1%	100.0%
Total	Count	101	48	6	155	
	% within Course	65.2%	31.0%	3.9%	100.0%	

Thus, there were varying responses from the three groups to the question about whether learner guides provided clear outcomes for each learning unit. Civil Engineering and Radiography responded more positively than Somatology learners. Radiography learners were the most positive, whereas Somatology learners were the least positive.

Provision of assessment methods in learner guides

Question: Learner guides clearly specify the assessment methods (always/sometimes/never)

In table 1.11, the learners' responses to the question about whether learner guides specified assessment methods, are illustrated.

Table 1.11 Assessment methods provided in learner guides

			Learner guides clearly specify the assessment methods			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	39	26	0	65
		% within Course	60.0%	40.0%	0%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	15	7	4	26
		% within Course	57.7%	26.9%	15.4%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	51	9	4	64
		% within Course	79.7%	14.1%	6.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	105	42	8	155	
	% within Course	67.7%	27.1%	5.2%	100.0%	

Again, Radiography learners were the most positive about their learner guides always clearly specifying assessment methods, while Somatology had the highest percentage of learners who were the least positive about their learner guides.

Provision of assessment methods in learner guides

Question: Learner guides clearly specify the assessment methods (always/sometimes/never)

In table 1.12, the learners' responses to the question about whether learner guides specified assessment methods, are illustrated.

Table 1.12 Assessment methods provided in learner guides

			Learner guides clearly specify the assessment methods			Total
			Always	Sometimes	Never	
Course	Civil Engineering	Count	39	26	0	65
		% within Course	60.0%	40.0%	0%	100.0%
	Somatology	Count	15	7	4	26
		% within Course	57.7%	26.9%	15.4%	100.0%
	Radiography	Count	51	9	4	64
		% within Course	79.7%	14.1%	6.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	105	42	8	155	
	% within Course	67.7%	27.1%	5.2%	100.0%	

Again, Radiography learners were the most positive about their learner guides always clearly specifying assessment methods, while Somatology had the highest percentage of learners who were the least positive about their learner guides.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clear definition of outcomes

It is evident from the data analysis that there is a problem with regard to the clarification of outcomes in Somatology. This could either be due to their educator not always defining the outcomes for a particular section of work or the outcomes themselves not being clearly defined. Even though about 60% of Civil Engineering and Radiography learners said the outcomes were always clearly defined, this figure is also a cause for concern since it implies that about 40% felt that the outcomes were not always clear. The different responses by different groups indicate that different Communication Skills educators state the outcomes differently. The outcomes, as Kramer (1999: 25) asserts, must be worded in clear, measurable and observable language; this was not always the case in all the three diploma groups.

It is clear that all the Communication Skills educators need to understand adequately how to state the outcomes clearly and unambiguously. It is, therefore, recommended that specific workshops on the clarification of outcomes be organised for the educators.

After receiving the necessary training in the clarification of outcomes, educators need to clearly state outcomes at the beginning of each lecture. Since outcomes are central to assessment in OBE, the clarification of outcomes will, to a certain extent, ensure clarification of assessments.

Different assessment methods

All the respondents seem to have used different assessment methods, even though the 16% difference between Somatology learners and the other two groups shows that the Communication Skills educator involved with the Somatology learners needs to vary the assessments a little more.

In addition to stating outcomes for each lecture, educators also need to specify the assessment tools to be used. Learners do not only need to know the outcomes, but they also have to know how they are expected to demonstrate the achievement of these outcomes. Different outcomes require different assessment methods. It is, therefore, essential for educators to ensure that they utilise appropriate assessment methods that are designed specifically to assess each outcome.

Active participation from learners

Educators appear to have encouraged learners to participate actively during lectures. It is, however, somewhat worrying that there was a 15% difference between Somatology and the other two groups. According to Jacobs *et al.*, (2000:2), the success of the teaching-learning activity depends on the educator's ingenuity (or lack of it) in creating a classroom climate that is conducive to active participative learning by the learner.

