“Professor Furedi, how do you get around learning outcomes?” a young lecturer asks me in a breakout session. I have just spent 10 minutes explaining the corrosive influence of learning outcomes on education to my audience at the recent Think Festival in The Hague. Nevertheless, I am caught off guard by my blunt questioner. That is probably why my reply is a bit more candid than I had intended it to be. “I just make them up and ignore them,” I say.

I should not have been too surprised by the question. One week earlier, when I put forward the same argument to a group of PhD students and staff at the University of Birmingham, the predominant reaction to learning outcomes was also one of cynicism and contempt. After my lecture, a recently appointed lecturer in education sounded like Jean-Paul Sartre when he described how he and his colleagues managed the institutional expectation that learning outcomes should be taken seriously: “With bad faith,” he chuckled. And bad faith is what the Quality Assurance Agency communicated in its 2007 report Outcomes from institutional audit: The adoption and uses of learning outcomes, when it boasted “that, despite differential rates of progress between and within institutions, the adoption of learning outcomes has been addressed with vigour”. Only in passing did the report point out that it “is apparent that not all staff embraced the learning outcomes approach with equal enthusiasm”; a bit of an understatement. Vigour and enthusiasm are not sentiments that normal academics express towards learning outcomes.

There are, of course, many academics who tell me that life is too short to worry about every fad in higher education. Their advice to me is to go through the motions of being a good boy or girl and to simply copy someone else’s learning outcomes. One Dutch computer studies lecturer explained to me that fortunately they have one colleague who “takes all this jargon seriously” and that he is more than happy to allow others to reproduce his wording.

So, although many academics regard the annual ritual of updating and specifying the learning outcomes in their module guide as a pointless performance, the role of this relatively recent innovation is rarely explicitly contested. Critics of learning outcomes frequently confine themselves to demanding a more flexible and less prescriptive approach towards the use of this tool and implicitly accept its legitimacy. And while in private conversation many academics dismiss the adoption of learning outcomes as an exercise in bureaucratic pedantry, such grumbles are indistinguishable from the numerous complaints about bureaucrats and administrators and rarely touch on the uniquely corrosive impact of the formalisation of learning outcomes on academic education.

On numerous occasions I have been told off by colleagues for making an issue of learning outcomes on the grounds that it merely requires a few minutes of cutting and pasting to produce them. Yet learning outcomes are not just another banal instrument deployed to monitor and quantify the achievements of students. The very purpose of this organisational instrument is to accomplish a shift in emphasis from learning to outcomes. This is a technique through which a utilitarian ethos to academic life serves to diminish what would otherwise be an open-ended experience for student and teacher alike. Those who
advocate learning outcomes do so expressly with the aim of abolishing such experiences, which is why they so vociferously target anything that smacks of ambiguity. Oxford Brookes University’s statement on “Writing Aims and Learning Outcomes”, for example, warns members of staff against using terms such as “know”, “understand”, “be familiar with”, “appreciate” or “be aware of” because “they’re not subject to unambiguous test”.

The attempt to abolish ambiguity in course design is justified on the grounds that it helps students by clarifying the overall purpose of their programme and of their assessment tasks. No doubt the learning outcomes contained in module unit guides are a model of clarity. But it is a simplistic form of clarity usually associated with bullet points, summary and guidance notes. The precision gained through the crystallisation of an academic enterprise into a few words is an illusory one that is likely to distract students from the clarity that comes from serious study and reflection.

The problem with utilitarian education is not its single-minded addiction to what is useful - hopefully all academic subjects are of use - but its tendency to deprive teaching and learning of meaning. Its focus on the end product devalues the actual experience of education. When the end acquires such significance the means become subordinated to it. The adage that “the end justifies the means” captures the imperative of utilitarian higher education.

The University of Virginia counsels its academics to “describe what students are asked to do using action verbs”. The exhortation is constantly repeated in different institutional guidelines. This rhetorical disdain for terms such as “appreciating” or “understanding” speaks to a pedagogic ethos that has become estranged from scholarship and the open-ended pursuit of ideas.

There are at least four compelling arguments against the use of learning outcomes in higher education.

First, they threaten to disrupt the conduct of the academic relationship between teacher and student. Every discipline has its own way of educating new cohorts of undergraduates. But even the hardest of the hard sciences requires that at least some of the time students should embark on a voyage of intellectual experimentation and discovery. Guiding students on such a quest demands that teachers are prepared to yield to new experience and are sufficiently flexible to forge relationships with students that are appropriate to the circumstances. The promise of certainty of learning outcomes violates relationships that are evolving in directions that are not always predictable.

Creativity cannot be foretold and students often develop their insight in ways that cannot be communicated to a predetermined formula. Instead of guiding, the ethos of learning outcomes encourages the imparting of information. Instead of a collaborative engagement, it favours a one-way dynamic rather than a dialogue. And what happens to those of us who are devoted to a Socratic orientation to teaching and believe that dialogue is not only a pleasant sounding cliche but is indispensable for gaining clarity and understanding? Since a dialogue cannot be a dialogue if its result is known in advance, the very notion of a learning outcome negates its spirit. This is not simply a minor defect of utilitarian pedagogy. Academics are not primary school teachers; they do not simply teach to impart information but because they, too, need the stimulation of questioning minds to flourish in their endeavour.

