

# Actions Speak Loudly as Words or What do the Verbs in OBE Literature imply?

by  
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## Outcome-Based Education: Where did it come from and what does it mean?

In Minnesota, the State Department of Education and the State Legislature have embraced Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and are in the process of overseeing its implementation in the public schools (S. Eyestone, personal communication). The Minnesota State Department of Education appears to view OBE as "a true revolution in schooling" that "marks the most important change in public education since the advent of the comprehensive high school nearly a century ago" (Schleisman and King, 1990). Once the OBE philosophy becomes adopted throughout the state, which has been mandated by the state legislature, the Minnesota Board of Education plans to establish statewide graduation requirements which must be met by every high school senior in Minnesota in order to graduate. Then, the Minnesota House and Senate Education Committees plan to validate and/or edit these requirements.

Unfortunately, many of us in the classroom have only a vague notion of what exactly Outcome-Based Education is and how it evolved. Although generalized overviews can be reductionist, few of us have the luxury to study a philosophy of teaching—like OBE—in great depth. With that in mind, the purpose of this article is to briefly introduce teachers to the background of OBE and some of the principles which help define it: purpose, criterion for measurement, assessment, accountability and learning objectives.

Historically, the concept of using objectives to plan curriculum has been around for about the past 45 years. It was first developed by Ralph Tyler in his text, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (1949). During the next forty years, and still today, educators develop curriculum according to the specific behavioral objectives they wish to teach, model, and finally, incorporate

into their students' knowledge or ability base. OBE adds to this theory by including a new dimension—assessment or outcomes. Rather than the process of learning, OBE focuses on the product(s) of learning. The three classifications of objectives and goals (outcomes) are knowledge, skills, and attitude (Schleisman & King, 1990).

Since the 1970s, taxpayers, parents, legislators, and business leaders have been concerned that students are graduating without the academic skills (especially reading, writing, and math) necessary to function successfully in society, let alone lead society internationally. This concern led to the Competency-Based Education (CBE) movement, whose philosophy was to make sure students were adequately prepared for life roles such as holding a job, paying taxes, voting, and parenting. Frequently, however, CBE became more of a remediation effort, rather than a challenge to sharpen the skills of all students, especially high achievers. Therefore, while incorporating the principles behind CBE, OBE tried to target maximum rather than minimum competency (Evans, 1992).

There are two primary methods of evaluating competency: by criterion or by norms (average). Norm-referenced outcomes determine success as it relates to everyone else—like grading on a curve. With this type of a model, some students will excel, some students will pass, and some students will fail. The expression criterion-referenced outcomes refers to achieving a specific skill, knowledge base or attitude in order to succeed. Although everyone may perform at various levels, everyone still has the opportunity to pass or succeed. Furthermore, with criterion-referenced outcomes, students don't "pass" or "go on" until they have achieved the designated outcome. For example, most children aren't taught the crawl stroke until they have mastered the skill of floating on their stomachs.

Outcome-Based Education, sometimes referred to as Results-Based Education, adopts the criterion referenced method, which illustrates the underlying philosophy that all children can succeed. The criterion is set so that each student can meet it, rather than some being penalized because they didn't meet the criteria as well or as quickly as their peers. Since success is not based on the performance of others, every student, in theory, can succeed.

The literature available from the Minnesota State Department of Education (1990; 1991a; & 1991b) and the literature written by William Spady, considered the primary developer of OBE (Spady, 1982; Schleisman and King, 1990) clearly state the philosophy and purpose of OBE. Similar to Mastery Learning (ML), OBE was developed by the same group of educational philosophers—Spady, Rubin, Mitchell, Bloome, and others (Spady, 1982; Schleisman and King, 1990). The seeds planted in ML appear to come to fruition in OBE. Like ML, “the fundamental purpose of OBE is to equip all students with the competency, knowledge and orientations that enable them to lead successful lives following their schooling experience” (Spady, 1987). Both philosophies profess that all students can learn all things if given the right amount of time. The only reason some students don’t master a skill is that they were not given adequate time; aptitude denotes rate of learning, not ability to learn (Rubin and Spady, 1984). In both OBE and ML, learning appears to be a linear process; students may not move to another level until they master the skills or concepts at one given level (Rubin and Spady, 1984).