It would be advisable for Communication Skills educators, particularly those involved in the teaching of Somatology learners, to be encouraged to foster active participation from learners by, *inter alia*, clearly stating the outcomes for each lecture.

According to Jacobs, Vakalisa and Gawe (2004:91), clear statement of outcomes encourages learners' active participation by arousing enthusiasm in learners and facilitating communication between educators and learners.

Jacobs *et al.*, (2000:4) assert that participative learning requires that the class be designed and managed in a manner that encourages learners to express their own views on the content without fear of intimidation from either the educator or their peers. They do not agree with the notion that there is an answer to every question.

Involvement of learners in assessment

It is evident that there was a lack of learner involvement in assessment, with only about half of Civil Engineering and Radiography learners stating that their educators always involved them in assessment. Somatology learners seem to be considerably less involved in assessment since approximately 30% of them felt that they were always involved in assessment.

According to Kramer (1999: 42), in order to ensure that learners are actively involved in their learning, they must also be involved in assessment so that they can gauge the progress they are making. Kramer (1999:48) adds that learners can only monitor their own progress and that of other learners if the outcomes make them fully aware of what they need to do to show that they have attained the set outcomes.

Educators should be encouraged by their departments to involve learners in assessment. According to Le Grange and Reddy (1998:19), assessment in an outcomes-based system is more overt than traditional assessment practices and involves more than one assessor; it includes educator assessment, self and peer assessment. Learners can be involved in assessment through both self assessment and peer assessment. Educators need to ensure that learners' involvement in

assessment is more meaningful by clearly stating what learners should be able to demonstrate to show attainment of learning outcomes.

Learning from feedback provided by educators

Except for Civil Engineering learners, learners did not particularly feel that they always learned effectively from the feedback provided. This was not unexpected because it is consistent with the fact that their educators did not adequately clarify the outcomes for each learning unit. It also appears that feedback was more general in nature, because large numbers of learners did not allow educators enough time to give individual attention to all learners who needed it.

In addition to the reduction of numbers of learners per class, which may not always be possible, the Communication Skills Department needs to ensure that Communication Skills educators are adequately trained in the provision of meaningful feedback. This can be done by, *inter alia*, clarifying outcomes for each lecture. When learners clearly understand outcomes, the likelihood is that they will understand the meaning of assessment and feedback. Educators should also be trained in specific teaching and assessment strategies, which will help them to cope better with larger classes.

Clear outcomes provided in learner guides

It is clear that some learner guides did not provide clear outcomes for each learning unit. Clear outcomes enable learners to gauge their own progress and know exactly what they are expected to do.

Departments need to organise workshops on writing learner guides that are OBE compliant, to ensure that educators know how to word their outcomes properly. According to Jacobs *et al.*, (2000:31), without written outcomes, educators will be unable to establish whether the outcomes have been achieved and, therefore, assessment will be unreliable.

Learners' enthusiasm and motivation

The lack of motivation, particularly among Somatology learners, could have been the result of unclear outcomes. It is evident from Somatology learners' responses that they found that the outcomes were not clearly stated by their Communication Skills educator.

A clear definition of outcomes plays an essential role in the motivation of learners. According to Jacobs *et al.*, (2000:30), outcomes arouse in learners a desire to achieve the purposes contained in the outcomes. Muthukrishna (in Jacobs *et al.*, 2000:30) states that even the most demotivated learners can be transformed into eager learners if an enthusiastic educator continuously reminds them of the intended outcomes, and allows them to experience growing confidence and status as their own competence increases.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research mainly focused on the role that outcomes play in the teaching and learning of the subject Communication Skills.

The study attempts to provoke further debate on the role of outcomes in higher education. Since this study only focused on the subject Communication Skills, further research is invited on the role played by outcomes in other subjects at various institutions of higher learning.

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