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DQP: Why Bother?

Fair question. After all we've all been offering courses, teaching students and giving degrees for a long time. If we ask students what the degree is about...it's a set of courses, credit hours, and grades which assemble to a credential that should be worth a job and a living, possibly a career.

If we ask teachers what the degree is about...it might be the same answer, with the additive that my particular course or field of study should be required for everyone! Increasingly, though, higher education is being asked to demonstrate that our degrees represent skills and knowledge that we expect students to have when they complete our programs.

The DQP calls for a more public viewing of the learning outcomes that comprise our degrees and makes the claim that this will be transformative for higher education. It's a big big picture concept with a big ambition. I'm going to invite us to examine the big picture through a microscopic lens. Let's examine the DQP concept from the perspective of the individuals who are most closely connected to the learning outcomes: teachers and students. What happens in a classroom when learning outcomes are visible and central to teaching, learning and assessment?

I'll share with you a little bit of my own teaching journey. Sadly, there's not time for my entire life story....so we'll peek into a few years ago when I was teaching Introductory Geology for majors and non majors here at Lane. I have always taught with specific learning outcomes...a result of knowing that I wanted to teach geology and seeking out a degree in Science Education. I thought learning outcomes were a nifty way to tell students what I expected them to learn and how I would assess them. I had weekly lecture objectives, lab objectives, and vocabulary lists. They became a sort of contractual study guide: I expect you to learn these things. You can expect me to teach these things. And I will assess you in the way that the outcomes are worded. So if it says "Identify a rock based on its texture and composition (these are technical concepts in geology), given a hand sample or a verbal description of a rock." That's what you'll see on the test. The coolest thing about this for me was that I no longer had to answer, "Will this be on the test?" I could say, Is it in the objectives? And when asked, "Will you give us a study guide?" I could say, I already did and you've had it since day one. So that was neat. And it provided students with a sort of "instructional scaffolding" of where we were going.

But that was not the transformative moment. The transformative moment came when I stopped grading every attempt at learning and I asked students to take charge of demonstrating their growth and competency in meeting the learning outcomes. We—for now we were organizing our interactions as a “community of scholars”, no longer a teacher and her students—we accomplished this by letting students in on how people construct knowledge (this, by the way, took less than 30 minutes), explicitly stopping “playing school,” (you give me work, I give you points) and most importantly I think, moving to portfolio assessments in addition to tests. I no longer graded weekly lab work. I had an aha moment when I realized that my dutiful feedback on every lab page (for 75 students, on the order of 300-400 pages a week!) WAS NOT LEADING TO LEARNING. I told students that we, as a community, had many ways to get and give feedback, not just me. The portfolio would be their opportunity to demonstrate key learning outcomes in the best way they could, with their best work that would be TYPED, well organized, illustrated, and professional. I was still grading about the same number of pages across the term, but the pages were a whole better.

The difference in students’ quality of work and level of engagement was astounding. I provided rubrics, of course, for the quality of portfolio elements and sometimes specialized rubrics for certain elements. So again, when students invariably sought some validation before turning something in (Is this what you want?), I could respond, “Let’s look at our rubric. How do you think you are doing meeting the rubric criteria?” A different conversation entirely. One that was ultimately empowering and far more democratic.

It turns out many students are not initially trying to become empowered learners. They are trying to earn the points to pass the class to get the credit to get the degree. Being empowered is a lot of work. So to make empowered learners, I think we need to let them in on the learning outcomes. In my classes, the majority of conversations became about learning. Not about missed due dates, fairness or lack thereof. There was no point bartering, and frankly, very little whining. Why? Because it was irrelevant when the standards and the means of attaining them were clear. I understood my role as coach and guide to attaining the learning outcomes. Overtime, I asked students to select objectives they wished to demonstrate, and eventually, asked them to integrate objectives in their portfolio pieces, with higher grades for integrating more complex objectives. In DQP lingo, the outcomes were reference points and students had multiple and creative ways to demonstrate competence. Students understood that class time was learning time. It was their chance to develop skills, knowledge, confidence and “intellectual agility” to handle increasingly complex tasks—in short to develop some measure of expertise. I did far less lecturing and much more teaching. They did less passive behaviors and much more learning.

I tell you this true-life parable in the context of the DQP. So let’s zoom back to my initial question: why bother? How does my teaching transformation inform how we might use and value the potential of the DQP concept? And what questions does it invite us to consider?

When faculty develop clear learning outcomes across courses and programs, they can more easily work together to provide efficient and effective learning activities and assessments. The same will be true for institutions that have clear degree outcomes. We can ask one another, “How are you teaching this learning outcome? How are you assessing it?” When the language of learning outcomes becomes shared, students can engage in tracking and assessing their own learning journey. This is a component of Lane’s AAC&U Roadmap project, where the learning outcomes will be landmarks on students’ educational maps. We already see this in many Career Technical programs where degree outcomes are clearly defined, courses are mapped onto the outcomes and student progress is competency based. As our AAOT criteria conversations demonstrated, bringing this clarity to the General Education programs of our institutions may be more challenging.

We can ask how the language of DQP outcomes and the 5 dimensions align with the AAOT language and the language of our general education outcomes and career technical outcomes. We’ll take an exploratory look at all of these in Breakout Session VI this afternoon. How do our existing outcomes fit or not fit? How will we paint in the DQ profile?

We can also raise questions about the verbs used to distinguish the various degree levels. Are the implied taxonomic levels appropriate; or can we express more clearly that higher and more complex cognitive strategies and applications occur in all three degrees. The differences, as the DQP suggests, are in the “progressively more challenging levels” of problems. The large body of research on the development of expertise within academic domains as well as in non-academic domains may prove useful in this regard.

Other panelists have raised the issue of how to engage faculty in the DQP. Lane, along with many other colleges and universities, has experience in developing a culture of assessment and can share successful strategies.

Finally, we can be very glad that school is about learning and that conversations that center on learning are inherently meaningful and rewarding. The DQP convergence we are embarking on will require many such conversations at all levels. I conclude by sharing these phrases from Meg Wheatley’s Turning to one another, “There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.” and “Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.”