The key difference between the two philosophies seems to be that Mastery Learning was designed for students K-6 and Outcome-Based Education was expanded to include junior and senior high school students (Spady, 1982). The underlying philosophy, or three key premises of OBE, are listed below as they are outlined in the OBE literature:

- 1) All students can learn and succeed.
- 2) Success breeds success.
- 3) Schools control the conditions of success.

(Spady, 1988).

It is important to note that specific learning objectives and their criterion-defined outcomes (i.e., each student will be able to recognize all the consonant letters and sounds) are not defined by the OBE philosophy. Outcomes are defined within each school district, school and classroom; then, they are negotiated through government agencies. (In Minnesota, for example, it is the Board of Education.) Many people who oppose OBE do it on the basis of the specified outcomes—however, the philosophy does not establish outcomes; individuals within specific districts do that. OBE is merely the philosophy giving them a

structure for establishing outcomes. The responsibility and accountability for students meeting these criteria rest in the teachers. “Teachers must exhibit some standard of competency or performance and schools must devise methods of relating expenditures to outcomes” (Ornstein and Levine, 1989). Although teachers usually draft the objectives and outcomes, in some states which have adopted the OBE philosophy, including Minnesota, the state legislature ultimately defines specific learning outcomes.

In conclusion, it appears that OBE is an integral part of our current educational philosophy in Minnesota and may be in the future. Therefore, it is critical that we understand some of its basic principles. First, it goes beyond basing curriculum on objectives into focusing more heavily on the outcomes of those objectives. Second, the outcomes are designed to encompass the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to be adequately prepared for their life roles as parents, voters, and taxpayers. Third, the level of the outcomes should presume a high standard of expectation rather than a minimal or remedial level of competency for all students. Fourth, like Mastery Learning and Competency-Based Education, students must meet the established criteria for one level or skill before they move on to the next one. Fifth, mastery of a given outcome is based on an individual’s performance rather than the group or the norm. Finally, the foundational principle of OBE is that all students can learn and can succeed.

#### **Verbs and other Modalities in OBE Literature: What Stance do They Express toward Literacy?**

As teachers, we must first be aware of our personal biases and prejudices toward the subjects we analyze. Therefore, I must admit that the seed of this research comes from my skepticism of OBE. This skepticism—and at moments, fear—arises from two things. First, after attending an informative conference presented by the Minnesota State Department of Education on OBE, (and they couldn’t define it) I became suspicious. Second, whenever politicians mandate rigid learning outcomes, as they are planning to in Minnesota via OBE, the implications for learning and literacy in general scare me. This dilemma sparked my research and this paper on OBE.

Often, literacy is expressed as something fixed and static—like the contents of a box. On the other hand, literacy is also expressed as something moving, evolving, and dynamic—continually being constructed and reconstructed like the waves of an ocean. In this study, I focus on OBE at the implied level in order to determine the disposition this philosophy of education takes toward learning and literacy. Specifically, I'm analyzing verbs and their tone (modalities) in samples of OBE literature to determine its underlying position toward literacy.

Before looking at the analysis, the tools need to be defined. Modalities are a universal mode of behavior like a tone or an attitude toward something. Verb modalities usually refer to verbs, helping verbs or adverbs, words which better clarify the verbs' tone or meaning. Epistemic describes the degree of force or certainty of an informative proposition. For example, a high epistemic modality might be a statement like "It is certain that. . . ." A low epistemic modality might be a statement like "It is possible that. . . ." Deontic describes the degree of obligation or inclination in an imperative statement—like the difference between a command or a suggestion. For example, a high deontic modality (obligation) might be "You are required to. . . ." A low deontic modality (obligation) might be a statement like "If you like, you may. . . ." An example of a high deontic modality (inclination) might be a statement like "I'm determined to. . . ." An example of a low deontic modality (inclination) might be a statement like "I'm willing to. . . ." (For a more thorough chart, see Appendix A.)

