"Make Them Up and Ignore Them"? Learning Outcomes and Literary Studies in Canada

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In a 2012 article in *Times Higher Education* (reprinted in the *CAUT Bulletin* in January 2013), Frank Furedi observes somewhat ruefully that, probably like many of us, he is uneasy about learning outcomes but has generally managed to "make them up and

ignore them." I first read Furedi's article in early 2013, as I was preparing to participate in my department's 2013-2014 learning outcomes committee. My experience was something of a head-on collision with the phrase "learning outcomes," which, as I soon discovered, were firmly rooted in Ontario universities in the wake of the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance's approval in 2010 of a Quality Assurance Framework. The Framework introduced offices of Quality Assurance— and their attendant fondness for learning outcomes—at campuses across the province. Just as my colleagues and I were embarking on the process of developing outcomes for an undergraduate degree in English, the Council on Quality Assurance, better known as the "Quality Council," was beginning to push beyond our phase of work toward the *assessment* of course-, program-, and discipline-specific outcomes. Despite the rapid introduction of learning outcomes across the country in the past half decade, Canadian universities have admittedly been relatively slow to embrace them: in Europe, the "Tuning Process," an effort to "harmonize skills and competencies at the subject or program level," was initiated more than a decade ago (Tamburri), and the Australian Qualifications Framework (which implemented "quality assured qualifications" and their attendant learning outcomes for each level of study undertaken in Australia) was established in 1995 ("What Is the AQF?").

Surely there are few of you who have not yet met learning outcomes, but a brief definition might be helpful. According to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario's *Learning Outcomes Assessment: A Practitioner's Handbook*, program-level learning outcomes are "statements that indicate what successful students should know, value or be able to do by the end of a program" (Goff et al. 8). Outcomes begin with verbs designating observable actions

(one cannot "know," but one might "apply" or "identify") and then specify the learning to be demonstrated ("the content") (Goff et al. 8). These outcomes are meant to be observed, measured, and assessed in the context of specific courses, programs, or disciplines. As critics such as Furedi have noted, there are excellent reasons to doubt the predetermined limits that the outcomes-based approach imposes on learning; the emergence of the assessment phase renders this doubt all the more solid. The questions that ensue from the assessment phase for all postsecondary programs, but perhaps for humanities programs in particular, are urgent: for instance, how might provinces tie future funding to the results of such assessments? Somewhat ominously, the *Learning Outcomes Assessment* handbook observes that universities should pursue assessment as a way to "showcase the quality of your program; make your graduates appealing to employers and your program attractive to prospective students and donors" (Goff et al. 8).

Given how nefarious the assessment phase may be in this era of "strategic mandate agreements" between provinces and universities, the question of how to broach the thorny obligation to generate learning outcomes looms large. For many of us teaching in literature and other Arts programs across the country, learning outcomes are still an open question. Many units appear to be in the throes of developing program—and course-specific learning outcomes: for example, in the wake of the establishment of university-wide outcomes in 2014, departments at the University of Victoria will be tasked with generating program outcomes in 2015-2016. How, then, to proceed? Making outcomes up in order to ignore them is likely not going to help us much, especially as we enter the assessment phase, when we will be asked to use our own outcomes in order to justify the "quality" of our programs.

Perhaps my own experience as a recent member of a committee tasked with generating program-level learning outcomes for undergraduate students in English can offer a useful example here. Most unsettling for me in the process was the fact that learning outcomes permit those of us who find ourselves tasked with birthing them to deploy the "active" and "concrete" verbs so favoured by the discourse (e.g., "describe," "compare," "apply"), while settling back into platitudinous statements regarding the politically subversive effects of the reading and writing practices we view as "outcomes." While my experience working on my department's learning outcomes committee confirmed this fact, Carleton's English program has not yet made its outcomes public. But one need not travel far to find a similar example at a neighbouring Ontario university. The Department of English at Wilfrid Laurier University made its "program level outcomes" available on its website several years ago, and the second outcome is as follows: students will "read texts critically in a variety of historical contexts, and recognize the issues raised by them in order to identify and assess their social, environmental and ethical impact on the current global community" ("English Program Level Outcomes" n. pag.). This is a perfectly reasonable and, I think, desirable outcome, but what happens to this outcome when we recall that it is just that—an "outcome"?

