# Western Australia's 'English' course of study: To OBE or not to OBE, perhaps that is the question

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Opinion surrounding Western Australia's provision of compulsory education via an outcomes-based education (OBE) paradigm is severely divided. At the centre of debate is an attempt by authorities to extend OBE into the final years of secondary schooling, Years 11 and 12. In this paper an examination is made of OBE as a curriculum paradigm. Secondly, an overview of how OBE has been interpreted in Western Australia as a model of curriculum design and planning is provided. Finally, and most significantly, the issues surrounding evaluation concerns as they relate to one exemplar course of study—English—are considered.

## Introduction

Curriculum change initiatives are always going to be problematic. This is principally because what is known is often perceived as being convenient and tried and tested, not necessarily 'broken'. Change is often equated with pain, and more so when any change in curriculum directly affects the high-stakes end of secondary education in Australia: Years 11 and 12.

This paper examines how recent change initiatives have affected the English learning area in Western Australia, with particular reference to proposed evaluation regimes, and considers outcomes-based education (OBE), which provided the interpretive model for guiding the change.

We argue that epistemic imperatives lie at the heart of any change and that unless such imperatives are considered at the planning stage of proposed curriculum innovation, operationalisation for the classroom is likely to be fraught with danger. Briefly, epistemics is concerned with 'the construction of formal models of the processes—perceptual, intellectual, and linguistic—by which knowledge and understanding are achieved and communicated' (Longuet-Higgins, 1988, p. 279). Put simply, there needs to be an agreed understanding of core concepts before those concepts have any likelihood of being successfully put into operation.

The heart of any epistemic activity consists of striving for conceptual clarification, that is, of individuals developing agreed understandings as these relate to an adopted position, and then appreciating the ramifications associated with accepting

such a position. With OBE, this means agreeing upon precisely what is meant by the model (theoretical dimension) and envisaging how any derived program could most effectively be implemented (practical dimension).

Before proceeding, it is necessary to briefly consider OBE as a model to see how a lack of conceptual clarification as it relates to this understanding of curriculum might cause discomfort and even controversy among members of the educational community.

## Outcomes-based education

William Spady, arguably the father of OBE, introduced his model of curriculum planning into the USA some 20 years ago (Spady, 1988). Spady's vision was one of beginning with the big picture through the creation of a set of broad outcomes, and from there working backward to determine the locally generated content to be used for achieving those outcomes. Spady (1994) has defined OBE as a process of

> clearly focussing and organising everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organising the curriculum, instruction and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens (p. 1).

From this broad definition, a number of fundamental principles, all of which have been distilled from Spady's guiding text, *Paradigm Lost* (1998), can be identified:

- begin with the end (outcome) in mind
- individual schools design a curriculum around predetermined outcomes
- comparing students' performances is educationally counter-productive
- all learning should be calibrated so as to allow for individual success
- process is at least as (if not more) important as product
- the importance of 'me' is emphasised in the process
- traditional schooling paradigms are 'educentric icebergs' (p. 10) and, as such, passé.

When Spady's principles first surfaced, they appeared to be such common sense and so compelling that many education authorities wholeheartedly embraced Spady's (1988) challenge of 'organising for results', often doing so naively, believing that matters such as content, assessment and implementation would, by and large, take care of themselves as schools interpreted and implemented OBE in their local context. Epistemically speaking, such an approach was never likely to meet with much success. Where local schools are part of a broader system, then unless there exists a system-wide 'core' understanding of how OBE is being conceptualised, those responsible for transmission at classroom level would most likely end up in a state of abject confusion. Simply asking 'design facilitators to empower the learning community', to paraphrase Spady, would never be sufficient direction for driving any system of education. And ever-stricter adherence to these fundamental principles by what would be termed fumdamentalists served only to exacerbate the problem.

History has shown this to be the case. International studies, including meta-analyses, from New Zealand (Donnelly, 2007a; Griffiths et al., 2005; Lee, 2003) as well as South Africa (de Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005; Spreen, 2001; Vambe, 2005; Vandeyar, 2005; Waghid, 2003) and the USA. (Watch District 46, 2002; Schlafly, 1996), indicate that it has generally proven problematic to successfully implement OBE, largely because an understanding of what it was that was to be implemented was never clearly determined. This has certainly been the experience in Western Australia (Andrich, 2006; Berlach, 2004; Berlach & McNaught, 2007; Donnelly, 2007b; Louden et al., 2007; Tognolini, 2006).

