# Beyond learning outcomes

(This is an extract adapted from the end of Chapter 3 on ‘Curriculum Design’ in the 3rd edition of ‘Making Learning Happen) published by Sage in 2014).

****Intended learning outcomes can be thought of as part of an even bigger picture, which also includes *learning incomes*, *emergent learning outcomes* and *intended learning outgoings.* Having sprung on you three things you won’t often find mentioned in the literature about curriculum design, let me explain and illustrate what I mean by these terms, and how we might usefully address them in curriculum design.

**Learning *incomes***

These may be different for each different learner. By learning *incomes*, I mean all the things learners are bringing to the learning situation. These include:

* what they already know about the subject
* what they can already do, related to the subject

other things in their experience which they can link to the new subject.

As long ago as 1968, Ausubel wrote:

If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this, and teach him accordingly. (Ausubel, 1968)

So how can we find out, before we start teaching them, what our learners already know? Ask them! For example, when about to start a new topic with a large group of learners, it can be useful to give each of them two post-its of different colours (e.g. pink and yellow). On the yellow one, ask everyone to jot down their response to ‘The most important thing I already know about “x” is…’. And on the pink one, ‘One question I really want to know the answer to about “x” is…’. Then get learners to show their post-its to each other and discuss. Next, arrange that they stick all the post-its up on charts or walls. The most important step is then for us to collect all these post-its, and sift through what they already know and what they want to find out.

This helps us to:

* avoid spending too much time telling the class all sorts of things they already know. We still may need to cover some of these things for the sake of the learners who don’t yet know them, but we can minimize the tedium for those who already do know them.
* give learners the chance to explain things they already know to each other – the explainers learn a great deal and we avoid boring them with our own explanations.
* spot misconceptions that some of our learners may have about things we’re going to build on. We can then put them right on these as we introduce topics.
* build on what members of the class *want* to find out. This helps learners to feel an increased degree of ownership of what we tell them – in effect, we’re structuring the curriculum around *their* questions.

***Emergent* learning outcomes**

Let’s think about the *emergent* learning outcomes, which learners achieve at the same time as they achieve the *intended* ones. In just about everything we do as human beings, there are emergent outcomes as well as intended ones. Sometimes the emergent ones turn out to be even more important than the intended ones. As teachers, every time we explain things to learners, and assess their learning, as discussed in Chapter 2, *we* gain a lot in terms of our own learning. We can think of this as our own emergent learning outcomes. But think again about *students’* learning. When they work through an element of curriculum, much more happens to them than merely achieving our intended learning outcomes. What *else* might they have learned? They learn all sorts of additional things, which might include:

* things they learned about the subject concerned above and beyond what we intended them to learn
* things they learned about the links between *our* subject and other subjects they are learning
* things they learned by getting things wrong on their journey towards achieving the intended learning outcomes
* things they learned *about themselves* as learners – for example, techniques they developed while learning this particular bit of curriculum which will be useful to continue to apply to other learning contexts
* things they learned from each other, and skills they gained in working with each other.

We can find out from students a lot about emergent learning outcomes. I have often issued post-its to a large class and asked everyone to jot on a post-it responses to the question ‘What *else* did you learn?’ I’ve then asked students to stick these on a chart on their way out of the teaching session. More often than not there are many *emergent* learning outcomes which prove to be just as relevant and important as any of the *intended* outcomes, and are well worth adding into the intended outcomes next time round.

So what about *assessment* of the emergent learning outcomes? We can’t really do this! This would be unfair. These are not part of the overt targets – even when they are important and desirable. And besides, the emergent learning outcomes are going to be different for different learners. But we can still give learners *feedback* on their *evidence* of achievement of their own emergent learning outcomes, alongside giving them feedback on the extent to which their evidence demonstrates their achievement of the *intended* learning outcomes. It would be tragic to refrain from congratulating learners on particular aspects of their achievement just because these aspects weren’t part of the picture as defined by our curriculum.

**Intended learning *outgoings*?**

How often have you told learners ‘This will be really useful to you later in your career…’, and so on. In vocational teaching, we’re often preparing learners for the world of work, and aiming to equip them with skills and knowledge which they will need in years to come. Very often, these things are above and beyond what we’re actually going to be able to get learners to *show* for their learning while they’re with us. In other words, some of these things can’t be included in the evidence of achievement upon which we base our assessment, and therefore can’t be included formally in the intended learning outcomes as discussed in this chapter. But we can refer to them as intended learning *outgoings*, to help learners to see where they fit in to the bigger picture of the curriculum, and indeed to link the intended learning outcomes to the wider world of future learning and employment.

One way of achieving this is to present the intended learning *outgoings* alongside the intended learning incomes so that learners can see what is on the immediate agenda, compared to the bigger picture of their ongoing learning and development. This can help them to gain increased ownership of the curriculum, addressing their ‘What’s in it for me?’ question more fully.

# Conclusions

By adding in thinking about learning *incomes* and researching with learners their *emergent* learning outcomes in practice, and by including in the picture the intended learning *outgoings* which learners will need later in their lives and careers, I believe we can make curriculum design address the full picture of student learning, assessment and feedback, working towards making it fit for purpose as part of our bid to encourage lifelong learning, rather than just the short-term achievement of particular targets.