

Outcome Based Education (OBE) And Performance Assessment In One School District

by

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INTRODUCTION

Recently we educators have directed much of our attention to OBE and performance assessments, and recently the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has also been urging Minnesota school districts in this direction, charging each district in the near future to verify that each graduate has achieved the required graduation outcomes and to validate assessments at all performance levels, this instead of basing student success and graduation on the traditional Carnegie units.

In 1991 several administrators at the Cambridge-Isanti School District collaborated and wrote a grant to the MDE to obtain funding for writing authentic exhibition assessments at grade levels 4, 8, and 12 and then test them for their reliability and validity. The grant specifies writing assessments in the broad area of communications, concentrating on these four published MDE competencies: 1) Read using alternative strategies to comprehend a variety of written materials. 2) Listen to, comprehend, evaluate, and respond. 3) Write in an organized and clear manner. 4) Speak in an organized and clear manner.

This article will review our approach to accomplishing this assignment, relate how successful our performance assessments seemed to be, and disclose how valid and reliable our performance assessments really were.

The principal purpose of our grant was to write communications exhibition assessments at grade levels 4, 8, and 12, designing task ladders down from each grade level, select teachers to test the exhibition assessments, and then have EPM Associates of St. Cloud evaluate our assessments and tasks for reliability and validity. Since it was English language arts' turn to revise its outcomes and curriculum in our district—we have a five year cycle for curriculum revision—we decided to marry the two efforts, that is write the assessments and task ladders for the grant and use them as outcomes for our English/language arts' K - 12 curriculum.

Initially we attempted to compose valid exit outcomes. We started this by inviting a small number of community members in to essentially tell us what they believe students graduating from our high school ought to be able to do in the realm of communications, namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. We did get a fair cross section of people, representatives from businesses, the professions, skilled workers, even a writer, a minister, and

a college English professor. We also had representatives from our high school English teacher staff and administrators present at those meetings.

When told they were to list what they felt our graduates ought to be able to do instead of what they ought to know, the lay members of this group immediately started listing specific performances, such as graduates being able to: communicate to customers in person or via phone in a polite, businesslike manner; locate parts and product information using technology; read and interpret manuals for installing new equipment and technology; solve problems without assistance from supervisors; demonstrate initiative and leadership qualities and seek out tasks to perform; take pride in his/her appearance and dress appropriately for the occasion. The group initially brainstormed a list of about forty such items, and there was a considerable debate about the fact that vocational type performances appeared to dominate our list with little attention given to the appreciation of the arts and values and the great ideas of man found in literature, those things English teachers, ministers, and writers hold so dear. However, after I crossed referenced our list with the MDE's list of graduation requirements, reducing the list to 31 competencies, the competency "the student shall interpret and evaluate creative works of expressions" seemed to satisfy those concerned with our list appearing "too vocational."

WRITING THE OUTCOMES

Our plan at this point was to design down in OBE fashion. The high school English staff wrote exit outcomes that reflected our list of 31 competencies. Two teams of high school English and communications teachers wrote preliminary drafts of the level 12 exhibition performances, one a written performance, the second an oral presentation. So we were armed with exit outcomes, graduation competencies, and an idea as to what the exit performance at grade 12 would be like. Our curriculum director, who is also our assistant superintendent, the director of our district's communications leadership team, who is an elementary principal, and I then started meeting with representative teachers from the other grade levels, 4 and 8.

We started by meeting with two representatives from each grade level 5 through 8. These teachers met and first wrote the exit outcomes for grade level 8, those things they expected to be able to say that the teachers "designed down" from grade 8 exit outcomes when they wrote the task ladders or outcomes for the other three grade levels, but they did not choose to do so. I gave them the option of breaking off into groups by grade levels, working independently of the teachers of the other levels, or working together in one large group. They chose the latter. Armed with the exit outcomes at level 8, the teachers started by writing tasks (performance outcomes) and their assessments for grade 5 and designed up, and it worked fairly well, for they were then able to maintain an age-appropriate sequence of outcomes and assessments for each grade level as they worked towards each level 8 exit outcome.

