The Trouble with Outcomes: Pragmatic Inquiry and Educational Aims

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Outcomes assessment (OA) has become a familiar feature of the higher education landscape, and it is likely to endure into the foreseeable future. All of our accrediting organizations now require it. A wide range of disciplines have adopted it for evaluating student learning as well as their own practice—we are now seeing outcomes assessments for physical therapy, foster home placements, management practices, legal procedures, nursing care, and more. The current, laudable focus on learner-centered higher education has spawned a veritable cottage industry of books and other resources for outcomes assessment. (See, for instance, Banta and Associates; Bresciani and Wolff; Driscoll and Wood; Maki; Walvoord; and the websites of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Association for Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' VALUE project, and eLumen). Surely the recent firestorm created by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska's controversial book *Academically Adrift*, which reported lackluster results in studies of college learning, will spur further interest in outcomes assessment.[1]

In short, OA is educational common sense. Define goals for student learning, evaluate how well students are achieving those goals, and use the results to improve the academic experience. Who could argue with that? And even if we were inclined to argue with OA, what good would that do? Indeed, it might do harm: if we don't define our own program and department outcomes and design our own assessments—to invoke one of composition studies' favorite assessment chestnuts[2]—others will be happy to do so for us. Sure, many of us in English studies have our worries: that

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we're not clear on the *exact* difference between an outcome and an objective, or that the time and effort we're devoting to OA might be better used in other ways, or that institutional OA risks compromising the academic freedom of our instructors and programs, or that our curricula are being narrowed to what is assessed, or that we're experiencing standardization creep, or that bean counters will do nefarious things with the data we generate—but we're *pragmatic* enough to get on with it anyway, lest direr fates befall us.

Of course, "pragmatic" here means doing what is realistic in light of existing constraints. Conventionally understood, as Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald suggest, "the pragmatist looks for the most efficient means to an end, without stopping to question much since stopping would reduce efficiency and practicality" (32). Or, if the pragmatist does stop long enough to recognize that the most efficient action might not be a desirable action, she or he will invoke "pragmatism"—often with an air of reluctant resignation—as an explanation (sometimes an excuse) for accepting the presumed necessity of taking the less-than-ideal route.[3] But as Roskelly and Ronald also show, this colloquial understanding of the term is ironic in light of philosophical Pragmatists' insistence that Pragmatism is precisely about slowing down and inquiring into multiple alternatives. For William James, for instance, Pragmatism entailed philosophical inquiry into the practical consequences of thinking through things in one way rather than another.[4] According to James (in "Lecture II: What Pragmatism Means"), Pragmatism is an attitude, a habit of inquiry, that entails a turning away from "fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" and toward concrete inquiry into experience. Pragmatists ask what practical difference ideas and courses of action make, and to whom.

At first blush, OA seems consonant with philosophical Pragmatism; its proponents, after all, claim that it shifts our attention from what we do (teach) to the consequences of what we do (student learning, or lack thereof). In this article, however, I show, through Pragmatic inquiry, that there is a *practical difference* in the tendencies to which the terms *outcomes* and *consequences* lead. Focusing on outcomes tends to limit and compromise the educational experiences of teachers and students, while attention to consequences tends to enhance those experiences. These tendencies, I wish to stress at the outset, reveal the functions of these concepts, not their essences. While I believe we would do well to abandon the commonsense model of OA, I am sufficiently "pragmatic"—and here you should catch a whiff of reluctant resignation—to recognize the hold it has over postsecondary assessment. But even—rather, especially—if we work within the OA model, it is important to consider carefully (and perhaps reconsider) how we frame and use educational aims in our profession, departments, programs, and classrooms. Specifically, we need methods for framing and using educational aims that allow us to avoid the problematic tendencies of outcomes while addressing institutional demands for assessment of student learning

and achieving some measure of program coherence. Toward the end of this article, I propose one such (Pragmatic) method: articulation.

Outcomes and Consequences

In common parlance, the terms *outcomes* and *consequences* sometimes function as synonyms, but when used as ways to name educational aims, they lead us to think and act differently. Student learning outcomes, as they are framed in OA (and countless university reports and websites), are statements identifying what students will know or be able to do at the end of an activity, unit of instruction, course, or program of study. They are generally expressed in terms of knowledge, understandings, skills, dispositions, or values that students will have attained by the end of the specified course of educational action. A typical set of outcomes for a writing program might look like this:

> By the end of first-year composition, students will
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> - *write for various purposes and audiences;*
> - *choose appropriate media and modalities for their compositions;*
> - *demonstrate appropriate use of genre conventions;*
> - *integrate their own ideas with those of others;*
> - *properly cite primary and secondary sources; and*
> - *identify their own strengths and challenges as writers.*

As the use of the word "end" in the stub phrase suggests, the outcomes represent the hoped-for conclusion of the educational experiences they reference: they are framed as termini of (rather than terminals within) those experiences.

