

Learning outcomes: A Case Study from Arab Open University

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Abstract: *This paper is organized as follows: the first part gives an overview of the AOU, the concept of Open Learning and the structure of the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS). The second part addresses the issue of the learning outcomes in some details highlighting the concept, advantages of learning outcomes and the relationship between learning outcomes and methods of assessment as employed at the AOU. The third part addresses the field work, presented in a form of questionnaire to be given to students. Results are then tabulated, followed by discussion. The final part addresses the implication and recommendation of the study.*

Symbols frequently used in this article:

AOU: Arab Open University
OU : Open University
TMA: Tutor-Monitored Assignment
QAA: Quality Assurance Agency
FLS : Faculty of Language Studies

1. Learning Outcomes

Perhaps we need to start by defining what is meant by learning outcomes: Learning outcomes refer to knowledge, key or transfer skills, and goals that should be attained at the end of a programme or a particular component of a course within a programme. Learning outcomes, as defined in the literature, are statements that identify what learners at the end of a particular programme or course of study will come to know. According to Adam (2004) learning outcomes concern themselves with the achievements of the learner and they can be elaborated or limited. University of Manchester Institute of Technology (UMIST), 2001 defines learning outcomes as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that is desired outcome of a learning process .University of Warwick (2004) gives a similar definition but they were specific in so far as the skills are concerned.

When the AOU was first inaugurated in the year 2000, the concept of learning outcomes was not widely used. It is only at the beginning of 2005 that two OU professors came to Kuwait and gave a presentation on the concept of leaning outcomes. Four distinct types of learning outcomes were introduced. These are related to knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, key skills

and practical and professional skills. The expected outcomes for every course have been drawn in collaboration with colleagues from the OU. It should be noted that there is an overlap between courses in so far as learning outcomes are concerned, especially those related to key and cognitive skills. We have come to know that the concept has originally been introduced following the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of Britain. All British universities are required to define the expected learning outcomes of each programme and link those to teaching and assessment.

For a number of years the concept of learning objectives as opposed to learning outcomes dominated the scene for decades following taxonomies was introduced by Bloom in 1956 and later by Krathwhol et al (1973). Bloom identified six types of learning. These are well documented in the literature of Higher Education. They can be further classified into two groups which is knowledge comprehension relating to knowledge and understanding while application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation which is relating to key and intellectual skills. Learning outcomes have become the focus of higher education. According to (Miller, 1998) traditional structures are dysfunctional and behind time for change. This suggests that students and their learning should become the focus of our planning which necessarily includes instructions, the policy decisions that we make, assessment criteria that we develop, facilitations we provide and so on.

1.1 Assessment and learning outcomes

In recent years, assessment has gained importance throughout higher education. Assessment generally is an information feedback method that directs individual students, faculty members and institutions at large about their learning and teaching efficiency. Assessment at the AOU takes the form of several Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), two or more Mid Term Assessments (MTAs) and one or two Final Examinations. TMAs account for 30% of the overall mark while MTAs are given the weight of 20%. Final examinations on the other hand account for the remaining 50%. Although the pass mark is 50% for each module or course, a student must get at least 40% of the final score to pass a module or a course. External examiners have to approve the overall results before they are issued to students. They also need to examine samples of students' work in the different areas before branches can finally issue the results to their students. This particular issue, i.e. the work of external examiners, takes us to the issue of accountability, a term usually used interchangeably with assessment but in my opinion they differ greatly.

Accountability, as it is employed in the literature, refers to a set of procedures reviewers take in order to scrutinize the results of FLS actions and to castigate or reward the faculty based on the outcomes. Accountability proponents (Austin, 1993) and (Ewell, 1997) suggest that assessment for accountability is basically an authoritarian practice to ensure institutional consistency to specified norms and standards. In a nut shell accountability is

how we can prove to OU Validation Services, for instance, that we are meeting both the local and external requirements to have our institution accredited.

