The Trouble with "Outcomes Assessment"

Michael Collender
WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE IN THE SAND?

The Trouble with “Outcomes Assessment”

By Michael Collender

During the summer of 2008 I participated in military research at the US Joint Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA. What I studied has direct application to outcomes based education (OBE) and the future of institutions committed to the Jesuit Catholic intellectual tradition.

OBE is an educational philosophy that defines successful education as the production of measurable outcomes in student behavior. OBE is afad, and like all fads, it will expire. However OBE is also the current accreditation paradigm applied by the US Department of Education, through regional accrediting bodies, to Jesuit universities. Should Jesuit universities let OBE be the evaluating criterion for program success rather than the Jesuit Catholic intellectual tradition?

No, and here’s why. Briefly (with more forthcoming) OBE is conceptually analogous to Donald Rumsfeld’s campaign planning paradigm, known as effects based operations (EBO). EBO teaches that a war ultimately occurs in the cognitive domain, in changing the enemy’s will to fight. So far, so good. But how is this change accomplished? In an attempt to be more “scientific,” Rumsfeld wanted to make war more quantifiable, so he disparaged classical strategic theory (Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Clausewitz, etc.) in favor of a metric driven approach. EBO teaches that minds are changed by campaigns that (1) identify the outcomes they aim to produce, (2) see an enemy as a number of measurable interconnected targets, (3) then target them in some assessable way. EBO is the targeting philosophy behind what is popularly termed the Rumsfeld Doctrine: instead of more troops, the military just needs more precise means to hit targets.

EBO failed in Iraq. “Shock and Awe” destroyed many measurable targets. In the spring of 2003, Rumsfeld even set up the Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) with dozens of PhDs, and many super computers fed in almost real-time outcomes information on the campaign. Even with so many measurable targets being hit the campaign deteriorated after its initial success, as the bipartisan Iraq study group reported in 2006. EBO also failed in its 2006 summer war with Lebanon. EBO’s failures in Iraq and Lebanon have led to a sea change in military planning philosophy. USJFCOM now recognizes that building campaigns around hitting more accredited targets does not translate to victory. For this reason, the military is returning to classical military philosophy as the basis for campaign planning.

Aristotle, that great university professor, reminds us, “It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.” Ironic it is that a philosophy of education can remove from its faithful the mark of an educated man.

Educators should take to heart the failure of EBO. Its apparent scientific precision cloaked its folly. We can be thankful that a botched war displays failure quickly. But rot in a botched education takes longer to smell. Within a bureaucracy, the fruit of a bad educational philosophy can always be blamed on the teacher, or the lack of money. When EBO failed, the soldier and field commander felt the initial heat. Blame took years to make its way to Rumsfeld. If both EBO and OBE aim at affecting the cognitive domain through measurable outcomes, and if both paradigms achieve the health of their endeavors by aiming those endeavors at certain quantifiable effects, or outcomes, then the analogy is established. And if this analogy holds, the first to be blamed for...
OBE’s failure will be the professors whose task it is to produce its fruit.

So what should measure a good education? For a military commander, wisdom is measured not by fads, but by the tradition of classical military philosophy reflected in Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Musashi, Clausewitz, Jomini, T.E. Lawrence, Mao Tse-Tung, and Boyd. Likewise, the educated mind is better measured not by new metrics assigned by committees or bureaucrats, but by the Catholic humanist tradition reflected in whole or in part by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Chaucer, Erasmus, Shakespeare, Galileo, Ignatius, Kepler, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Chesterton, Merton, von Balthazar and others. Catholic education aims at formation, not merely the formation of individuals, but culture, a culture that forms individuals with wisdom to add to and deepen that culture. This is why Catholic education has drawn the Trivium (language arts) and the Quadrivium (sciences) together through the interdisciplinary hallmark disciplines of philosophy, theology, and history. Like the Trinity, education should preserve unity and diversity without reduction to a single metric. If we must measure the mind, should its measure not be the greatest minds of history? Before OBE, let them be our metric.

If Jesuit institutions maintain courage, this could be what Churchill might call “our finest hour.” Recall that EBO’s failure in Iraq and Lebanon made the wisdom of classical military philosophy more respected for its historically proven success. Analogously, the future failure of OBE presents the Jesuit Catholic intellectual tradition with a remarkable opportunity to build our brand. As we render to Caesar what is Caesar’s in accreditation, we must draw the line in the sand, and make no changes to our mission or its statement, for human beings bear the image of One greater than Caesar. If we remain faithful to the Classical Catholic humanist tradition, rooted in ancient and Renaissance wisdom, while advancing the global dialogue of the 21st century, then we will have a significant opportunity to serve the American academy. And as our tradition reminds us, authority comes through serving.