It is important to recognize that the outcomes are determined before the educational experience commences, even as they describe its end. This, too, is educational common sense, thanks in large part to advocates of "backward design," who insist that teachers and curriculum designers must start with their ends in mind (Wiggins and McTighe). The value of outcomes, to this way of thinking, is that they give teachers and students targets to shoot for. They provide focus, stability, clarity, and transparency. Further, they are helpful for accountability purposes: they allow us to measure and document students' performances vis-à-vis expressed goals.

Again, this seems difficult to argue with: of course teachers and students should know what they are aiming for; of course our teaching and students' learning should be given force and focus by our goals; of course we should assess students' work against those goals. However, OA's insistence that the formulation of outcomes occurs before the educational experience commences should give us pause. According to the educational Pragmatist John Dewey, when educational aims are formulated outside of

the ongoing activities of teachers and students, "activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account" ("Chapter 8: Aims in Education" *Democracy*). This separation of ends and means, according to Dewey, leads to fixity and rigidity in the formulation of the ends; diversion of attention away from the existing conditions for teaching and learning; narrow fixation on singular results rather than openness to emergent consequences (some of which might turn out to be more significant for the learner than the specified, anticipated results); and imposition on students and sometimes on teachers as well (*Democracy*).

My experience as a writing program administrator (WPA) and an assessment consultant for several English departments and writing programs suggests that OA harbors each of the tendencies Dewey mentions. In many programs, outcomes become isolated, over time, from the ongoing activities of teachers and students. Whether administrators and faculty begin with great enthusiasm or great skepticism (or, most likely, a mix), outcomes, once expressed, often stay in place for years, even as programs change. Teachers may dutifully reproduce those outcomes on a syllabus or assignment, and students may dutifully provide evidence that they've achieved them in their work products, but rarely do the outcomes become a meaningful and intimate part of teachers' and students' experiences. In these programs, outcomes—whether the hard-won result of intense consensus building or an administrative hand-down—tend to become enshrined in the bureaucratic machinery. Though some proponents of OA are careful to suggest that outcomes be revisited and perhaps revised regularly, many institutions and programs—whether out of ennui, conflict aversion, or a less than fully developed assessment process—ignore this recommendation. Rather, outcomes statements take on an aura of finality, of achieved and unimpeachable institutional authority. Thus, the outcomes on the books remain the central focus of assessment and documentation efforts, with little attention paid either to the always-evolving context in which those aims are pursued (shifts in student demographics, staffing policies, institutional resources, and the like: what OA enthusiasts sometimes derogatorily identify as "inputs") or to unforeseen and unexpected results of unfolding educational experiences.[4] Under these conditions, teachers and students merely *receive* the outcomes; they experience them as imposed, whether they were formulated by a distant regulatory body, a professional group, or some earlier incarnation of the local faculty.

There are, of course, institutions in which OA does not look like this—where, for instance, outcomes are drawn from and become an important component of the shared experiences of teachers and students and are continually revisited and revised. Some readers, I'm certain, have had such positive experiences with outcomes. But again, mine is not an essentialist argument; I'm not claiming that outcomes, owing to some inherent property, always and only have the negative consequences I describe. I do suggest, however, that where outcomes are having positive effects on teaching

and learning, assessment participants are taking care to counter consequences toward which outcomes *tend*. That's because OA operates within institutional and ideological logics that produce these tendencies. Measuring, documenting, and reporting outcomes—pegged to bureaucratically defined units (courses, programs, courses of study)—serves prevailing academic management priorities such as accreditation reporting and other forms of public accountability, strategic planning, and the identification of "programs of excellence." As Shari Stenberg and Darby Arant Whealy suggest, outcomes function within an "efficiency model" that privileges measurement for institutional purposes, often at the expense of inquiry for pedagogical purposes (684). Moreover, the insistence among proponents of OA that we shift our attention from "inputs" to "outputs" clearly serves the interests of academic management.[5]

Indeed, OA greases the wheels of technical rationality in the "managed university" (on the latter term, see Martin; Rhoades; or, closer to our disciplinary home, see Bousquet; Chaput; Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu; Gallagher; Nelson; Strickland). It may begin at the end—with the specification of hoped-for results—but it is resolutely linear and teleological. Certain about its ends, it provides instrumentation (outcomes statements, rubrics, and the like) to measure the distance between where students are (Point A) and where we want them to be (Point B). Diverting attention from contextual variables—students' preparation, faculty working conditions, available resources, and so on—it encourages single-minded focus on certain expected results. As such, it is highly amenable to simple-form documentation and reporting, providing nice, clean numbers for university administrators' spreadsheets.