Assessment of student learning is an integral part of the learning/teaching process. It is a pivotal process for improving learning and teaching in higher education. This shift of emphasis from learning objectives to learning outcomes has become the focus of international efforts for higher education accrediting organization. FLS Course Chairs are responsible for preparing TMAs and final examinations in collaboration with the relevant external examiners. Contribution is normally sought from FLS academic tutors in relation to final examination.

2. Purpose of the Study

Since the establishment of the AOU, all OU content-based courses were accompanied with clear learning outcomes which were also incorporated into both the students' and tutors' course guides. However, there has been a consensus feeling among academicians, particularly the FLS branch program coordinators that such learning outcomes were not taken seriously. This study being the first of its kind at AOU, endeavours to reveal any significant results to the extent of awareness of FLS students to their learning outcomes. The result of the present research paper will no doubt be of significant value to AOU educational specialists pay more attention into ways by which FLS course tutors and students alike become more significantly familiar with the learning outcomes of the courses they are undergoing and such approach may lead to better understanding of the subject matter of their courses.

2.1 Limitations of this study

The study is limited to the context of the AOU branch in Saudi Arabia. Participants who responded to the questionnaire are students majoring in English and who are currently registered (Spring Semester 2009) and studying OU based courses (specialized).

3. Characteristics of the sample

Subjects who took part in this study are males and females. Their ages range between 18 and 35. Prior to joining the Branch Department, they had already obtained their local secondary school certificate or its equivalent and had either taken an intensive course in English or were exempted on the basis of the placement test score, a TOEFL test score or an IELTS score. Some are Saudis and many are the sons and daughters of the immigrant work force namely from Arab and non-Arab countries.

3.1 Questionnaire

For the purpose of assessing students perception of learning outcomes, a questionnaire was designed to be completed by students who are studying OU based courses in class. Colleagues who helped in the administration of the

questionnaire were asked to give it to students at the end of the first lesson .The purpose was obvious as some of the items relate to the activities during the first lesson. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items covering matters related to learning outcomes and related matters. Students were required to choose what they see appropriate from a 5 point scale, denoting agreement and disagreement and one point expresses lack of knowledge.

The questionnaire was originally written in Arabic. The purpose was obvious to make sure that all students understood the content of each item in a none ambiguous way. Before the questionnaire was administered, it was given to two colleagues who are full professors in the field of Linguistics; one of them is the dean of the Faculty of Language Studies /Arab Open University. They both found it to be very comprehensive and useful for a research paper which is what is intended for. Their comments certainly confirmed the content validity of the items of the questionnaire and the purpose for which it was designed. However, in order to measure face validity of the variables tested, in this case learning outcomes the questionnaire was also shown to four members of the Faculty of Language Studies at KSA branch. They all confirmed the face and content validity of the list of items on the questionnaire in that they measure what it is supposed to measure.

Copies of the questionnaires were given to the Branch students who are specializing in English Language and Literature and taking OU based courses in both Linguistics and Literature. A total of 127 respondents, out of 350 completed the questionnaires. They were instructed not to write their names so as to be sure of the confidentiality of their responses. This actually led to annotate their answers with additional comments which will be discussed at a later stage in this paper.

3.2 Data analyses

Items, in this case the FLS list of learning outcomes, and responses were coded first and a table was drawn to enter frequency counts onto it. This task was accomplished by two FLS administrative assistants at the Department. The following table below shows these results.