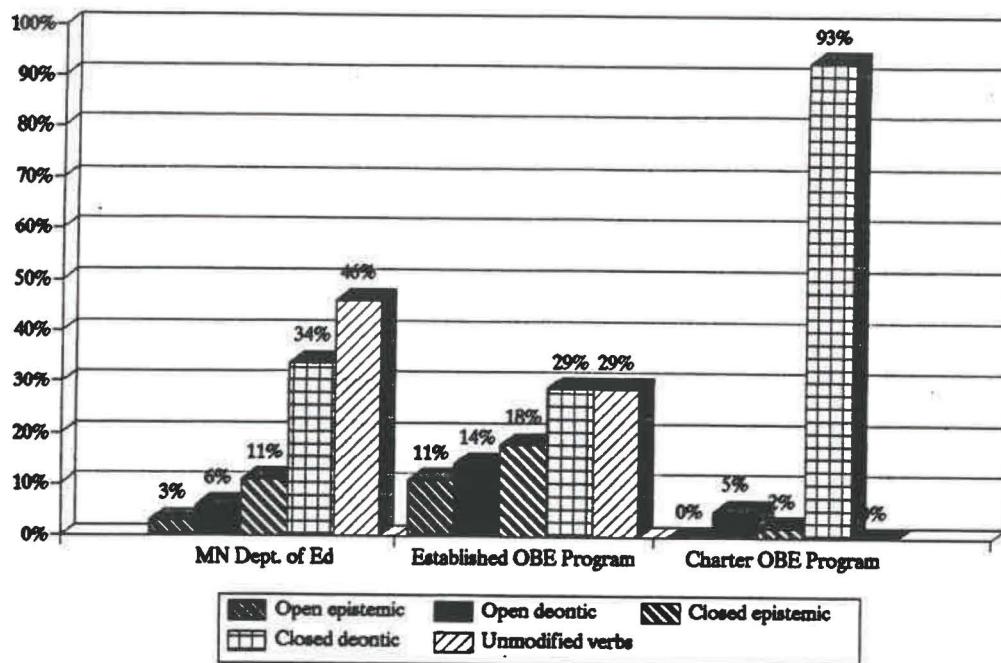
Sample texts chosen were explanatory handouts or a handbook written to explain the philosophy and intent of OBE for its end users—teachers. The sample texts were taken from three groups. The first was the Minnesota State Department of Education; the texts used were three handouts (1-2 pages each). The second group selected was a school district which is said to have one of the most well-established OBE programs in Minnesota. The text analyzed describes the approach to learning through OBE in that specific school district. Finally, a "charter" school district in the process of establishing an OBE approach was used. Since they are currently incorporating the OBE approach, I used the few handouts they had available.

For the analysis, each verb modality which expressed either an epistemic or deontic stance toward learning and literacy was marked and coded. For example, a sentence from one state department handout reads "These teachers believe that if they carry out the five practices (defining outcomes, designing curriculum, delivering instruction, documenting results and determining advancement) then 'All students can succeed'" (Italics mine). Both the verbs believe and determining seem to imply a closed epistemic stance; the statements are indubitably "truth." Can, on the other hand, implies an open deontic stance; the participants (students, in this case) have a choice regarding their actions.

In doing this textual analysis on OBE literature samples, some surprises occurred. First, a sizable portion of each text, especially the Minnesota State Department texts, is written in incomplete sentences. Usually, the missing element in the fragments is a verb which decreased the number of verbs and modalities within the text. So, when a conditional word such as apparently, probably, absolutely, or always appeared in a fragment, it was ignored since the sentence did not contain a verb.