Teachers, program administrators, and department chairs thus become "instrumental problem-solvers" (Schön)—in a word, technicians. Technicians deploy their technical knowledge to solve problems that hinder smooth operations. Their job is to reduce uncertainty and avoid unforeseen consequences. In this way, technical rationality doesn't so much divert our attention from consequences other than our articulated outcomes, as Dewey worried, as it encourages us to suppress those consequences. In outcomes assessment of student writing, for instance, we norm ourselves to read student writing "against" (read: through) the outcomes. In so doing, we close our reading selves off from what is surprising or excessive or eccentric about the writing. In our narrow focus on whether outcomes have been met, we also suppress our sense of the singularity and potentiality (to borrow key terms from Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell) of the writer or the writing. Our reading starts not with the student's text, but with the outcome, or the rubric, which conditions what we are able (and unable) to see in the text. And that is the point: in order for a scoring session to run smoothly, unpredictability—surprising writings, rogue readings—must be minimized or removed. Potentiality is a problem for OA, not only because it cannot be measured—as much of what we most care about in writing cannot be measured—but also because it disrupts OA's linear, delineable telos. After

all, potentiality "points to the future, but it exists now" (Haswell and Haswell 41). Potentiality reminds us that it is no use evaluating the acorn as an oak, nor as not an oak; it is both and neither, at once.[6]

One way to bring potentiality back into focus is to shift our thinking from outcomes to consequences. This is not, I admit, an easy task; although assessment theorists have developed a theoretical model of validity in which the consequences of an assessment are a (indeed, *the*) central consideration (see Huot; Cronbach), we are not accustomed to thinking or talking about educational aims in these terms. If we did think and talk this way, for one thing, we would need to be attentive both to the intended and unintended results of our interactions with students. This is an important difference between outcomes and consequences: in OA, there is no such thing as an unintended outcome—but in programs and classrooms, unintended consequences are commonplace.

Consequences can be anticipated and hoped for, of course; thinking assessment in terms of consequences does not require us to eschew the setting of educational aims altogether. Rather, the issue, as Stenberg and Whealy contend, is how educational aims function:

> As John Dewey argues, if ends or aims function as a final goal, a point at which activity and questions cease, they hinder both reflection and action. But if ends or outcomes are conceived not as fixed, but as ends-in-view, then these goals or aims function as "redirecting pivots in action"; they are a point at which to stop and reflect, but not to cease activity (72). While an outcome as an end-in-view serves as a guide or stimulus for present activity, it also leaves open the possibility for new goals and objectives to ensue. It allows that there are moments of learning that will exceed outcomes, which are as valuable as the end itself. (684)

My suggestion here is that educational aims we dub "outcomes" are unlikely to function as ends-in-view, given the appropriation of that term by the ideology of technical rationality and the efficiency model of institutional management. As we have seen, outcomes are conceived within OA as fixed at the end of an educational experience—they issue (it is hoped) from it at its conclusion. By contrast, consequences, as ends-in-view, are always emergent within educational experiences; they cannot be fixed beyond or outside those experiences. Consider, for instance, how consequences function in Dewey's notion of Pragmatic inquiry. Such inquiry, according to Dewey, is "directed by understanding of conditions and their consequences" because "standards and tests of validity are found in the consequences of overt activity, not in what is fixed prior to it and independently of it" (*Quest* 66, 59). For Dewey, then, consequences are not (or not only) subsequent to the activity, but (also) part of it; otherwise, the activity could not be "directed" by understanding of them. Attention to consequences as they unfold is part of—indeed, is constitutive of—the Pragmatic method.

The Pragmatic conception of consequences, then, encourages us to think in recursive rather than linear terms, blurring the lines between means and ends. Consequences are themselves the ultimate potentiality: pointing to the future, but existing (because emerging) now. If close attention to outcomes tends to narrow our view to what we wish to find, close attention to consequences broadens our view to include what we never thought to look for, opening us up (potentially!) to surprise and wonder. Moreover, because consequences are intrinsic to (immanent in) and coterminous with activities, they cannot be predetermined and imposed upon those who undertake the activities, as outcomes often are.

The terms *outcomes* and *consequences*, then, have differing tendencies: they encourage different ways of thinking about and acting vis-à-vis assessment. Moreover, while outcomes, as conceived in OA, are amenable to the prevailing technocratic logic of the managed university, consequences—unpredictable, always emerging, tied to context, recursive—tend to disrupt it. Consequences direct our attention to singularity and potentiality: the very problems that the measurement-based efficiency model is meant to manage away.