## Outcomes-based education in Australia

The evolution of an outcomes-based approach to education in Australia had its genesis in 1988, with the then federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, pushing for states to articulate generic competencies that all students finishing school could arguably demonstrate. He called for such competencies against a backdrop of an economic recession and viewed education as a tool for economic revitalisation in a highly competitive global economy. The competencies were thus driven by an economic and political imperative to produce outcomes serving the national interest: that is, to produce a more productive, literate, intelligent and technologically sophisticated workforce.

In 1992 a set of seven generic skills, the Mayer Key Competencies, were identified as the basic transferable competencies that underpin workforce participation, further education, and personal and community activities throughout an individual's life. Such competencies informed the work of the National Profiles, which were early attempts to generate a nationally consistent curriculum. They did not achieve this but did leave a legacy of an outcomes-based approach to edu-cation in every state framework in Australia. This occurred as Spady's broad OBE principles were adopted as the interpretive lens for instigating future education and training.

It needs to be made clear that due to the slippery nature of the concept of OBE (Berlach, 2004; Donnelly, 2004), it was never conceived of as a single unitary model for guiding the process of curriculum change. Each state developed its own interpretation of what OBE meant, how the model was to inform curriculum development and how consequent initiatives were to be implemented. After many iterations, most jurisdictions settled (more or less, the process is still ongoing) on a manageable understanding of OBE.

## The Western Australian experience

One state that stood out from the others in terms of interpretation and implementation protocols was Western Australia. Western Australia was one of the last states to review its curriculum and, when it was finally produced, the *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) was arguably one of the more fundamentalist interpretations of OBE approaches in the country. Proponents adhered narrowly and rigidly to the fundamental principles (listed earlier) of Spady's *Paradigm Lost* and, in doing so, lost the wider commonsense in

his approach that had been so enthusiastically received when his work first appeared. Consequently, education in Western Australia has been shrouded in controversy. For the first five or so years after the introduction of an OBE approach for students from kindergarten to Year 10, teachers were genuinely dismayed with the processes but doggedly persevered. At this time the upper secondary courses were quarantined from the OBE agenda.

The first wave of the new course of study was into Year 11 (English, aviation, engineering and media studies) in 2006, with preparation for subsequent course roll-out being undertaken. Almost from the inception, criticisms were vitriolic and came in the form of epithets such as 'politically correct'; 'New Age'; 'dumbing-down'; 'pretentious movement' ; 'edubabble'; and 'outcomes compelled schooling', to name a few (see, for example, Turner, 2007). Teachers and university educators became increasingly alarmed that a bank of courses which were tried and true, possessed content rigour and were driven by a sequentially arranged syllabus would be jettisoned in favour of vague outcomes buoyed by ephemeral content, which had dubious power of discrimination for university entrance (Alder, 2007; Kessell, 2006).

It is our contention that the present curriculum controversy has an epistemic basis in that there has been, and continues to be, little agreed understanding of what is meant by 'curriculum'. This has lead, as suggested earlier, to 'perceptual, intellectual, and linguistic' confusion (Longuet-Higgins, 1988, p. 279). As conceptual leaks began to appear, a process of decision-and-reversal was adopted in an attempt to stem the discontent. Examples of this process are not difficult to find in documentation from the Curriculum Council. For evaluation, achievement levels were lauded, then discarded. Syllabuses were anathema, then they were the saviour. Outcomes were to be weighted equally, then they were to be weighted differentially. Examination protocols were established, then withdrawn.

Such peripheral tinkering, in the absence of a clearly agreed understanding of curriculum design, development and implementation, was never going to be effective in tackling the basic problems associated with the central core: Spady's vague principles, variously interpreted, overlayed with fundamentalism, and laundered in a Zeitgeist of postmodernism.

The downside of an essentially 'open' interpretation of curriculum, such as that advocated by Spady, is that it coalesces very comfortably with a self-referential, relativist interpretation of reality. Within the bounds of such an interpretation, the amorphous and subjective are given far greater currency than the tangible and objective. This emphasis has the potential of manifesting in curriculum beliefs such as the following which the authors have encountered:

- We must not compare children's performances; as long as each is doing his or her best, that's all that matters.
- Maintaining children's self-esteem is more important than providing them with a realistic view of their abilities.
- Children know best what interests them and the teacher's primary task is to cater to such interests.
- What is learned is not as important as is the process of learning itself.
- Creativity is what education is all about; rigour ought to play second fiddle.