Second, a sizable number of "to be" verbs appeared in the literature with no conditionals whatsoever. The presence of modalities without an adverb to soften verbs such as am, are, and is, comprises a sizable portion of the literature, and weighs heavily on the results. Initially, the unmodified "to be" verbs are listed in a separate category so the reader can see their individual contribution to the final analysis.

## Percentages of Verb Modals in OBE Literature Samples



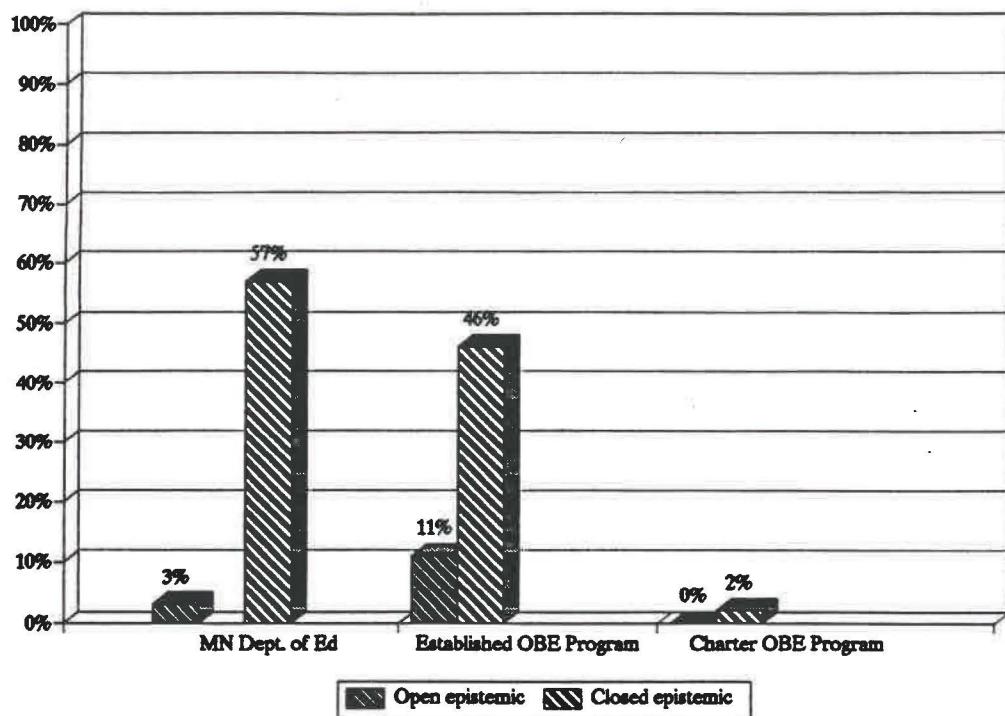
Although the extensive use of the “to be” verbs in the OBE samples was a surprise, it should not have been. According to Biber and Finnegan (1988), this use of unmodified “to be” verbs is “faceless” and typical of both academic and media prose styles (23). In media prose the discourse is faceless because it is understood by the audience that all the given information is “presented as ‘reality.’” (Biber and Finnegan, 1988). In academic prose, the text is “expected to present findings and conclusions that are supported” enough to be facts (Biber and Finnegan, 1988; Chafe, 1986). An example drawn from the charter school reads, “The Whole Language philosophy will be present throughout the program. . . .” The unmodified “to be” verb here is “faceless”; there is no voice or personality present. Since the very nature of faceless discourse is to “present reality” and defined conclusions, this voice, or lack of it, clearly portrays the view of OBE toward literacy as being fixed and static.

