

Outcomes-Based Qualification Design and Vocational Subject Literacies: How Compositional Fallacy Short-Changes School-Leavers' Literacy Development

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Abstract : Learning outcomes-based qualifications have been heralded as the means to raise vocational education and training (VET) standards, meet the needs of the changing workforce, and establish equivalence with existing academic qualifications. Characterized by explicit, measurable performance statements and atomistically specified assessment criteria, the outcomes model has been adopted by many VET systems worldwide since its inception in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. Debate to date centers on how the outcomes model treats knowledge. Flaws have been identified in terms of the overemphasis of end-points, neglect of process and a failure to treat curricula coherently. However, much of this censure has evaluated the outcomes model from a theoretical perspective; to date, there has been scant empirical research to support these criticisms. Various issues therefore remain unaddressed. This study investigates how the outcomes model impacts the teaching of subject literacies. This is of particular concern for subjects on the academic-vocational boundary such as Business Studies, since many of these students progress to higher education in the United Kingdom. This study also explores the extent to which the outcomes model is compatible with borderline vocational subjects. To fully understand if this qualification model is fit for purpose in the 16-18 year-old phase, it is necessary to investigate how teachers interpret their qualification specifications in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Of particular concern is the nature of the interaction between the outcomes model and teachers' understandings of their subject-procedural knowledge, and how this affects their capacity to embed literacy into their teaching. This present study is part of a broader doctoral research project which seeks to understand if and how content-area, disciplinary literacy and genre approaches can be adapted to outcomes-based VET qualifications. This qualitative research investigates the 'what' and 'how' of literacy embedding from the perspective of in-service teacher development in the 16-18 phase of education. Using ethnographic approaches, it is based on fieldwork carried out in one Further Education college in the United Kingdom. Emergent findings suggest that the outcomes model is not fit for purpose in the context of borderline vocational subjects. It is argued that the outcomes model produces inferior qualifications due to compositional fallacy; the sum of a subject's components do not add up to the whole. Findings indicate that procedural knowledge, largely unspecified by some outcomes-based qualifications, is where subject-literacies are situated, and that this often gets lost in 'delivery'. It seems that the outcomes model provokes an atomistic treatment of knowledge amongst teachers, along with the privileging of propositional knowledge over procedural knowledge. In other words, outcomes-based VET is a hostile environment for subject-literacy embedding. It is hoped that this research will produce useful suggestions for how this problem can be ameliorated, and will provide an empirical basis for the potential reforms required to address these issues in vocational education.

Keywords : literacy, outcomes-based, qualification design, vocational education

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