Table 1: Respondents' frequency counts and percentages for the questionnaire items

Learning outcomes	Strongly agree	Agree	Do not know	Strongly disagree	Disagree
I do understand what is meant by Learning Outcomes.	13 (10%)	63 (49.6%)	34 (26.7%)	3 (.02%)	11 (.08%)

I prefer that learning outcomes for the OUUK based-courses are translated into Arabic, so that I know what is required of me to do.	31 (24%)	37 (29%)	11 (.08%)	19 (15%)	24 (18.9%)
Tutors explain learning outcomes for the courses I study in the first face to face tutorial session.	50 (39.4%)	54 (42.5%)	10 (.07%)	6 (.04%)	6 (.04%)
I am aware that there are general learning outcomes for the programme I am enrolled in and specific learning outcomes for each course.	22 (17%)	70 (55%)	30 (23%)	2 (0.015%)	2 (.015%)
I believe that my knowledge of the learning outcomes will help me understand the course material.	58 (45.6%)	50 (39.3%)	14 (11.02%)	3 (2.3%)	1 (0.78%)
It is valuable that the AOU holds an orientation session at the beginning of each semester to explain the overall learning outcomes for each program.	69 (54%)	44 (34.6%)	5 (3.9%)	4 (3.14%)	4 (3.14%)
Every tutor must spend the first half an hour explaining the overall learning outcomes for the course(s) s/he is teaching.	55 (43.3%)	44 (34.6%)	8 (6.2%)	7 (5.5%)	11 (8.66%)
I always remind myself with the learning outcomes for the courses I study by logging onto AOU main site, i.e. www.arabou.org	25 (19.6%)	42 (33%)	23 (18.1%)	17 (13.3%)	19 (14.9%)
I do not know about the existence of this site.	2 (1.5%)	12 (9.44%)	11 (8.66%)	39 (30.7%)	52 (40.9%)
I believe that there is a strong relationship between learning outcomes and methods of assessment such	26 (20.4%)	55 (43.3%)	36 (28.3%)	12 (9.4%)	7 (5.5%)

as MTAs, MTAs and FLS final examinations.					
I find the learning outcomes for Linguistic courses easier than those of Literature.	15 (11.8%)	42 (33%)	41 (32.2%)	12 (9.4%)	14 (11%)
I always discuss with my colleagues at our branch and other branches the course requirements through the students' shared forum.	33 (25.9%)	57 (44.8%)	11 (8.6%)	15 (11.8%)	10 (7.8%)
I always ask my tutor about topics I do not understand.	19 (14.9%)	67 (52.75%)	9 (7.08%)	9 (7.08%)	10 (7.8%)
Before I start doing my TMA, I discuss what is required of me with my colleagues to make sure I have understood the course content.	50 (39.3%)	53 (41.7%)	8 (6.2%)	4 (3.14%)	11 (8.66%)
When I do not find my colleagues helpful, I seek the assistance of others.	27 (21.25%)	50 (39.3%)	5 (3.93%)	19 (14.9%)	23 (18.1%)
I normally find a lot of among colleagues tend to misunderstand the particular TMA requirement.	36 (28.3%)	61 (48.0%)	17 (13.3%)	5 (3.93%)	7 (5.5%)
Their misunderstanding, I believe, is the result of the different levels of Language proficiency among the students.	43 (33.8)	46 (36.2%)	18 (14.15)	7 (5.5%0)	11 (8.6%)
Learning outcomes include understanding the subject matter through basic linguistic and non-linguistic skills.	38 (29.9%)	65 (51.1%)	16 (12.5%)	4 (3.14%)	4 (3.14%)

Internal consistency of the questionnaires

In order to examine the internal consistency of the questionnaire two statistical processes were computed. These were Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients and Split half and Alpha Cronbach reliability coefficients. The two tables below show result. Correlations are significant at the 0.01 and at the 0.05 level of significance as shown in the table with the exception of 1. Split half reliability coefficients yielded 0.66 a relatively high coefficient.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation

No.	Correlation
1	0.110
2	0.478**
3	0.349**
4	0.216*
5	0.571**
6	0.478**
7	0.296**
8	0.462**
9	0.214*
10	0.316**
11	0.241**
12	0.436**
13	0.319**
14	0.400**
15	0.321**
16	0.220*
17	0.318**
18	0.305**