This tension between what we might call "consequential assessment" and the demands of the managed university raises several small-p pragmatic concerns. First, and most obviously, we have programs and departments to run, teach in, and yes, assess. We do not stand outside of the managed university. And even if we did, there are good intellectual and ethical reasons for attempting to achieve and document some measure of program coherence—for offering, that is, a similarly high-quality (though not necessarily identical) educational experience to all students. Second, we are some way down the outcomes assessment road; as I have suggested, OA has attained the status of educational common sense. Given this status, most of us could not feasibly decide simply to stop doing OA; the negative institutional consequences would be too severe. Third, a simple swapping out of terms (trading *outcomes* for *consequences*) would do little good: without changing the way our institutions and programs *approach* assessment, consequences (or whatever terms we might choose) will simply come to take on the valences that *outcomes* now has. (We have seen this before—with the institutional evisceration of the terms *critical thinking* and *diversity*, for instance.)

But even though most of us cannot feasibly jettison the OA model altogether and begin assessment anew, this does not mean the only option available to faculty and department and program administrators is simply to accede to the ideological and institutional logics of OA. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neil argue in their recent book *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*, we as faculty and department and program administrators need to get involved in conversations in and beyond our institutions about the nature and function of post-secondary assessment. We should advocate for assessment models that we believe in and that are likely to lead to the consequences we desire for our programs, faculty,

and students. Further, as Donna Strickland has recently argued, even if we accept that we all participate in academic management (of classrooms, programs, and/or institutions) by virtue of our faculty and administrative positions, only an "instrumental" approach to academic management would require us simply to reproduce technical rationality and the efficiency model. Strickland imagines instead an "operative" approach that involves "tweaking" existing institutional protocols through informed intuition and careful reflection on our goals and values. Quoting Brian Massumi, Strickland suggests that the operative approach "'poses an unpredictable futurity rather than anticipating outcomes'" (121).

Without adopting wholesale Strickland's notion of "operative managerial reason" (119),[7] I appreciate her insistence that there is room to maneuver within prevailing logics of academic management. This small-p pragmatic stance should not deter us from advocating for changes to those logics when they do not serve the interests of teaching and learning (or, for that matter, research), but, for our present purposes, it asks us to consider (as well) how we make educational aims operative: how we frame and use them in the profession and in our departments, programs, and classrooms. Regardless of whether we find ourselves working (or choose to work) within the OA model, the challenge before us is to *frame* and *use* educational aims in ways that avoid the pernicious separation of means and ends, the rigidity of fixed ends, the narrow focus on predetermined results, and the imposition of external ends on faculty and students—while addressing institutional demands for assessment of student learning and maintaining program coherence. In the next section, I address the framing and uses of educational aims by disciplinary organizations; I then consider the framing and uses of educational aims in local sites of practice: departments, programs, and classrooms.

Disciplinary Framing and Uses of Educational Aims: A Tale of Two Documents

The most visible framing of educational aims in the discipline is undoubtedly the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition." The statement, originally adopted by the council in 2000 and amended in 2008, is, in my view, an eminently useful document. I have used it to frame assessment conversations and activities with faculty and students in several institutions. Its categories of intellectual work—rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; knowledge of conventions; and (in the amended version) composing in electronic environments—resonate with me as a writing teacher and administrator. As I read through the outcomes, especially in the amended version, I recognize that these are, generally speaking, my hopes for my students.

There is also much to admire in the so-called outcomes collective's highly collaborative, iterative approach to developing and circulating the statement. Participants on the WPA listserv and attendees of various national and regional conferences had multiple opportunities to help shape the document. Once the document was complete, the collective continued to encourage both "celebration" and "complication" of the statement, to invoke key terms from Susanmarie Harrington's introduction to *The Outcomes Book*. The book itself contributes to this effort, presenting both praise for and criticism of the statement, and exploring the various ways it has been and can be used.

At the same time, the framing of the outcomes in the CWPA statement reflects the kind of fixity and isolation from the experiences of teachers and students that Dewey worried about. The announced aim of the statement is to "regularize what can be expected to be taught in first-year composition" by describing "only what we expect to find at the end of first-year composition." The reader is reminded that "[l]earning to write is a complex process [. . .] that takes place over time," but, as with my earlier hypothetical formulation, each outcome branches from the stub "by the end of first year composition." As Rich Haswell suggests in his chapter of *The Outcomes Book*, the statement "rather insistently frames itself as a snapshot taken at only one point in time" (193). The outcomes are not framed within a larger developmental arc; they are fixed at the end of the first-year course, and they fail, as Marilyn Sternglass asserts, to build on students' prior knowledge, which Sternglass's longitudinal study of college writers had found to be so important to their development.