For example, at grade 8 a student has to write an expository paragraph, but students in grade 5 also write paragraphs. So what is different? The fifth grade teachers decided their students ought to demonstrate the ability to write a descriptive paragraph. So, still, what is different? The sixth grade teachers opted for a persuasive paragraph for their students. And seventh grade teachers decided their students, like the eighth graders, ought to write an expository paragraph as well. And we know that English teachers at the high school also reteach how to write these different types of paragraphs, that many students typically have not yet mastered these tasks before they reach the high school. Where is meaningful sequence?

This issue was roundly discussed. The answers lay in the assessments and their standards. The eighth grade teachers expected more from their students than fifth grade teachers did and consequently wrote tougher standards. Here is how the assessments and standards differ:

Grade 5

The student will write a descriptive paragraph

STANDARDS (S = Satisfactory N = Needs Improvement)

The student will:

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | write either 4 sentences of 50 words (to be specified by your teacher.) | S | N |
| 2 | introduce the topic clearly | S | N |
| 3 | use sensory descriptive words | S | N |
| 4 | remain focused on a single idea (unity) | S | N |
| 5 | write in complete sentences | S | N |
| 6 | meet the basic conventions of indenting, capitalization, punctuation, usage, and spelling (underline the item(s) which the student needs to improve). | S | N |

Grade 8

The student will write an expository paragraph

STANDARDS (S = Satisfactory N = Needs Improvement)

The paragraph:

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | must have either 6 sentences or 100 words (to be specified by your teacher) | S | N |
| 2 | starts with a unifying topic sentence. | S | N |
| 3 | supports its topic sentence with adequate detail. | S | N |
| 4 | makes an original idea clear to the reader (clarity). | S | N |
| 5 | remains focused on a single idea (unity) | S | N |
| 6 | is written in complete sentences | S | N |
| 7 | meets the basic conventions of capitalization, punctuation, usage and spelling (underline the item(s) which the student needs to improve). | S | N |
| 8 | must have sentence variety | | |

We concluded that it was desirable to have representatives from all our middle school grades meet as a group to determine the proper sequence of task difficulties for the assessments, even though they did not use a perfect OBE design down approach.

The writing team assembled for the elementary grades K- 4 used the same basic approach.

They, too, wrote the exit outcomes for grade 4 first, then working together in a group, designed outcomes and assessments from kindergarten to grade 4. This was their choice. They maintained an age-appropriate sequence K - 4 for each outcome.

WRITING THE EXHIBITION ASSESSMENTS

After we finished writing the outcomes and their assessments for all the grade levels, we tackled writing the exhibition exit assessments. We used the same writing teams as we used to write the outcomes. Instead of describing the process of writing the assessments, I will describe the nature of each assessment and our successes.

At the high school the class selected to do the exhibition assessment was a classical English class; consequently, according to the assessment, each student was required to select a classical work to read and researched the author and what critics have written. Each had to write a formal research paper and organize and give a six to twelve minute oral presentation on his or her topic. By the way, these high school students received no instruction on how to accomplish either of the assessments since their teacher interpreted this assessment as an indicator of whether each student could in fact satisfactorily perform this exit assessment. And this seems to be the distinct nature of an exit assessment.

The audience for these students comprised of peers (classmates and invited members of our school's National Honor Society), teachers, administrators, community members who served on the local curriculum advisory committee, and school board members. In addition to this, we video taped each student's presentation. Understandably we raised the anxiety level of the student presenters. And the students rose to the occasion splendidly.

For the most part, that is. We had scheduled the performances over two evenings in January. A severe ice storm prevented us meeting the second evening. So we were forced to have the students finish giving their presentations during school the following day, without adults and peers from the honor society in the audience. The students who performed under these less stressful conditions did not perform as well. They came dressed for a typical school day, not dressed in their Sunday best as did those students who presented in the evening performance. In spite of the fact their presentations counted as their semester final exam, the daytime presenters did not have the same pressure, were somewhat lackadaisical about the task, and clearly

did not perform as well as their counterparts who performed two evenings before.