- Literacy is not as important as self-expression; if it feels right and good it doesn't necessarily have to be accurate.
- A response based on immediate sense-experience is of greater value than one derived via a process of reflection and critical evaluation.
- It doesn't matter whether you actually know anything about X, it's what you think about X (your opinion) that matters.

In an immediate attempt to stave off the inevitable criticism that we do not support student-centred learning, we submit that nothing could be further from the truth. We do. Our viewis that beliefs such as those cited above have less to do with student-centred learning and more to do with fundamentalist thinking. We agree with Wilson (2003) that one needs to be wary of 'phlogisticated myths . . . driven by belief rather than by the evidence that stares us in the face' (p. 9).

To exemplify our concerns with how the core of the curriculum is currently being interpreted and how this is being reflected in state-mandated documentation, we consider the Course of Study Year 12 English examination. Two versions of the examination are compared and it will become immediately evident that, although minor changes between versions have occurred, an underlying 'core' of OBE fundamentalism still persists.

## Course of Study—English

The English course of study was always going to be met with a great deal of scrutiny because of its compulsory status for all Year 11 students, some 15 000 in number, in Western Australia schools. It was one of the first four courses to be implemented in 2006; the others had relatively few students in comparison. As such, English was the flagship of OBE curriculum design; it would act as an indicator of the teacher, student, parent and community response to OBE initiatives in the high-stakes environment of the post-compulsory years.

From its inception, the English course of study was dogged by controversy as a result of the Curriculum Council's decision to amalgamate four previous courses—English, English Literature, Senior English and Vocational English, all of which catered to varying interests and ability groups—into just one course.

The one-size-fits-all approach offered by the English course of study led to a battle between different stakeholders who wanted the proposed course to cover their particular area of interest. Eventually, a new emphasis prevailed—one that provided greater attention to transactional texts and creative writing. This could well have been anticipated given the self-referential predilections upon which OBE is founded. Literature lost out as OBE fundamentalists argued against a supposedly 'elitist' approach to the teaching of English that had at its centre the literary text. Demanding a wider definition of 'text', this approach suggested graffiti, SMS messages and computer games as being worthy of study.

After a general outcry, a discrete literature course, 'Text Traditions and Culture', was established. In deference to the fundamentalists, the term 'literature' was avoided, at least until in national circles the title was construed to be a study of history. Responding to national pressure, the Curriculum Council relented and reverted to the name 'Literature'.

As the English course was rolled out, the draft exam was roundly derided. The outcomes themselves, while eminently sensible objectives of student achievement, were deflated by a laborious and reductionist assessment approach. Every outcome had a litany of aspects that were required to be measured more than once and then applied to an algorithm to plot students on a continuum found within the *Progress maps* (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2004). All outcomes were to be assessed in a manner that assigned each equal value. In the previous English course, Listening and Speaking had not been given as high a weighting as Reading, Writing and Viewing because these outcomes were notoriously difficult to assess and to measure and could rarely be accommodated in an external public examination.

The major principle, that each outcome had to be assessed equally and discretely, resulted in the Curriculum Council providing the following guidelines in its marking key for the English examination:

> Each student response should be marked for the demonstration of the understanding of the question asked, as illustrated by the marking criteria given. *Student responses should not be penalised for poor spelling, punctuation, grammar or handwriting*, unless these are elements of aspects or outcomes specifically being assessed. Student responses can also be given in dot point format, diagrams or other suitable alternatives to continuous prose. (2006, emphasis added.)

Conventions of functional literacy were ignored in outcomes such as Reading and Viewing. As a consequence, the English course of study shot to prominence as an object of national ridicule, as indicated by an editorial in the *Australian* (2006, p. 13):

> . . . in Western Australia Yr 12 English students may pass their final exams without ever reading a book; analysing TV ads and film posters will do. Students will even be allowed to draw their answers, if they are able to figure out the mind-numbingly complex exam instructions.

Closer consideration of two versions of the examination paper (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2006b) reveals that they seem to have been generated within an environment of general epistemic insecurity. Further, the asserted ripple-free surface structure fails to conceal the deep fundamentalist proclivity imbedded in both versions.