Equally important, as Peter Elbow suggests in his chapter, the outcomes are disconnected from students' *present* activities—the ones undertaken in writing courses. Elbow explains that the outcomes have much more to do with the results of writing than with the experience of writing. The outcomes neglect educational aims that he finds "most central and writerly for a first-year writing course: getting students to *experience* themselves as writers and to *function* as writers" (179). This omission, I suggest, is not surprising; when we begin our thinking with "outcomes," we tend to look not to the means of the educational activity (here, writing), but to its results, its ends.

It is worth noting that this separation of ends and means was a conscious, political choice made by the outcomes collective. The collective viewed itself as responding to the threat that outsiders who knew little about writing and teaching writing would step in and provide outcomes for writing programs—and perhaps implement reductive tests to measure students' writing against those outcomes (Rhodes, Peckham, Bergmann, and Condon 12, 15). It wished to use the statement as a shield against such intrusion. At the same time, the collective wished to preserve the prerogatives of teachers and program administrators. As Ed White recalls, the solution was "a set of crucial distinctions: outcomes are different from standards, and agreement

on outcomes [by the collective] does not require agreement on a single best way to achieve those outcomes" (5). In other words, the collective (in a preemptive move) would determine ends, but means would be left up to local actors.

This principle appears in several other essays in the collection (Yancey; Rhodes, Peckham, Bergmann, and Condon; Wiley; Hokanson). Rhodes, Peckham, Bergmann, and Condon perhaps enunciate it best: "We [the outcomes collective] could specify *what* students should do in first-year composition in terms that could work within any of the variations we knew about; and we could leave decisions about *how well* students should perform those outcomes where those decisions belonged—in the local context" (12). This compromise seems a neat way to head off some potential dangers of this kind of statement. But notice that it turns on just the separation between ends (what) and means (how) that Dewey feared. "The local context" is identified as the locus of responsibility only for decisions regarding means, not ends. Responsibility for specifying ends is arrogated by the professional body, working outside of that local context. The claim by members of the collective that the statement merely provides a "framework" (Yancey), a "baseline" (Hokanson), a "heuristic" (Wiley), or a means to start curricular "conversations" (Harrington) is undermined by the insistence that educational ends are the province of "professional" bodies while educational means are the province of "local" actors. (Though this is not the dominant stance, it is worth noting that the book is not entirely devoid of disciplinary paternalism and condescension toward the "average" teacher of college composition.) This separation of responsibilities explicitly isolates ends from the ongoing activities of teachers and students.

This is not to deny that there are good "pragmatic" and intellectual reasons for disciplinary organizations to get involved in formulating educational aims. Aims formulated by knowledgeable professionals can be used to forestall the incursion of remote policymakers, politicians, or corporate leaders into our professional work. They can also help inform institution-, department-, and program-level work, as the outcomes collective claimed and as I will show. But the point here is that when professional bodies frame educational aims, they need to find ways to avoid the separation of means and ends, the fixity toward which the term *outcomes* tends, and the likelihood of imposition on local actors.

In my view, the more recent *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, adopted by CWPA, NCTE, and the National Writing Project, offers a promising alternative framing and use of educational aims. The *Framework* itself does not formulate "outcomes"; instead, while "based on outcomes included in the CWPA Outcomes Statement," it identifies "the habits of mind and the kinds of writing experience that will best prepare students for success as they enter courses in which they will work to achieve those outcomes" (3). Couched in the discourse of "college readiness," the *Framework* does peg the habits of mind and experiences to a course

of study—the entire K–12 experience. But the habits of mind and experiences are not framed as "ends" in the same sense that outcomes are. The habits of mind—curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition—are broadly conceived and cannot be achieved once-and-for-all. Moreover, in recommending certain kinds of *experiences* with writing, reading, and critical analysis, the *Framework* makes an explicit attempt to articulate means and ends simultaneously. For instance,

> Teachers can help writers develop flexible processes by having students
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> - practice all aspects of writing processes including invention, research, drafting, sharing with others, revising in response to reviews, and editing;
> - generate ideas and texts using a variety of processes and situate those ideas within different academic disciplines and contexts;
> - incorporate evidence and ideas from written, visual, graphic, verbal, and other kinds of texts;
> - use feedback to revise texts to make them appropriate for the academic discipline or context for which the writing is intended;
> - work with others in various stages of writing; and
> - reflect on how different writing tasks and elements of the writing process contribute to their development as a writer. (8)

These look like outcomes statements—it is easy to imagine a stub phrase such as "by the end of high school, students will . . ."—but this framing emphasizes instead the kinds of *experiences* teachers can help provide for students. It also suggests that the aim—to "develop flexible [writing] processes"—can be achieved only over time and through many kinds of related experiences.

