
Outcomes from *The Outcomes Book*

by Jacob S Blumner

Review of *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement*, edited by Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Ruth Overman Fischer, and Rita Malenczyk. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005.

Who would have thought that a seemingly innocuous two-page document describing what students should do when they leave first-year writing could engender an entire book, but defining a single set of outcomes for first-year composition is no ordinary task. Rhetoric and composition teachers are no ordinary group as exemplified in their self-naming as the “Outcomes Collective” rather than a committee because they didn’t believe the term “committee” fit. They believed “*collective* characterized the playful chaos that swirls around core questions, a chaos that eventually formed into the Outcomes Statement” (xvi). It’s striking then, as Peter Elbow notes, that “they [the crafters of the Outcomes Statement] managed to attain remarkable agreement among a very disparate but important group of leaders in the field” (178). So it seems fitting that many of the architects of the Outcomes Statement (OS as they call it) also wrote chapters in *The Outcomes Book* to flesh out the details and nuances necessarily absent from a two-page, bulleted list.

I admit to being skeptical when I first glanced at the book. Could the authors of the OS adequately critique it? And when Susanmarie Harrington wrote in the introduction that “this collection celebrates the Outcomes Statement; it also complicates it” (xv), I cynically wrote in the margins, “navel gazing?” Why, I asked myself, would the relatively new OS need an entire book to explain it and complicate it? If the creators questioned parts of the statement, what did they expect others to do with it? Specifically, what did they expect those who may not share the same values as compositionists, such as administrators and legislators, to do with it?

The book is broken into four parts: 1) Contextualizing the Outcomes Statement, 2) the Outcomes Statement and First-year Writing, 3) the Outcomes Statement Beyond First-year Writing, and 4) Theorizing Outcomes. My skepticism wasn’t quelled by part one; after chapters on the history of the OS, Cynthia L. Self and Patricia L. Ericsson critique the OS for not adequately addressing the “emerging technologies and their impact on literacies” (32). How

does the Outcomes Collective neglect such an important component of writing pedagogy?

The answer to my technologies question wasn't answered in part two, but I began to appreciate the purpose of the book. Four of the seven chapters describe site-specific examples of the Outcomes Statement benefiting institutions. Stephen Wilhoit's chapter describes Oakwood High School's curricular reform, how the OS helped teachers see the reforms as "a viable, important initiative," and that "teachers across the disciplines may come to believe that using writing to promote inquiry, learning, and thinking is not just another passing educational fad" (45). This chapter maps one way readers of *The WAC Journal* might develop stronger ties between high schools and higher education, the kind of connection that Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt advocate in their *College English* essay "Writing Beyond the Curriculum." Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem share their experience with using the OS and the importance of critical reading and writing. Readers will find this chapter helpful because it illuminates an aspect of all instruction I believe is neglected—critical reading—in very concrete terms.

The most compelling chapter of part two is Barbara Little Liu's "More than the Latest PC Buzzword for Modes: What Genre Theory Means to Composition," in which Liu questions whether the use of the term genre in the OS will be interpreted simply as a synonym for "modes." After critiquing the problem of simply teaching genre as modes, Liu offers what she terms a *genre process* approach that encourages assignments that allow students to engage material and explore genres at the same time. This enables students to learn how genres work and what their purposes are rather than simply writing to fill a form. Faculty will benefit from her discussion by considering the teaching techniques they use to introduce students to disciplinary genres.

Section three appears to be the most beneficial for *The WAC Journal* readers because it looks at the implications of the OS beyond first-year writing, but Martha Townsend opens the section with serious concerns about the implications of the OS. She writes, "I can't help but wonder whether the central values of the academy in general and of composition studies in particular—questioning everything, 'interrogating the text,' inquiring critically, acknowledging differing views, privileging argument—have gotten in the way of reaching agreement on the OS" (122), an observation that Elbow echoes later in the book. The criticisms of Self, Ericsson, and Liu focus my understanding of the OS and the book. The Outcomes Statement is flawed by compromise. But Townsend shows the potential as well, "The OS will provide a vocabulary of words and of concepts that allow faculty in the disciplines to engage in more meaningful conversations about their own pedagogy," and "the OS will help establish baseline expectations that composition teachers can rely on as they plan and teach subsequent material" (125). This potential could become

the basis for building successful WAC programs and stronger connections between first-year writing and other writing initiatives on campuses.

Townsend shows pitfalls and potential of the Outcomes Statement, and Robert O'Brien Hokanson writes as a "critical friend" to the Outcomes Statement and the commitment to improving the teaching and learning of writing it represents" (150). Hokanson's chapter, "Using Writing Outcomes to Enhance Teaching and Learning: Alverno College's Experience," is the best example of the potential for the OS, and the most inspirational essay in the collection. Early in the chapter, he writes, "the moral of this story has more to do with the process of developing and maintaining a language of outcomes than with the particulars of the language itself" (151), and what I most appreciated was Hokanson's explanation of how Alverno's outcomes developed over thirty years. The valuable lesson here is understanding the need to adjust and adapt the outcomes over time, and Hokanson presents a clear and reasonable example of how it can be done successfully. Additionally, he shows how it can be done across the curriculum, not just in first-year writing.

At the end of Ruth Overman Fischer's chapter entitled "The Outcomes Statement as Theorizing Potential," she summarizes the fourth section of the book and foretells my sense of the section and my initial reaction to the book once I'd finished it. In her final paragraph she notes that all of the authors of the fourth section, Marilyn Sternglass, Peter Elbow, and Richard Haswell, all "perused the Outcomes Statement through his or her own theoretical frame" (176), and all of them point out its failures. And as a final section that theorizes the Outcomes Statement, I was a bit perplexed to find such negative conclusions. Even Kathleen Blake Yancey has criticism of the OS in her *Afterward*.

I admit to being a bit stumped by the concluding tone of the book. Why would its editors conclude a book with theory (the underpinnings of our pedagogy) that is heavily critical of the Outcomes Statement? Townsend's quote earlier in this review about composition studies questioning everything may be a clue, but I've struggled to overcome the negative tone of section four. Harrington writes in the introduction that the theorists were asked to contribute, and that their criticism is a "floor, not a ceiling" (xvii), and that "Our hope is that this collection will encourage you to do three things: first, read the Outcomes Statement; second, consider your syllabus, your curriculum, and your program in light of the Outcomes Statement; third, do something" (xix). How do writing programs benefit and how do they suffer from such debate and consensus? What advantage is gained by having prominent composition scholars question the outcomes? Will it impact their adoption by writing programs or their effectiveness on campuses? I'm troubled by these questions. But the editors have accomplished their goal. I'm doing something: I'm thinking.

There is much to be gained from the book if we view the OS as an organic document that will grow and change over time. Though the authors

created and intended the OS primarily for use in first-year composition programs, it has implications and presents potential for all writing programs. Elbow writes, “The framers have done something important, useful, and very difficult. They took one of the most chaotic realms in all of higher education—first-year composition—and broke it down into clear goals” (178). These goals can be used as a foundation for developing writing programs throughout public schools and higher education, and the book provides useful models and theoretical discussion for those interested in adopting and adapting the outcomes to their needs.