All teachers evaluating students both occasions commented on this difference, which causes us to believe that students usually will rise to the occasion and will in fact perform to raised standards.

We observed the same phenomenon at the middle school level. The eighth grade English teacher who tested our communications exhibition assessment for level 8 decided to integrate it with social studies. Linked with social studies, each student was required to select a country, research it, write a letter to one of its embassies, write a report of the research activities, and give an oral presentation to the peers in his or her classroom.

There were some difficulties initially. With the assessment came OBE, and most students were not prepared for OBE standards, that is do all the required tasks, and do them satisfactorily according to clearly written standards. As is typical with a traditional grading system, a number of our middle school students become accustomed to selecting which assignments to do, which not to do, for it doesn't take students long to learn than one doesn't have to do many assignments to pass with a D minus. Consequently, about fifteen percent of the eight graders initially refused to write a business letter to an embassy of their chosen countries.

However, as time went on and they became more involved with stages of the assessment in both their English and social classes and as both teachers continued to prod them and they saw their classmates advance on with their projects, apparently most began to feel they were in jeopardy in both their English and social classes; most became ambitious and completed all the requirements for the assessment. Only two percent failed to complete them all.

Like the students at the high school, as they approached the days for the oral presentations, the anxiety level of the students rose to an unprecedented high, and when the students performed their oral exhibitions, they rose to the occasion and performed admirably well.

The exhibition assessment for grade 4 was likewise integrated. The teachers writing this assessment decided to use a science project they have used for years as a basis for a communications performance. For the science project each student was required to select a local animal, research it, create a poster-like display, and present it to the class. One research activity was traveling to a local nature area and listen to biologists discuss local animals and the life cycles of their chosen animals.

Again, the teacher and her principal report that the assessment was extremely successful, partly because it was integrated: the students researched topics they were interested in; there was a purpose for creating their displays and presenting them; the assessment was not done in

isolation.

That seems to be the common characteristic of each exhibition assessment; although the assessment at the high school was not integrated, the assessment was the culminating activity for a course, a final test, if you will, and not done in isolation. In each case the assessment was a culminating activity, and in each case the students' anxiety levels were heightened and they had vested interests in performing well, and they rose to the occasion, performing much better than what they typically do.

This fact is recognized by both staff and principals. In fact, while I was in the process of writing this report, the principal of the teacher who tested the eight grade assessment asked me to guide other English language arts teachers in his building writing performance exhibition assessments for grade levels 5 - 7. Teachers have come to him with ideas for integrated English/social or English/science performances that will prepare students for their eighth grade exhibition performance.

One last interesting aspect: the high school exhibition performances required an immense amount of staff members' time, namely assisting and assessing the student performances, so much time, in fact, that at an administrative meeting of the grant, I detailed the amount of work involved, only 10 performances in an evening, and said it would be extremely difficult convincing the staff to require all 300 plus students to deliver a performance next year. To my surprise, at an English department meeting later, this possibility was discussed, and the staff felt so good about the student performances they decided to attempt to create a logistical plan to accommodate all our students. When asked why they felt this way, one staff member said, "Look. Community members have told us what skills our graduate ought to have. We designed a performance assessment that tests these skills. When we evaluate a student's performance, we can accurately say whether the student can perform or not. Grades for courses don't do that."

I feel quite confident that exhibition performances can be authentic and actually measure what students are able to do, that they can improve the quality of education we give our students.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Simply stated, our exit assessments were quite valid, but we did not create a reliable method of rating student performances. We achieved valid assessments because of the wisdom of the grant's authors; they insisted that we meet with community members for their input as to what skills our graduates ought to have. We did not achieve a reliable rating scheme because of our desire to keep scoring simple and quick; we used S (satisfactory), E (excellent), N (needs improvement) to rate student performances instead of a comprehensive rubric. We will correct this deficiency immediately this summer.

Dr. Stan Knox of EPM Associates, an educational consulting service, evaluated our assessments. To determine validity, he sent questionnaires listing the items on which we rated level 12 performers on both their written and speaking performances to three groups: the community members who originally met with us to list graduation competencies, local employers, and college English faculty members of a local community college and an area state university. He concludes this about the level 12 writing assessment: "As an instrument, the items appear to be contributing significantly to the concept being measured, i.e., the importance of specific skills in writing. This supports the conclusion of acceptable validity based on the analysis of the responses."