Like the CWPA "Outcomes Statement," the primary disciplinary use of the *Framework* is to provide an authoritative professional statement of educational aims, and thereby to counter or forestall relatively reductive, uninformed "outsider" notions of writing. But the *Framework* frames broad educational aims over a long period of time, giving the impression that it names only some of the consequences that alert teachers and students ought to pay attention to as they undertake teaching and learning experiences together. There is no attempt to atomize and make measurable detailed skills and content knowledge. The K–12 aims are tied to college and career aims, suggesting continuity among past, present, and future educational experiences. Those aims—expressed as habits of mind and experiences rather than "what students should know and be able to do"—attempt to name and guide the ongoing activities of teachers and students, rather than focus only on their results. They are ends-in-view rather than fixed ends: resources for present action, not determinants of it.

On the other hand, there is no indication that the *Framework* is dynamic and evolving; instead, it is presented in fixed terms (rooted in research, thoroughly vet-

ted by high school and college faculty, professionally endorsed [1]). Perhaps more important, the framing of the *Framework* offers little by way of guidance on how the document ought to be used. Although the document identifies "instructors who teach writing" as the primary audience and asserts that "audiences beyond the classroom—including parents, policymakers, employers, and the general public—also can use this document" (2), it does not specify what either audience might do with the *Framework*. So even as its framing of educational aims avoids many of the pitfalls associated with outcomes, the *Framework* does not go far enough in guiding its potential uses—including in local sites, to which I now turn.

Framing and Using Educational Aims in Departments, Programs, and Classrooms: The Art of Articulation

When educational aims are framed as outcomes, local actors—department and program administrators, teachers, and students—are encouraged to *adopt* (the term we encounter in several essays in *The Outcomes Book*) or *align with* (the phrase we find everywhere in K–12 education) the aims. Programs and classrooms are expected to fall into line with the outcomes. By contrast, framing educational aims as consequences encourages program administrators, teachers, and students to *articulate* their own aims with external aims.

Articulation has two common connotations that are relevant here. It is, first of all, an utterance—an act of expression. An appropriate educational aim (to borrow Dewey's formulation) is an expression of the values of teachers and students who undertake the educational activities. But articulation also means to fit or join together. In this sense, the term suggests that two things are juxtaposed: placed in relation to one another. An appropriate educational aim may be expressed in relation to various other expressions, including other sets of (institutional and disciplinary/professional) aims.[8]

Department and program administrators, teachers, and students can use educational aims formulated elsewhere, then, to articulate (to express, to frame) their own. Articulation does not require accommodation of external aims, as do adoption or alignment, but it does entail responsibility to engage those external aims and to account for the relationship between internal and external aims.

Articulation at the program or department levels can take many forms, but the strategies associated with it are these:

- engage as many faculty—and, when possible, students—as possible in the process of reflecting on and expressing their educational aims
- put those aims in conversation with relevant institutional and disciplinary/professional educational aims

- design an iterative process in which the resulting aims become an object of ongoing inquiry
- design mechanisms or protocols for tracking consequences *beyond* the expressed aims

To be clear: this is not a description of an entire assessment process; it is a set of strategies for framing and using educational aims at the program and department level. Because aims tend to become naturalized over time within ongoing assessment processes, it is useful to identify strategies by which department and program participants, working together, can keep them in play, as it were. This militates against narrowness and fixity. Because the process is iterative and the aims are an explicit object of inquiry, ends are continually tied to means; because the process is as inclusive as possible, those ends are not imposed but emerge from the department and program participants. And the final strategy allows us to be alert to emerging consequences, open to singularity and potentiality we might not have anticipated when framing our aims.

In the writing program I currently administer, for instance, the assessment committee began the process of revising our program's key educational aims and the experiences we wish to offer students by conducting a collective analysis of relevant institutional and program documents, the CWPA "Outcomes Statement," and individually designed concept maps it solicited from all instructors in the program. (Instructors were asked first to list terms and concepts that represented what they most valued in the writing courses they taught. Then they were asked to create a visual concept map that prioritized and related those concepts and terms through an arrangement of symbols, shapes, and links.) Just as the committee articulated program goals with those in the "Outcomes Statement," it encouraged instructors to articulate their goals vis-à-vis those the committee had drafted on behalf of the program. The committee encouraged instructors to begin their thinking in their own teaching experiences and to consider first their best hopes for their own students. They were not to worry about "deviating" from the program's draft aims, and they were given the option of submitting their maps anonymously.