Let's be frank, as Stephen Harper was so fond of saying: learning outcomes are really about funneling students as quickly and efficiently as possible into the labour market. According to the "Quality Council," "quality assurance at the national and international levels provides for greater acceptance of Ontario degrees as well as for greater opportunities for employment for graduates" ("Quality Assurance"). Hence, we need to recognize the kind of reading (and writing) we teach to our students does not exist in a vacuum of our own private creation. As

Nicole Shukin compellingly argues, reading in the contemporary moment is neither "aestheticized labour" (the opposite of work) nor "subversive pleasure" (24). Our discipline is "now immanent to a market economy and, more specifically, to a knowledge or information economy" (24); it is enmeshed in the "*biopolitics* of producing reading subjects and populations within current contexts of capitalism" (27). Viewed in this way, learning outcomes are just one further institutional layer operating within a postfordist economy that has a voracious appetite for immaterial labour. I hope we can still insist on the subversive possibilities of reading and writing, but surely the genealogy of learning outcomes renders them inappropriate vehicles for expressing these possibilities.

Moreover, as Imre Szeman has pointed out, practitioners of literary study must attend to the shifting terms of the discourse of "creativity" in the context of the global economy. If this term has not been of great historical interest to literary critics, it should be, Szeman contends, because not only has the "social form (as work)" of artistic labour changed (insofar as it has become a model for work in general), the "political challenge" of art has been "domesticated" and "diluted" by the reigning discourse of creativity (33). Widely influential concepts such as Richard Florida's "creative economy" have spread a discourse of creativity that "represents a loss in how we understand the politics of culture—a shift from a practice with a certain degree of autonomy (however questionable, however problematic at a theoretical level) to one without any" (Szeman 18). Yet it is most specifically in relation to the utterly compromised concept of creativity that art encounters difficulties. Szeman concludes:

Contemporary art and cultural production have a social specificity that plays an essential role in their political function. They don't need to think of themselves as

creative or as the exemplar of creative acts. Indeed, it would seem that the farther they stay away from the intellectual and political traffic in creativity, the greater suspicion with which they treat this mobile and uncritically accepted discourse, the more likely they are able to continue to challenge the limits of our ways of thinking, seeing, being, and believing. (35)

Szeman's assessment of the fate of the arts in the globalized, postfordist economy is thus slightly more sanguine than Shukin's, but his principal note of caution regarding the discourse of creativity bears recollection, especially as we embark upon the labour of writing learning outcomes.

Bearing Szeman's argument in mind, we teachers and practitioners of "English" should probably be wary of letting ourselves fall into this "traffic in creativity" as we develop our outcomes and endeavour to justify the value and utility of our discipline to upper-level administrators. This danger is very real: if we tweak our language slightly, we can easily pander to the very current idea that creativity is an economic good, or that English graduates are uniquely "entrepreneurial" and "innovative." Accolades for English will ensue! In this era of declining enrolments, many Departments of English across the continent have in fact turned to such logic in the promotion of their programs, drawing implicitly and sometimes explicitly on the now-infamous "Want Innovative Thinking? Hire from the Humanities" article published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2011 (see, for example, the "Pathways to Careers" section on the University of Ottawa's Department of English website). Surely in many cases such logic is being imposed from upper levels of university governance with considerable force.

There are evidently no easy answers to the problem of learning outcomes. But I do not think that we, as professors of English, need to be resigned to them or to their

terminologies and logic. Where collective agreements exist, we need to draw on their resources in order to protect our academic freedom. Perhaps most importantly, we should be wary of what appears to be the possibility of using learning outcomes strategically. We can make outcomes say all manner of things about the politicized nature of language, literacy, and culture, but at the end of the day, it is the way we will be asked to instrumentalize our own learning outcomes that should concern us.

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