Like the assessment items for the writing skills, most of the assessment items for the speaking skills appear to be basically on target. We discovered that we language arts teachers obviously place more importance on product form and organization (title page, word processor, outlines, a prescribed summary) and appearance (appearance, word processor, and visual aids) than the three groups of raters do. Nevertheless, we created a valid instrument to assess student speaking skills.

I am primarily responsible for us creating a unreliable rating method. We were not ignorant of elaborate scoring rubrics; and we did have our share of advocates for using such rubrics; but I urged simplicity, obviously sacrificing reliability in the process.

In many of our initial meetings with teachers, questions of work load and time to do the required additional tasks and selling all this to the other language arts teachers became serious concerns. At the same time, many of the OBE gurus, those we were consulting with and several making OBE presentations at the 1992 Practitioners Paradise at Rochester, Minnesota, were addressing the same issues. Their advice was to make the rating schemes of course and unit assessments quick and simple; several advocated using the S, E, N method instead of taking time to work with numbers. Consequently, a majority of our teachers agreed to use this simple technique for our exit assessments at levels 4, 8, and 12, and to keep the number of items for evaluation at a minimum.

Below are the item lists for both the writing and speaking assessments. Dr. Knox concludes in his evaluation that in general, reliability will increase as the number of items increase." So he recommends to keep the number of items the same or increase them.

LEVEL 12 WRITTEN ASSESSMENT ITEMS**APPEARANCE**

Title page	E	S	N
Outline	E	S	N
Works Cited	E	S	N
In-body citations	E	S	N
Written with word processor	E	S	N

CONTENT

Introduction with main idea clearly stated	E	S	N
Main points supported with evidence	E	S	N
Main points supported organized in a logical arrangement	E	S	N
Flowed smoothly from one point to the next	E	S	N
Conclusion that summarized major point(s)	E	S	N

MECHANICS

Correct use of the English language	E	S	N
Correct spelling	E	S	N
Correct punctuation	E	S	N

This speaker has fulfilled the requirements for the writing graduation assessment.	YES	NO
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LEVEL 12 ORAL PRESENTATION ASSESSMENT ITEMS**INTRODUCTION**

Catch Interest	E	S	N
Relate Purpose	E	S	N
Preview Main Points	E	S	N

BODY

Well-chosen Interesting Material	E	S	N
Statistical and Factual Information	E	S	N
Logical Arrangement of Ideas	E	S	N
Use of a Visual Aid	E	S	N

CONCLUSION

Summarized Main Points	E	S	N
Effective/Memorable	E	S	N

DELIVERY

Self Confident/Poised	E	S	N
Eye Contact	E	S	N
Adequate Volume	E	S	N
Appearance	E	S	N
Time (approximately 6 -12 minutes)	E	S	N

PREPARATIONS

Works Cited of Written Sources	E	S	N
Works Cited of Oral Sources	E	S	N
Interview Questions and Answers	E	S	N
Outline	E	S	N
Notecards	E	S	N

This speaker has fulfilled the requirements for the oral presentation for the communications graduation assessment.	YES	NO
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He continues, "Scoring criteria need to be established for all the items on each test in order to assure that every student is being rated in the same manner." He recommends using "scoring rubrics which provide highly specific guidelines for the assessment of the students on all items," which in turn would "substantially improve all the technical aspects of these instruments."

CONCLUSION

When a school decides to create performance assessments to assess student progress or readiness for graduation, it must consult with community members to achieve validity and authenticity; without community input, we educators charged with preparing students for our dynamic and competitive decade are apt to miss the mark; we need the community's stamp of approval; we need to consult with the community frequently for possible changes.

There is no quick and simple method of reliably rating student performances. Needed is a comprehensive scoring rubric with clear, precise standards. And all the raters must be trained on how to rate and score items evaluated. Reliability is achieved only when all raters can consistently agree on how to rate all items of all performances.