By making this mapping activity a routine part of our professional development workshops, we are able to track emerging trends in the maps (and individuals can do this with their own maps as well) and continually revisit our key aims and experiences. Just as important—because we understand that any attempt to map is a necessarily reductive process—we also use this activity to identify gaps or tensions: we discuss what we are not capturing, what is surprising or new to us that we had not anticipated, things we are just beginning to think about and want to return to, and so on. Our key aims and experiences are understood as provisional and partial. At the same time, they are our best attempt to articulate the values that are most important to us at a given moment in time, so we stand by our aims-for-now (as we

call them internally) and allow them to provide much-needed program coherence. We can, of course, use these aims for traditional scoring to meet institutional demands for assessment data, but we are also examining alternative methods by which we can analyze data, such as tagging and coding student electronic portfolios, as well as employing a range of indirect assessment methods. These methods will allow us to identify a range of significant consequences of our work with students, including some that our expressed aims-for-now could not have anticipated.

It is often possible to involve students in articulation strategies such as these. I know of at least one English department in which senior majors are asked to respond to and even rewrite learning goals for the major as part of their exit focus-group interviews. But no matter how collaborative and inclusive a department's or program's process of developing aims might be, if students are not involved in articulating educational aims as they undertake the educational activities in classrooms, even departmental or programmatic aims may seem fixed and imposed from outside their experiences.

Once again, there are many ways for students to articulate their aims with aims formulated outside their classrooms. The basic strategies parallel those used by departments or programs:

- involve students in the process of reflecting on and expressing their educational aims
- put those aims in conversation with relevant course/program/department (and, where appropriate, larger institutional and disciplinary) aims
- design an iterative process in which the resulting aims become an object of ongoing inquiry
- design mechanisms or protocols for tracking consequences *beyond* the expressed aims

For instance, students could be asked at the beginning of the semester to write about their own learning goals for the course as well as their ideal educational experience. At midsemester, they could return to this writing and revise it in light of their experiences in the course thus far. This might be a good time to introduce relevant aims associated with the program, department, institution, discipline, or profession. At the end of the semester, students could return both to their own aims and to the relevant set of external aims. They could be asked to write not only about how their learning and experiences aligned with the aims—and at what level they believe they achieved those aims—but also about aspects of their experiences or learning in the course that were not captured or anticipated by either their own or the external aims.

Depending on the type of course involved and the pedagogical approach of the faculty member, institutional or disciplinary aims might be introduced right away, or they could be introduced later, once students have had time to develop and express their own learning aims. Similarly, some faculty will want to ask students to return frequently to their aims as consequences emerge, and others will want to identify one

or two key reflection moments during the semester. In any case, the point is that the operative aims—the ones that matter most for student learning—emerge from the conditions, needs, and activities of students as they experience them.[9]

Conclusion: Articulating Consequential Assessment

These department, program, and classroom articulation activities, in my experience, broaden and deepen both the assessment process and the educational activities of which they are a part. Students, faculty, and department and program administrators all have an opportunity to reflect on, identify, and operate from aims that are meaningful to them. As a result, the assessment process is more informed, better contextualized, and more likely to enlist "buy-in" at all levels and therefore to positively affect teaching and learning.

Articulation is a Pragmatic method because it asks us to slow down and inquire into multiple alternatives; indeed, it is *the* Pragmatic method (as conceived by James and Dewey) applied to the framing and use of educational aims. The power of this method lies in its ability to help students, faculty, and program and department administrators negotiate the inherent tension in academic programs between coherence on the one hand and singularity and potentiality on the other. Articulation allows us to achieve (always provisional) program coherence and to meet institutional assessment demands while avoiding the problems Dewey associates with fixed, narrow, imposed educational aims, in several ways:

- by calling for engagement of external aims without forcing adoption or even alignment
- by contextualizing local assessment processes without allowing them to become insular
- by identifying a set of aims that program and department faculty and administration can stand by without enshrining them forever in institutional bureaucracy
- by prioritizing some aims without diverting attention from emerging, unintended, and perhaps highly significant consequences

In the end and above all, articulation engages us in the necessary and difficult task of bringing educational aims—by whatever name—inside ongoing teaching and learning activities, where they will inevitably evolve as we perceive and act on the always-emerging consequences of our work with students. This is the work of consequential assessment: the work of every department, every program, every classroom.

Notes

1. Indeed, it already has, and close to home. Citing *Academically Adrift* in a recent From the Editor column in the *ADE Bulletin*, David Laurence, while stopping short of calling for profession-wide student learning outcomes, issued a request for ADE-member departments to share their assessment work to an online resource library. Though literary studies in general has been more reluctant than composition studies to take up assessment work, Gerald Graff's support for assessment while president of the Modern Language Association (see Graff), recent discussions in the *ADE Bulletin* (see Rosenthal) and in the MLA Delegate Assembly (see Rosenthal), and Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal's recent book *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime* (published by the Teagle Foundation, which advocates for higher education assessment) suggest that Laurence's call may be well timed. One index of the commonsense status of outcomes assessment is the conflation of "assessment" and "outcomes assessment" in these discussions. For instance, while *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime* engages many assessment debates and addresses several challenges to assessment—most notably that much of the learning we value in literary studies is "ineffable"—neither the introduction nor any of the eighteen chapters critically examines the idea of outcomes.

