

Book Review

Developing Outcomes-based Assessment for Learner-centered Education: A Faculty Introduction, Amy Driscoll and Swarup Wood (Stylus, 2007)

Review by

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Because I have been wading knee-deep through a sea of learning outcomes at my institution, I approached *Developing Outcomes-based Assessment for Learner-centered Education* with keen interest, hoping to find new ideas, new strategies, new models that could immediately be pressed into action to persuade resistant faculty to give learning outcomes a successful try.

Sure enough, the authors provided exactly what I needed. Driscoll and Wood offer convincing, well-grounded explanations of the role learning outcomes can play in creating truly effective programs, courses, and assessments. Learning outcomes are presented as means of powerful perceptual change, a key component of the learning paradigm. Furthermore, they discuss common faculty misgivings openly, with understanding and reason.

The authors' advice is based in literature and the experience of introducing outcomes-based assessment to an initially resistant university. Driscoll, as then-Director of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at California State University, approached the persuasive component of her work by creating faculty-centric learning communities, which eased faculty into the use of learning outcomes as members of a supportive cohort. Wood, a Chemistry professor, was one of the faculty members won over by Driscoll's approach, which led eventually to a collaborative relationship.

Aside from its persuasive and explanatory merits, the book's value is elevated by clear, practical advice for faculty on all aspects of creating and using effective learning outcomes. It may be the most useful guide to outcomes-based education I have read. And yes, I said "outcomes-based education" because Driscoll and Wood do not confine their advice to assessment alone, despite the book's title.

There are flaws, of course. Driscoll and Wood rely on folksy, often quite hokey, rhetorical techniques. Their language is intended to win faculty over with an academic version of "we're all in this together" populism, which wore thin a few pages into the first chapter. The writing style, when not wincingly populist, is a typically administrative sort of blandness, with all the flavor of an internal memo. If *Developing Outcomes-based Assessment for Learner-centered Education* is meant to be read cover-to-cover, many faculty may miss the useful content as they're lulled to sleep.

I found myself struggling to understand the nature of Driscoll and Wood's co-authorship. Although the book is intended to provide both administrative and faculty perspectives –

with Driscoll as the avatar of administration, Wood as the avatar of faculty – it obviously belongs to Driscoll, who frequently addresses Wood in the third person. Most chapters end with a cute section entitled, “A Conversation with Swarup,” the principal effect of which is to highlight Wood’s marginalization as co-author. Toward the end, as discussion turns to the results of their own research rather than advice, Wood seems to play a larger role; a few of these later chapters feature “A Conversation with Amy.”

At times I found myself wishing the authors had spent more time thinking through the issues. Their use of Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is irritatingly uncritical, though the effect on the book as a whole is minimal. The chapter on “Criteria and Standards for Assessment” is a let-down, as the standards they present as examples are about as useless as the vague, wishy-washy rubrics used in many Canadian public school systems. Such standards have no value unless accompanied by explanation, context, and definitions of key terms. For instance, what is the difference between “occasionally” doing something and “seldom” doing something? Unless we know how the terms “occasionally” and “seldom” are being defined, using them in assessment accomplishes little of value. The standards, furthermore, concern themselves only with the frequency with which students do something, ignoring quality of performance. Without an element of evaluation, a student could receive a score of “excellent” for the “In-Depth Analysis” standard simply because he frequently engages in tasks related to analysis – even if he performs poorly. Yet who would accept that a student who performs frequent analyses at a low level should be judged “excellent” at “In-Depth Analysis”? Chances are, “excellent” connotes positive qualitative evaluation for most people.

Nevertheless, a welcome and useful book that will certainly inform my practice in many respects. *Developing Outcomes-based Assessment for Learner-centered Education* is worth purchasing despite its flaws, for its virtues are considerable.