## The English examination—the initial version

### Section One: 'Writing' outcomes

Section One allowed the candidate to choose from six questions. This provides a great degree of choice and opportunity to discuss a variety of texts but the irony is that the examiners asked students to respond in one consistent format, which had three parts, on every occasion:

> (1) Present a case for a film version to be made of a fiction or non-fiction text that you have read. Use a form of writing or combination of forms to suit your chosen purpose and audience. (suggested length 400wds);
> (2) In note form, clearly specify the Audience and Purpose of your response in (1). (suggested length 5–15 wds Audience and 5–15wds Purpose);

(3) Explain your choice of the form, vocabulary, content and structure of your response in (1). (no more than 200wds).

This was a very limited form of response and denied students the opportunity to show that they could write an extended piece, sustain a thesis and show evidence of strong analytical skills. It is arguably impossible to develop a sustained piece of analytical writing in 400 words—a valued skill for any student contemplating university study. The essay as a form of assessment had been completely abandoned and, with it, the skills that it tests.

The second part of each question also caused concern. It must be questioned how a marker could possibly evaluate the quality of a response that has a 5–15 word limit. Further, one wonders how markers could obtain a valid grade distribution from such marking.

The third part of the question was an exercise that would be far better done in the classroom. We would challenge anyone to be able to reflect objectively on a piece of writing just composed under examination conditions in terms of its 'vocabulary, content, structure and response', all in the recommended 20 minutes and 200 words.

### Section Two: 'Reading' outcomes

This section was generally a fair and valid assessment task. A major problem with this (as well as with the Viewing section) was the clear instruction not to penalise students 'for poor spelling, punctuation and grammar'. For a subject that is the key vehicle for an assessment of literacy, this seems to be quite counter-intuitive. There appears to be a fundamentalist interpretation of outcomes here, one suggesting that a student working on a task measuring reading must not be penalised for a poor written response because this would be measuring writing and not reading.

Such an approach effectively meant that only one outcome in the exam could be a true measure of functional literacy, namely, the writing outcome. If two-thirds of the exam ignores functional literacy, it is difficult to sustain the claim that the exam contributes 'authentically' to the measurement of English language competence.

The interesting irony is that at the same time these criticisms were being made of the English examination, the course of study in Chemistry was asking students to write an extended essay requiring an 'analysis of the relationships between attitudes, values, beliefs and chemical knowledge to account for the development of the cosmetic industry'. It may well be that the Chemistry exam could provide a better measure of literacy than the English exam.

### Section Three: 'Viewing' outcomes

In Section Three of the paper, students were limited to an analysis of the composition of a set of posters or of two photographs. This could be mistaken for an Art examination, a Media examination or perhaps even a History examination where document analysis is undertaken. Again this appears to have been driven by a fundamentalist view that refused to allow students to write about something they had actually been taught, or for which they might be able to prepare. Immediate

experience and gratuitous relevance are given far greater value than acquired knowledge (see Furedi, 2004, p. 139). We are not arguing that the exercise of responding to unseen texts does not have validity. What we are doing is questioning the overemphasis of such an approach and the de-emphasis of opportunity to display knowledge about specific texts that might have been studied in depth.

A further concern is that one of the most important texts related to this outcome had been completely omitted: namely, film. The viewing of documentary and feature films had been an important part of the previous course and far more significant than the posters that might advertise them. Photography is also worthy of study but certainly two photographs do not compare in terms of visual complexity to the study of film.

After a concerted wave of criticism, late 2006 saw another sample paper being introduced to teachers and students in order to direct preparation for the public exam to be encountered ten months hence. This new paper tried to allay public perceptions that the external examination had been 'dumbed down'. The paper gave teachers a new direction for the preparation of their students. Instructions had been simplified and for each section an extended response was introduced which overcame the previous criticism of providing for only limited written responses.

## The English examination—second version

### Section One: 'Reading' outcome

The first section of the paper, which examines the Reading outcome through a comprehension exercise based on an extract from a novel by Andrew McGahan, *The White Earth*, is both rigorous and worthwhile. Interestingly though, in the examination design brief provided to teachers, the debate about 'knowledge' and examinable knowledge again raises its head. 'Questions should enable the application of understandings and skills associated with reading *rather than simply the reproduction of knowledge about texts studied during the course*' (emphasis added). Again the emphasis is on applied knowledge rather than an opportunity for students to display detailed knowledge of texts they have read. While the marking guidelines expect students' responses in this section to be 'clear, fluent and organised', markers are advised that 'minor spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors should not be unduly penalized, as examination scripts are essentially a first draft written under time pressure'.

