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Learning Outcomes

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All of the schools under the Association of Theological Schools are required to have a very clear and strong sense of educational effectiveness. One of the ways to gauge such effectiveness is by evaluating to what extent a course meets its stated 'learning outcomes.' In every syllabus we need to establish the outcomes desired in each course and how we will measure these outcomes. Every school must be able to assess its teaching/learning process through very specific measures and once the learning outcomes are established, teachers will have to find ways to measure that those outcomes were clearly achieved.

This way of approaching effectiveness seems to result from which learning outcomes can be effectively announced and properly measured rather than the extension to which expansive goals or purposes of the classroom are built along the way by a community.

What seems to be at the center of this educational politics is a top-down teacher-centered position from where the learning outcomes must come. This sense of education seems to be captive to a rigid system of control that organizes its success not by the autonomy of the students' processes of learning, ongoing formation and so on, but rather, by the anticipated forms of specific results. In this way, education becomes a mere instrumentalization of an apparatus of skills dictated by the teacher who knows and desires the goals his students must achieve. The central point becomes the teleology of the education system and not the process in which one's curiosity is ignited. Instead, the whole establishment must fulfill the grand

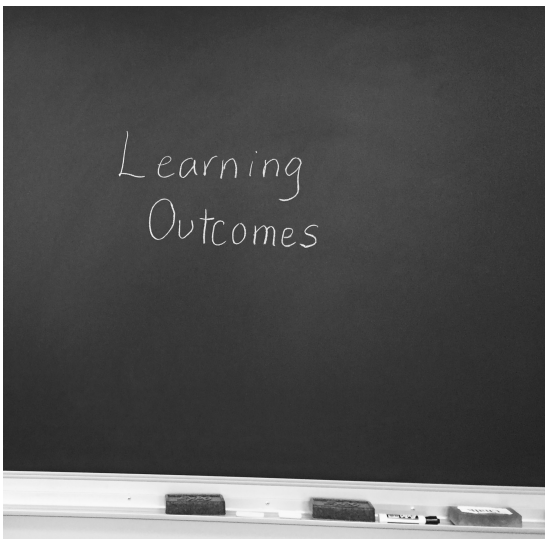
desires of the educational neoliberal machine under which the teacher works, establishing the goals of the learning outcomes of this machine way ahead of the beginning of the course and even before knowing her students, the place of the gatherings, or even the very social composition of the class. I taught in 3 seminaries and am going to my fourth one and in all of them I had to decide the learning outcomes of my courses even before I arrived, not knowing who my students could be.

Thus, as mentioned before, this concept of learning outcomes places the teacher at the center of the educational process, and above and beyond its students, as if the very reasons of the course were the fulfillment and proper assessment of the learning outcomes rather than the process of learning, the variables of student configuration, formation, background and needs. The teacher continues to show up as the only knower of it all, one who knows everything before the meetings, and one who manages the class to fulfill his/her desired outcomes - otherwise he/she runs the risk of being a failure. Faculty are supposed to analyze and review the evaluation of students' work in tandem with the learning outcomes and if they don't match, there will be a necessary change to be done but it can only be done for the next time the course is taught, not during the teaching/learning process/experience. In any case, the *a priori* teleological structure of the educational system is kept the same.

Another concern is that this way of structuring a classroom has to do with an understanding of education that serves a market that demands efficiency, effectiveness and specific forms of product/learning. Instead of teaching to transgress as bell hooks invites us, we teach to turn all of us captives to a system that demands specific results. Thus, we are all captives to a sense of education that is individualistic, one that considers students almost as accidents in the learning process, and one that can be considered a distraction and even a stumbling block to the achievement of the previous unchangeable results of the learning outcomes, challenging the very "teaching effectiveness."

The question of effectiveness remains: who is being evaluated and by whom? The student? The teacher? Both? Is it fair to evaluate the teacher by the students' outcomes? Within and beyond these questions, it seems that what rules our sense of educational effectiveness is the market, hence we need specific results to show that we are working properly, that we are not losing or randomly spending time without proper assessment. Moreover, in order to show that this school has a place in society, we must make sure that the profitable educational results are clear. As in a financial institution, we have to report evidence of the positive (profitable) results in order to capitalize - in other words - exist, and to make its presence possible in society. Underneath its assumptions there seems to lie a distrust that the teacher can actually teach something by himself/herself, thus there must a functional aspect to the system that will establish criteria to judge/assess his/her abilities and end results.