Conversely, it is interesting that the charter OBE school district lacks almost any epistemic verbs whatsoever (i.e. “we know that” or “it is true that”). As shown in the “Percentages of Verb Modals in OBE Literature Samples” chart, and more clearly in the “Open vs. Closed Epistemic Modals” chart J, only two percent of the total number of verbs are epistemic and those are closed. This is significant in that the stance of the charter school seems to ignore a position on information. Rather, their focus resides completely in the actions expected from the teachers. This suggests a stance toward literacy in which all the responsibility for learning and literacy lies within the teacher rather than any collaboration between students or any negotiation between students and teachers. Although the extensive use of deontic modals such as “teachers and parents *will* be acknowledged as” or “Measurement and assessment *will* be a partnership decision between parents and teacher(s)” does not imply a fixed and static view of information, it does imply a static learning model that appears to be teacher-centered.

Furthermore, it implies a top-down type of decision making in which the educators are told what and how to teach. Since all the responsibility for learning is placed upon the teacher, a student-centered classroom seems unlikely. Furthermore, this static learning model denies the emerging evidence in educational studies that shows the social nature of learning and the importance of capitalizing upon it.

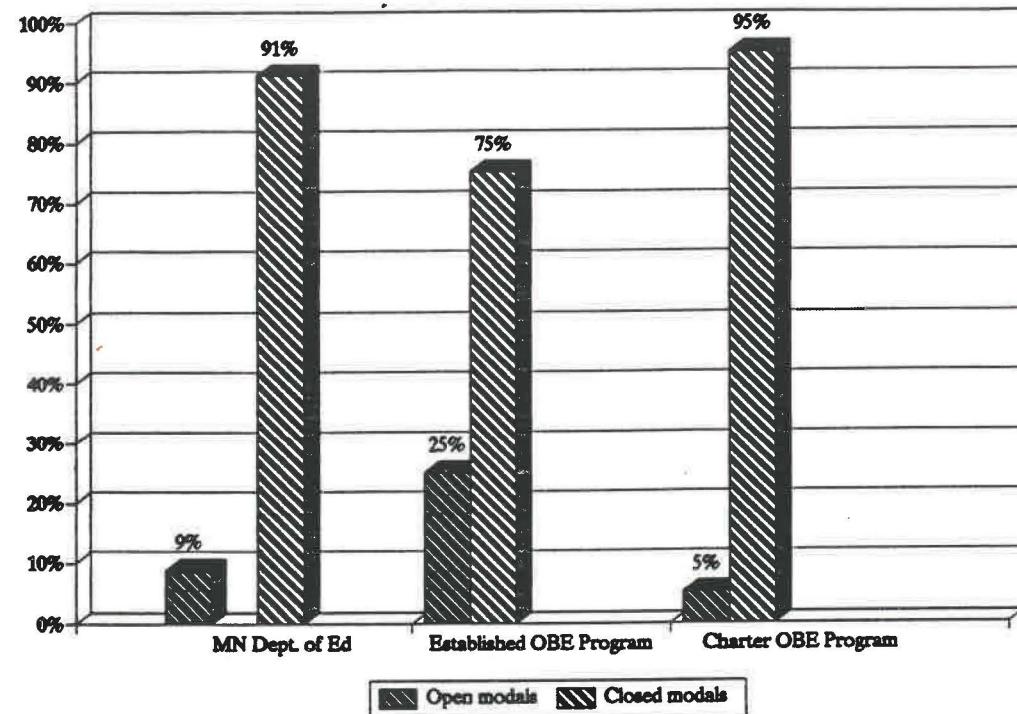
Although not frequent in the charter district, the closed deontic (obligation) stance is the second highest category in the Minnesota State Department literature (34%), and is tied for the highest category in the established OBE district (29%), comprising approximately one third of the verb modalities. As stated earlier, this does not necessarily portray a static stance toward what is learned, but it does portray a static stance toward how learning takes place.

