

Framing Education Research using Outcome-Based Education as a Theoretical Lens

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical framework serves important functions in any scientific research endeavor. It is an explicit structure that critically undergirds conceptual positions and procedural implementations of scientific inquiry. Outcome-Based Education (OBE) offers a very strong theoretical backbone that can hold and sustain the research process from ideation, execution, to conceptual and practical resolutions. This article intends to elucidate important theoretical paradigms, premises, and principles of OBE. Discussions about the important theoretical standpoints of OBE on who the learners are, what learning is, and how the learning takes place are given emphasis. These conceptual and theoretical elements should serve to correctly and effectively use OBE as theoretical underpinning in doing education research.

Keywords: *theoretical framework; outcome-based education; education research*

In any scientific research inquiry, it is critical to ensure consistency and alignment of the different parts and stages of a study: from ideation, execution, to conceptual and practical resolutions. In order to achieve congruency of thoughts in research, a strong and plausible theoretical lens would be necessary. The operative purpose of theoretical lens in a research study is indispensable. It serves as conceptual anchor of an inquiry that function as guide in explaining the phenomenon being investigated. When used as conceptual underpinning in research, these lenses function as theoretical framework that binds and holds the different elements and dimensions of an inquiry. Theoretical framework performs very important roles in scientific research. It affords research with credible structure in defining the study philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It also serves as conceptual path and it grounds firmly the research inquiry on the identified theoretical constructs. Further, it helps in extending the knowledge by providing both direction and impetus to the investigation (Adom, Hussein, & Adu-Agyem, 2018).

In the recent years, several research efforts in the field of education have observably gravitated towards topics around Outcome-Based Education (OBE). The goals of the studies ranged from evaluation of teaching, instructional, and assessment practices, effectiveness of OBE framework in attaining curricular outcomes in various programs, innovative and best practices implemented at the school or institution-wide level, among others (Asim et al., 2021). Noticeably,

most of these research studies are anchored on explaining the vital role of OBE for purposes of accreditation and international academic standards, aligning pathways of education curriculum for employability, and compliance with government mandates on education policies and systems.

Rarely, published education papers on OBE dwell on its theoretical and conceptual aspects. Apparently, OBE is viewed by many practitioners and researchers in education as fundamentally systemic and procedural mechanism that importantly focuses on and requires operational compliance. Many of these studies aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of OBE based on criterion-referenced measures (e.g., test performance, subject grades and scores, etc.), while some use self-report measures (e.g., perception, attitude, etc.). Whereas, OBE provides multitude conceptual opportunities that can be used as rich theoretical guide by researchers in investigating several education-related variables (e.g., learning process, academic achievement and success, student engagement, etc.). It can also be used as an effective theoretical basis in framing the research inquiry on aspects of teaching and learning process, instructional design, assessment and evaluation systems, among others.

Identifying and Addressing Research Gaps Using OBE as Theoretical Standpoint

One of the most crucial parts of any research paper is the articulation of the new information that it contributes to the existing body of knowledge called the research gap. The identification of research gaps is crucial to any investigations in almost all fields of science. This paved the way for the discovery of new knowledge that has not been addressed, fully or partially, in the previous and current available literatures. The research gap also systematically and practically informs the researcher as to what to focus on in the present study and what are the potential benefits of completing the study and arriving at a plausible set of conclusions.

OBE as a theoretical framework of education offers rich conceptual and practical positions that can address or answer specific research gaps related to teaching, learning, and the wide dimensions of education administrations and management, and beyond. The pre-requisite to this is the familiarity of researchers to the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of OBE.

OBE as Theoretical Lens: The Learner, The Learning, The Learning Process

OBE as defined by Spady (1994, p. 12) ‘means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experience.’

This definition may sound very practical, systemic, and organizational, and that may not explicitly suggest theoretical positions. However, this should not be taken out of the entire context within which Spady argued about the importance of basing the education system to the outcomes. In fact, in many landmark papers (Spady, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2018), he emphasized the philosophical underpinning of OBE by highlighting the ‘Success for All Philosophy’, which serves as the main essence of OBE as an education framework. To substantially discuss this philosophy, three of the most crucial elements of what Spady (1994) identified as ‘sound outcome-based approach’ will need to be discussed: the paradigm, the premises, and the principles of OBE.