Opposite to that, what I often see in the classroom is that I will only know the learning



outcomes of my courses when my class ends, and my results might not be as successful/profitable. Let me say that I am not against the idea of measurement, or for teachers to set up intended outcomes for their classes and work towards those forms of learning and production of knowledge. However, this is only one aspect of the educational process and not the sum of all parts. There are other ways of assessing outcomes and other forms of looking at education. One such alternative can be a more communal way of setting measurements. For instance, when I sit with my students at the beginning of the course I must ask the questions, " What do you hope to learn here? Why are you here? What do we want, hope, need to learn together?" At that point we will find some learning outcomes together. Along the way we might discover new needs so we shift gears and redraw the map for new learning outcomes. Then, the final result, learning outcomes, of this class will only happen when we again sit together at the end of the course and we ask each other: "What have we really learned in this course?" Only then I will know fully what my learning outcomes finally are and I will be able to make my final and best assessment, of myself, of my students and the school, as well as my students will evaluate me, themselves and the school and the school will evaluate me and the students.

We should work with a sense that to teach is to gather with people into a journey partially known, partially unknown, and to quote Zizek, partially "unknown known," a land yet to be discovered, a place of several different encounters where each one of us will be coming from different social contexts, going through different experiences and situations and perhaps getting lost on the way. Along the way, the class will have, hopefully, distinct educational formation backgrounds which is the ongoing formation of one's whole self, and we will have to deal with its unevenness, with some pushing and pulling different things, with some waiting for some/something and others moving ahead with others. The classroom is a place for self-discovery in a Deleuzian sense! As a community of interpreters (or even a "community of interpretants" C. Peirce) we will establish the outcomes together, as we go, according to the needs of each individual and the group. At the end of the course, we will look back and do our assessment together.

In his book *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (Pedagogy of Autonomy), Paulo Freire says that to teach

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is not to transfer knowledge, but to create possibilities for the production and construction of knowledge. To teach is to create an act of sharing knowledge. The teacher has to engage the curiosity of the students, turning the whole process of education into an expanded social process of learning and teaching. The knowledge each student brings is not a side effect or even a danger to the main learning outcomes, but rather a fundamental component to the effectiveness of the learning processes and outcomes. As we are stimulated to discover our processes of learning together, students gain the possibility to become autonomous agents and subjects of their own history. They become equipped to go back to their communities, reshape the world and the conditions of the possibilities of their lives. That means also an ongoing wrestling with and against the very mission statement of theological schools.

With the learning outcomes given *a priori*, we continue to deposit a certain kind of knowledge into the database of our students who are there supposedly to receive and accumulate proper knowledge. No! Teachers have a choice to make. We can be an alternative to the fatalism of the neoliberal educational market that is turning education into profit. We can offer different ways of thinking that go against the one way of thinking of capitalism. We can teach for freedom, teachers and students included, creating as many other worlds as possible. We study to create, sustain and expand life and not because of a demand of the market. Teachers are not servers of students doing what they want, neither are students pupils of their teachers. In the classroom we are common learners, wondering, wandering, trying to figure ourselves and the world out…

Learning outcomes? Yes a multiplicity of them! How are we going to assess it? After we have been together. As a second step. This way we will be better able to imagine a new theological education, one that perhaps escapes our own assurances, covered insecurities and convictions of either the past, the present or the future. We don’t need to control everything, including the learning outcomes!

After all of that said, it does not mean that we should not have any form of measure or control. What I am saying here is that we have to work against a top-down structure and move it into one that is shared between teachers, students, staff, and the larger community where the school is located, especially the marginalized ones.

The future is open and the students, along with the teachers, agents of this new moment, constructing knowledge and new forms of education, which is nothing less than the construction of life and forms of living together. Perhaps then, “Stories from the Front (of the Classroom)” will also entail stories from the back (of the classroom).

There is a song sung throughout Latin America called New Moment. That song can be used to help us understand our learning outcome and imagine its effectiveness:

God calls us for a new moment
To walk along with one another
It's time to transform what needs to be undone
Alone, isolated, nobody is capable

So come and join
Gather in the round with us all
You are very important
Come!

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