

OBE (Outcomes Based Education) is founded on a very simple, practical, logical notion that every one of us uses everyday in our lives. An outcomes-based approach means knowing what you want to achieve – your outcome – and then taking the steps to achieve it. When a carpenter wants to build a table, for instance, he has a picture of a table in mind (his outcome). He assembles his materials and tools and begins a step-by-step process until he has given form to the picture in his mind. When a chef wants to cook a meal, he has a picture of it in mind and he assembles his materials and tools and begins a step-by-step process to produce it. Scientists, trying to find a cure for AIDS, have in mind the end result, destruction of the human immune deficiency virus.

In other words, in order to achieve something, you have to know or have an idea of what it is you want to achieve and then work towards achieving it. An outcomes-based approach is as simple as that. It is common sense. Steven Covey has made a fortune explaining this common sense notion that we all know already. OBE is based on principles derived from the division of labour and the assembly line and is perfectly suited to the modus operandi of the school.

So why did such a simple approach, an approach that every one of us uses every day in our lives, fail? For me the answer is simple. Those who adapted the outcomes-based approach, mostly academics, could not accept its simplicity and believed it entailed all kinds of mysterious and involved rites that our simple minds could not deal with. They turned OBE into a ritual that only they could interpret and they set up the most involved hieratic procedures that teachers could not understand but had to follow religiously. They took away control of learning from the teacher, and more importantly, from the students. They created a system that they called “OBE” but which was exactly the opposite – it was Anti-OBE and was infected with a virus, CSIV (Common Sense Immune Virus) that made teachers and students CSI+. (Academics are highbrows; they do not have “common” sense.)

In the name of OBE, a huge administrative bureaucracy was created: SAQA, SETAs, PROVIDERS of new textbooks, workbooks, etc. and Supervisors (with new titles that gave the impression that they were there to assist not control). But these measures only spread the CSI-virus. And teachers and learners were prescribed to – even more rigidly than they had been under Bantu-Indian-Coloured Education. Teachers did not know exactly what was required of them and did not know what to do; learners took it all as fun and stopped learning.

OBE, which is a simple common sense method based on the principle of knowing what you want to do and then finding a way to do it, was turned into a system administered by a

government department.Â And we should all understand that government institutions and departments are based on distrust and strict control.Â Because some of us are aberrant in our behaviour, we are all treated as aberrant. (If you don't believe me a visit to government-controlled departments for licences and identity documents, will convince you.)Â So an outcomes-based method from being a common sense means of exploring and gaining knowledge became a confused web of imposed tasks and objectives, strictly controlled by an army of administrators and materials providers who effectively stopped independent learning.

Critics of OBE warned us about OBE before it was implemented; they claimed that it had failed in other countries.Â In pondering why OBE fails, it struck me that OBE, which actually fosters democracy, is doomed to fail when it is taken over and administered by government departments.Â Government departments do not operate on the principles of democracy; they are authoritarian, bureaucratic and very controlling.Â So there is a disconnect between OBE and Departmental Administration – and there always will be.Â An outcomes based approach, which is how we all conduct our everyday lives, is too simple for government departments to understand. It does not require rules, regulations and control and that is obviously a threat to authoritarian institutions.