Thus the one examination that is used as a measure for competency in literacy still downplays functional literacy. This raises an obvious concern that surely the external examination is precisely the moment where the culmination of a functional literacy competence must be measured diligently if only to assure the public that standards are still rigorous and not falling.

### Section Two: 'Writing' outcome

The Writing outcome, now assessed in Section Two, is an interesting revision. While it moves away from a number of flaws in the first sample exam and also requires

students to write an extended answer, its focus on providing students with a broad range of choice in written forms raises real issues in relation to comparability. For example, how can we compare the response of one student who might choose Question 6: 'Write to convince an audience of the need for the inclusion or exclusion of Australian texts in the English course' as opposed to Question 4, which asks students to 'Write a text that could accompany the image reproduced below'—referring to a photograph of a man (Otto Lilienthal) flying what looks like a hang-glider but is indeed a biplane of sorts?

The same instruction about functional literacy still applies in this section, which is indeed the assessment of the *writing* outcome, 'minor spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors should not be unduly penalized, as examination scripts are essentially a first draft written under time pressure'. What is difficult to follow is the markers' guide, which stipulates that

> Answers should be marked on the quality of the writing. In this section it is not realistically possible to ignore content of the writing, but the focus should be on the demonstrated writing skills.

Is 'content' being demeaned here? Surely all good responses are a delicate balance between an articulation of knowledge/content and the ability to express such knowledge. The instructions continue:

> Writing skills and knowledge of content are often closely related. However, markers should not award half the marks for one and half for the other. The focus should be on the demonstrated writing skills.

Apart from the inherent internal contradiction, there is a clear instruction not to unduly penalise students for 'minor' spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

It is our contention that four of the six specific marking guidelines for Question 4 (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 2006b) simply add to the confusion. In respect of the first point, while insisting that the question elicits an imaginative response it immediately imposes boundaries on what might be an 'acceptable' imagination:

> There are many possible ways in which the image could be interpreted, but answers which ignore the date given—namely, '1895'—are at a disadvantage. In other words, the candidate's own cultural/historical position needs to be taken into account in the answer.

One is moved to ask why such fundamentalism should be imposed on an assessment task of this type when it is never suggested or even remotely implied in the question:

> There is no requirement in this question to refer to a print or non-print text. Many candidates may discuss the image without referring to a text studied. These candidates should not be penalised.

This raises a question that needs answering. What is the reasoning behind examination questions that are in essence devoid of content, where students can simply respond off the cuff, from within a highly personalised context? Does such

reasoning arise from a particular view of an outcomes-based environment that privileges a student-driven approach and de-emphasises content over process?

In respect to Question 6 (below) it might be expected that a greater reliance on knowledge of texts studied in the course could be assumed but this is not to be the case when we examine the advice to markers. Again the focus is merely on writing and not on content knowledge.

**Question 6**

'Write to convince an audience of the need for the inclusion or exclusion of Australian texts in the English course'.

- This question clearly elicits an argument, and responses should be judged on how well the candidate uses language conventions to 'convince an audience'.
- It is assumed that candidates will take note of the 'or' in the question, and develop an argument for or against. However, it is possible that a sophisticated answer might recognise the complexities of the issue and offer a more ambivalent response.
- The word 'convince' implies that the candidate will write to persuade the reader with a structured argument.
- It is possible, if unlikely, that some candidates could see this as an opportunity to present imaginative writing with an Australian focus. These responses should be marked according to the demonstrated control and understanding of writing conventions.
- 'Australian texts' may be interpreted as texts written and produced in Australia, or as texts that have a strong Australian focus.

There is no requirement in this question to refer to a print or non-print text. Some candidates may present an argument without referring to a text studied.

It is inconceivable that such a question could be answered without actually referring to an Australian text but nevertheless, the last two dot points certainly remove the delusion that here might be a question here that requires an answer of substance. The words of Matters (cited by Wilson, 2005, p. 88) might be worth remembering given the context of this question, namely that,

> Given that one cannot just think but, instead, must think about something, the integration of academic content with the teaching and learning of higher order thinking skills would seem to be essential.