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Reliability

No. of Items	Alpha	Split-half
18	0.64	0.66

4. Discussion and Implications of the Results

A good percentage of the respondents 59% expressed an awareness of the concept of learning outcomes; however, around 27% have no knowledge of such

concept. It is important that all students must be aware of the concept of learning outcomes. On the second item 53% expressed an interest into translating the learning outcomes for the programme and courses in Arabic. Those are mainly students who are still studying their first-level courses, i.e. A123A & A123B. This is not surprising because their English proficiency is still not up to the standard required and it will definitely improve with time. On the other hand, 43% of the respondents disagreed with the idea of having learning outcomes translated into Arabic. It is obvious that these students find no difficulties in English.

A very good percentage of the respondents, i.e. 81%, agreed that their tutors, in fact, explain the expected learning outcomes of each course during the first face-to-face session. 72% of the respondents are aware that there are specific learning outcomes for each course and within the ELL programme as a whole. However, 23% of the respondents do not seem to be aware of this division (course vs. programme). It is important that ELL tutors must make sure that their students become aware of the specific and general learning outcomes. Around 85% of the respondents believe that their knowledge of learning outcomes will help them understand the course material better, while 14% are split between do not know and disagree. 89% think that it is important that an orientation session on learning outcomes for each programme is given at the beginning of each semester. The remaining percentage, around 11%, did not show an agreement. This could be the case that those represent the top 10% of the respondents. 77% of the respondents agreed with the idea that each tutor should spend the first half an hour explaining the expected learning outcomes of the courses s/he is teaching. 52% seem to be aware of the AOU main website address and that they can find the learning outcomes for the programme and the various courses. On the other hand, a substantial percentage of 48% are not aware of this Website as it is also obvious from their answers to the item that follows. Tutors are; therefore, expected to inform the students of the AOU main website and how to find the relevant information. Around 66% of the respondents realized that there is a strong relationship between learning outcomes and the various methods of assessment. The remaining percentage of the respondents does not seem to be aware of such relationship.

The following item is an evaluative judgmental one where respondents were asked to assess the difficulty of the Linguistics courses in comparison with Literature courses. Around 50% of the respondents thought that the learning outcomes for Linguistics to be more difficult than Literature while the remaining 50% thought otherwise. 67% percent of the respondents do ask their tutors about things they do not understand; however, around 15% percent of the respondents maintain they do not normally ask their tutors. This could be the case that those are the top 15% of the respondents and seem not to have any sort of difficulties with the course materials. 81% of the sample maintains that before they do their TMAs, they consult with their classmates to make sure they have understood what is required of them to do. On the other hand, 22% of the respondents do not. It is assumed that those could be the ones who do not need any sort of help.

Around 61% of the sample states they seek the help of others such as private tuition.

It is not totally surprising to see that 76% of the respondents think that there is a lot of misunderstanding among the students to what is required to be done with a particular TMA. Almost the same percentage attributed that to the differences in English Language proficiency on the part of the learners is the case.

Within the limitations of this study, address learning outcomes as perceived by the AOU /SAB students. Overall, participants' responses highlighted an awareness of expected learning outcomes. However, between 28% and 43% of the sample size remains sceptical in so far as the concept as well as the relationship between assessment and learning outcomes. The most significant result of the study clearly implies that the expected learning outcomes of each course should be reinforced at the beginning of each semester. Also, FLS tutors should make sure that their students understand what is required in a particular TMA to the extent that it leaves no doubt or ambiguity. Since the present study has been a pioneering AOU research of its kind, other follow up studies should be encouraged. Other colleagues may use the present research questionnaire as a basis for other studies of a larger scale. The questionnaire test instrument could be given to the students of other branches as well. Such future research may involve separate studies for different levels and separate studies for linguistics and literature courses. Studies showing the differences between students' and tutors' extent of awareness to the concept of learning outcomes should also be undertaken. It will also be interesting to see if studies on gender differences may also reveal results of significant research values.

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