2. In composition studies lore, "Assess thyself, or assessment will be done unto you" is known as (Ed) White's Second Law of Assessodynamics.

3. Roskelly and Ronald complicate this stereotypical view of pragmatism and claim both the pragmatist and romantic traditions of our field. For instance, they point out that Ann Berthoff's influential work was informed by Pragmatists (especially C. S. Peirce). Janet Bean and Elbow also claim pragmatism, using it as a lens through which to revisit freewriting. Donald Jones does the same with Elbow's work (and "expressivism") more generally. Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles use a pragmatist lens to argue for directed self-placement, and Michael Kelly uses it to address stubborn pedagogical and institutional problems in the teaching of writing in classrooms and writing centers. For useful and diverse general treatments of the philosophical tradition of Pragmatism, see John Diggins, Louis Menand, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West.

4. In the second of the lecturers that would comprise the book *Pragmatism*, James illustrates this idea with the example of a man and a squirrel. The man is trying to catch sight of a squirrel on a tree, but the squirrel avoids the man by moving around the opposite side of the tree as the man circles. Question: once the man returns to his original position—without having seen the squirrel—has he gone around the critter or hasn't he? To approach this question as a pragmatist, James said, one must consider what is *practically meant* by the term "go around." If we mean passing from the north to the east to the south to the west of him, the answer is yes. If we mean being in front of him then to his right then behind him then to his left, the answer is no. James uses this humble example to demonstrate the utility of what he calls "the pragmatic method" in intervening in seemingly interminable debates.

5. Not all OA proponents eschew "inputs," but many define OA precisely by shifting attention from inputs to outcomes. Michael Carter, for instance, puts it this way:

> We're used to thinking about education primarily in terms of inputs: we designate a particular set of courses for students to take and when the course count is completed we declare them educated and send them on their way. We assume that the inputs we provide for students will lead to certain outcomes, the knowledge, skills, and other attributes we believe graduates should possess. However, an outcomes-based approach to education does not rely only on assumption. By that method, faculty identify the educational outcomes for a program and then evaluate the program according to its effectiveness in enabling students to achieve those outcomes (4–5).

6. Though I find the Haswells' treatment of potentiality and singularity extremely useful, I do not reach the conclusion, as they do, that "[w]e will need to individualize diagnostics, because we and our students are singular" (231). Or, at least, I don't agree that we must *always* do so. When working with and assessing individual students, we should do our best to confront their "radical singularity." There are times, however, when we may wish to get a sense of what is going on in a whole class or in a program or institution, and for this we might use "diagnostics" that go beyond the individual. The task when doing so, it seems to me, is to design assessment practices that do not force us to be "normed" out of our reading selves even while reading across texts.

7. While I find Strickland's historical study of "the managerial unconscious" in composition studies illuminating, I am not persuaded that "it's really a matter of word choice to prefer 'administration' over 'management'" (10). Or, perhaps more accurately, I don't agree that this word choice is a trivial matter. The terms *administration* and *management*, like the terms *outcomes* and *consequences*, have differing tendencies; while administration is hardly innocent, management names—and more to the point *does*—a kind of work that I'm not convinced is in our interest as faculty or program/department administrators to embrace.

8. Though I don't have space to pursue this here, there are interesting and significant resonances between my Pragmatic notion of articulation and Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. As John Trimbur explains, "Hall's theory of articulation conceptualizes the conjunctures at which people knit together disparate and apparently contradictory practices, beliefs, and discourses in order to give their world some semblance of meaning and coherence. Articulation theory in other words, describes how people make a unity that is neither necessary nor previously determined" (23). For Hall, articulation was a concept that mediated between the strict determinism of structuralism and the radical indeterminacy of post-structuralism. It created a space for agency—much as I am trying to do here—even within highly restrictive social and institutional conditions. Crucial to Hall's notion of articulation, and mine, is unpredictability: "Articulation is always a matter of struggle in a war of positions where nothing is certain ahead of time but rather a matter of practice. No outcome can be guaranteed [. . .] by the laws of history but must be determined concretely at specific conjunctures of history" (Trimbur 24).

9. I am grateful to Carmen Kynard for helping me see what these activities can look like—and what is at stake in undertaking them, especially for students whose gender, class, and race position themselves outside the gendered, bourgeois, and racialized codes of traditional outcomes statements. Kynard's ongoing assessment work will help us better understand the concept and practice of "cultural validity" as well as the potential contributions of critical race theory to writing assessment.

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