## Section Three: 'Viewing' outcome

Section Three focuses on the outcome of Viewing. Again there is an attempt to deal with previous criticism by actually allowing students to refer to visual texts studied in their course, although the nature of such texts are not alluded to; for example, it may be suitable to refer to a photograph, or a painting or a poster or a film or perhaps even graffiti.

**Questions**

Answer ONE of the following questions.

In your response refer to visual text/s you have viewed. You must also include reference to ONE of the two sets of images given below:

1 Discuss ways in which visual texts may serve to shape cultural values.

2 Consider ways that visual texts may serve social purposes or power relationships.
3 Explain how the generic features of visual texts are used to construct representations of our world.
4 Explain how your context and your knowledge of genre influence your response to visual texts.

There is still a persistent attempt to ensure that students cannot be fully prepared for the examination by insisting that they also refer to one of two photographs that appear on the same page, one representing Jamie Oliver in the kitchen and one representing a housewife in the kitchen from the 1940s. How students can make an intelligent link (which appears to be the intent of the exercise) to the themes in these photographs with the text they might have studied in the classroom is a study in arbitrariness itself. Perhaps the answer lies in the second set of pictures, which refers to two different photographs of boyhood on the covers of two novels. Maybe this theme is easily linked to the study of visual texts in the classroom but—given there are no prescribed texts, only a list of recommended texts—it is highly unlikely that the stars will so easily align.

The point we are attempting to convey is this: in the end, this exam is very much an assessment of intellectual reflexes rather than an attempt to assess knowledge gained through detailed study. Woodhead (2002), retired Chief Inspector of Schools in England, made the point that knowledge can never be viewed as an impediment to thought. This view stands in stark contrast to that promulgated by Spady (in Brandt, 1992), that 'outcomes are not content, they're performances'. True to the Spadian tradition, the Western Australian English course of study examination, by and large, tests spontaneously generated performances and ignores the much more rigorous task of testing an acquired body of knowledge that is the result of focused learning.

## Conclusion

English, the flagship of the courses of study, has epistemic shortcomings that we believe are the result of an inadequate conceptualisation of curriculum. Under an OBE regime, the little agreed understanding regarding the core of the curriculum has resulted in the absence of a reference point for developing satisfactory examination protocols. This absence has permitted a fundamentalist push in the direction of beliefs such as

- de-emphasising spelling, grammar, punctuation and other previously indispensable building-blocks of functional literacy
- seeing immediate experience as having pre-eminence over a structured response to a prepared body of work
- privileging process and applied knowledge over substantive content
- emphasising writing per se rather than what is written about;
- reducing rigour as teachers are removed as the gatekeepers of core curriculum knowledge, becoming instead 'a guide on the side'
- providing amazingly broad student choice that then makes the task of comparing student performance problematic.

The examination, a powerful symbol, sends important messages to the students, teachers and the community about what is valued and important. The English course of study paper signifies that preparation, effort, hard work and thorough, diligent teaching are not important when two-thirds of the paper can be answered with very little specific preparation.

Hirsch (1996) described OBE in America as the transformation of a reasonable idea into impractical vagueness through to progressivist antipathy regarding subject-matter knowledge. Ten years after these words were penned, the English COS examination is proof positive that such a curriculum orientation is alive and well in Western Australia.

English is but one course of study that has attracted severe criticism. In response to acute public pressure, the Curriculum Council set up a system of teacher juries to examine some 40 proposed courses. The juries consisted of experienced subject teachers who embarked on the task of vetting and then providing guidance on the readiness for implementation of the planned courses of study. Early in May 2007, the juries recommended that over half of the proposed courses be delayed, subject to further investigation (*West Australian*, 2007, p. 1).

A commitment to achieving greater epistemic clarity in the areas of curriculum conceptualisation *prior* to engaging in implementation would likely have yielded a different result regarding the reception of the courses of study. It may still not be too late to bring greater level of design integrity to the entire process of curriculum development in Western Australia. A good starting point might be a scrutinised investigation of the desirability of OBE itself as the theoretical tool for interpreting the notion of curriculum.

**Keywords**

Outcomes based education | English curriculum | assessment
curriculum development | conceptual distinctions | epistemology

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