## Open vs. Closed Epistemic Modals



As portrayed in the “Open vs. Closed Epistemic Modals” chart (Appendix A), the significant element is the difference in usage between the closed epistemic modalities and the open epistemic modalities. In this chart, the unmodified “to be” verbs were incorporated into the closed epistemic modalities, which is typical in this type of textual analysis. This addition underlines the frequency of closed epistemic modalities vs. open ones (57% vs. 3%; 46% vs. 11%; and 2% vs. 0%). This assumption, again, denies the possibility of any socially constructed reality in language, learning and literacy. The vast difference between the closed and open stances implies a view that information, the basis of learning and literacy, is fixed or static.

## Open vs. Closed Modals



As shown in Appendix A, the modalities used to describe information are words like absolutely, factually, always, and without exception. The modalities used to describe obligation are verbs like must, shall, will should, etc. By collapsing the various categories of open and closed modalities, the “Open vs. Closed Modals” chart portrays the overall marked discrepancy between the use of closed vs. open modalities in each of the three groups examined (91% vs. 9%; 75% vs. 25%; and 95% vs. 5%). The conclusion these percentages implies is that the promoters of OBE, in the three sample groups examined, take a closed stance toward both the information gleaned in the classroom and the obligation for the classroom teacher's strategy to present information. Again, this implies a static stance toward learning and literacy.

Having considered the static nature of OBE and its implications, I find this philosophy needs analysis. First, literacy is not a classroom commodity doled out by a teacher. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1992) state that the bulk of learning takes place in the home and only a minimal amount takes place in the classroom, a point further supported by Taylor (1991). Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz go on to say that the notions that "learning was basically accomplished through classroom instruction" and "what counted was the curriculum and how it was presented," the basic premise of OBE, ignores cultural diversity in learning styles and the affect of experiences outside of class on the experiences inside of class (1992).

Second, information and meaning making are negotiated and socially discovered rather than static facts to be passed out by a teacher. The social aspect of learning plays a key role in the depth of understanding that a student achieves (Beach, 1992; Porter, 1992). Part of this, according to Brooke (1991), is the development of self identity. A person takes on a particular role during a literacy event; this role shapes the meaning making and information the participant experiences. Therefore, information cannot be something fixed and static, which is distributed by a teacher rather than discovered personally. It is constantly being re-evaluated and constructed socially.

Finally, most information and "meaning making" is negotiated and dynamic. As Bruner says, "The reality is not the thing, not in the head, but in the act of arguing and negotiation about the meaning of such concepts" (1986, p. 122). Heath (1992) further supports this dynamic view of learning in that rather than defining learning and what we learn, educators, parents, and taxpayers should "locate" literacy. She warns against the "decorative" function of literacy in which the emphasis is on totaling fixed products of information as well as on the memory function or residue of specific information. Rather, Heath (1991) suggests emphasis should be placed on furthering literacy as part of a person's personal awareness of the self and the community and the world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, much contemporary scholarship on learning and literacy portrays the process of learning as well as its constantly evolving product as dynamic. In contrast, on the implied level, OBE appears to express a static as opposed to a dynamic stance toward learning and literacy. This comes forth in three clear patterns implied in the OBE samples analyzed.

- 1)The dominance of closed deontic modals suggests an emphasis on the teacher's obligations in the learning process rather than on the process itself or on what is learned in the process.
- 2)The dominance of closed deontic modals also assumes that education is the responsibility of the classroom teacher, not a collaboration between teacher and students or students and students.
- 3)By its very definition, the "faceless" discourse style shown by the dominance of unmodified "to be" verbs in OBE literature portrays information as static and fixed.

Although at the beginning of this proposal a concern was expressed regarding my prejudice toward OBE, it should not have affected my results. The verbs and other modalities in the literature written on OBE cannot be rewritten or fabricated. My bias directed the invention of this research, but, given the material, it should not have tainted my conclusion—through its verb modalities, Outcome Based Education clearly implies a static rather than dynamic stance toward learning and literacy.

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## Appendix A