The second argument against learning outcomes is that they foster a climate that inhibits the capacity of students and teachers to deal with uncertainty. The attempt to clarify and render explicit the different
dimensions of academic learning represents a futile attempt to gain certainty through relying on process. What is gained, however, is not clarity but rigidity. This is a problem of what Richard Hil in his lively book Whackademia: an Insider’s Account of the Troubled University has characterised as the “rigidification of pedagogy”. According to Hil, this “involves the attempt by teaching and learning experts and academics themselves to ensure a largely pre-determined approach to learning - one that is linked directly to ‘learning objectives’ set out in unit information guides”.

The rigidification and standardisation of pedagogy attempts to artificially bypass the problem posed by the indeterminacy of knowledge and understanding. Yet a serious academic course is likely to raise issues that are complex and fluid and cannot be meaningfully distilled through the arbitrary act of inventing a learning outcome. This attempt to prescribe standardised outcomes invariably flattens out complexity and rewards those who have internalised template-speak.

The third argument against learning outcomes is that they devalue the art of teaching. The art of teaching depends on exercising judgement based on experience. At its best, it presupposes the capacity to respond to unexpected and unpredictable questions and problems that emerge in the course of a dialogue. It requires a willingness to extem-porise, change direction and even introduce issues and questions into the course that were not anticipated previously. But when teaching is constricted by what others think students should know at the end of the course, academics are spared the hassle of having to think for themselves.

The art of teaching also requires a readiness to treat different students differently. The more adventurous students will flourish only if they are let off the leash and given space to experiment. Learning outcomes inhibit this. Moreover the insights and experiences gained outside and beyond the learning outcomes are simply not recognised.

The fourth - and arguably most disturbing - consequence of the regime of learning outcomes is that it breeds a culture of cynicism and irresponsibility.

It is important to recall that the principal reason for the invention of learning outcomes was to hold academics and their institutions to account. As an integral component of auditing culture, advocates of learning outcomes claimed that through rendering the work of institutions more explicit, higher education would become more transparent and accountable. But, paradoxically, a method of organising education that has as one of its aims the institutionalisation of accountability fosters a climate of non-responsibility.

It is well known that the act of cobbling learning outcomes together represents a performance of impression management. As we have seen, academics receive guidelines that include a long list of words that they can use and ones that they cannot. These templates are than customised for the sake of appearances. But the very process through which learning outcomes are constructed involves an act of bad faith. Why? Because although the learning outcomes are formally authored by academics, the language and narrative used is scripted by agencies - so university courses are framed through a language that expresses values and organisational ideals that are external to their discipline. This would not be a problem if it were merely a matter of borrowing a terminology that served as an administrative convenience. The narrative through which learning outcomes are framed, however, seeks to distil a complex and necessarily open-ended dynamic into phrases that, even with the best will in the world, can never be more than platitudes.
This utilitarian ethos encourages irresponsibility because what matters is whether the formal outcomes have been achieved, not what students have actually experienced or learned. It promotes a calculating and instrumental attitude where responsibility becomes equated with box-ticking.

The issue of institutional dishonesty lies at the heart of the problem. Although promoters of learning outcomes frequently praise their alleged pedagogic benefits for students and teachers, it is necessary to recall that the motivation behind the invention of this instrument was that of a managerial convenience. More specifically, the motivation behind the language and narrative of learning outcomes was the exigency of holding academics to account. It was the aspiration to quantify and regulate higher education and not a problem integral to academic education that led to the institutionalisation of this regime. So what we have is a disciplinary instrument masquerading as a pedagogic one.

Can learning outcomes be redeemed? Critics who recognise the bureaucratic burdens imposed by the regime of outcomes have called for more flexibility. Others have criticised the “insensitive” use of this instrument and plea for a more “student-centred” approach. As a formal auditing instrument, however, learning outcomes cannot be anything other than formal and rigid. Nothing will be lost by getting rid of them.

If individual academics want to use learning outcomes, of course, that is their prerogative. But what we need is a genuinely pluralist academic culture where courses are taught in a manner that engages with issues that are integral to their discipline. Academics are grown-up people who do not need the language police to instruct them about what kind of verbs to use. And students should be treated as grown-ups who can be allowed to embark on a journey of discovery instead of directed to a predetermined destination.

The idiot’s guide to writing learning outcomes

Intended learning outcomes are statements that predict what learners will have gained as a result of learning.

A 2002 paper, The Role and Integration of Learning Outcomes into the Educational Process by Paul Watson of Sheffield Hallam University, defines learning outcomes as “something that students can do now that they could not do previously...a change in people as a result of a learning experience”.

Academics are asked to write learning outcomes for each course; they form part of the process of designing a course.

On its website, the University of Birmingham advises academics: “Your learning outcomes should specify the minimum acceptable standard for a student to be able to pass a module or course (threshold level). This means that it is important to express learning outcomes in terms of the essential learning for a module or course, so you should have a small number of learning outcomes which are of central importance, not a large number of superficial outcomes.

“We recommend that you aim for between four and eight learning outcomes for each of your modules, and up to 25 outcomes for an entire programme.

“Start programme outcomes with the phrase: ‘A successful learner from this programme will be able to...’
“Start module outcomes with the phrase: ‘On successful completion of the module, students will be able to...’

“Or, better still: ‘On successful completion of the module, you will be able to...’”

Meanwhile the University of Glasgow’s guidance says: “Try to avoid using verbs like ‘understand’ or ‘appreciate’ or ‘be familiar with’. Instead ask yourself what your students will be able to do if they understand ‘x’ and try to express this in the learning outcome. ILOs [intended learning outcomes] must express in operational terms what candidates should be able to demonstrate they can do for the purposes of assessment.”