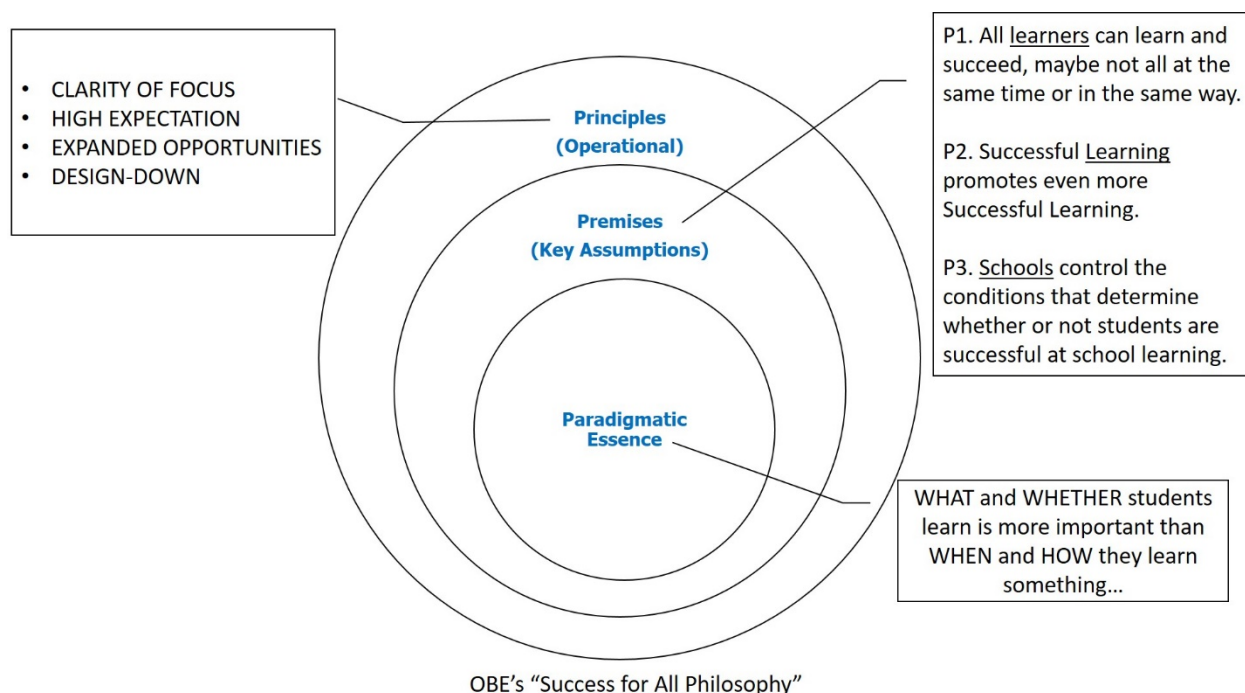


Figure 1. OBE's Theoretical Position: Success for All Philosophy

At the very core of the success for all philosophy is the paradigmatic essence that says it all about what education should be as opposed to its present standardized system or form (time and modality based) that has been prevailing for a century of formalized school system. Central to this point is actually not education, i.e., institutionalized and programmatic system, but learning, the process by which an individual evolves and progresses as a human being. This paradigmatic essence depicts the theoretical standpoints of the success for all philosophy, and it is further reinforced by the articulation of the three basic premises, which revolve around OBE's theoretical positions on 'who the learners are', 'what learning is', and 'how learning takes place'. Then, it is further operationalized by the four strategic and systematic principles that ensure alignment of education systems and practices in fostering learning and success for all learners. These will be tackled succinctly in the proceeding section.

The Learner

In OBE, learners are viewed optimistically as individuals who are capable of learning and attaining success. The optimistic view about learners is posited in one of the OBE premises, which states that 'all learners can learn and succeed, maybe not all in the same time or in the same way...'. This is different from the rightist ideology that all students have the right to learn and be educated. Rather, the theory focuses on the inherent capabilities and potentials that every individual learner possesses, and these can be harnessed and developed if the learning systems and processes are facilitated and implemented in consonance with these predetermined traits, attributes, and potentials. Thus, in this standpoint, the normative standards of the traditional education, where students are labelled as bright or dull, fast or slow, and other categorizations used in the existing educational systems are external to the learners and are consequently limiting and defeating the inherent capacities and potentials for individual's growth and improvement. In order to fully

appreciate what OBE posits about who the learners are, it's inevitable to discuss the contexts or dimensional factors that affect and influence the progress and development of learners. Ideally, there should be alignment and consistencies between the two dimensions in order to achieve success and enhancements on learner's competence. These dimensions refer to the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect individual learners.

Intrinsically, learners are individuals who are born with innate capacities and potentials for growth and improvement. These inherent characteristics serve as the primordial tools that would make individuals not only survive but succeed in life. This is evidenced by the natural behavior that can be observed on newly born child in which instincts and reflexes naturally operate and work for the child's survival and adjustment to the new environment, the outside world (Padmanabha, 2020). As one grows old, the instinctive tendency to survive becomes more complex and sustainably increases in terms of purpose. This natural and pre-determined process reshape and redefine survival instinct to success-driven purposes. All human beings are naturally inclined for success. These intrinsic predispositions to thrive and become successful can either be facilitated or thwarted by the extrinsic dimension.

The extrinsic dimension refers to the established and standardized systems that many learning institutions developed, e.g., school systems and processes. As mentioned earlier, there should be great alignment and consistencies between the two-dimensional factors, the intrinsic and extrinsic, in order to achieve optimal success and enhancements on learner's attributes (i.e., skills, competencies, proficiencies). Thus, the individual's full potential for improvement and progress can be achieved in a learning environment that allows and accommodate for wide array of possible commonalities and diversities of learners, who are naturally unique human beings. The regard for learners' uniqueness and diversities explicitly suggests that OBE adheres with the learner-centered approach to learning. In this perspective, learners can thrive in a system that provides wide-ranging flexibilities to address individual differences in terms of interest, intelligences, learning and thinking styles, among others. This is contrary to the widely accepted system of education that systematically eliminates and disregards the intrinsic dimensions of learners. The imposition of arbitrarily designed standards in the existing traditional system of education, like the strict credentialing, number-based performance rating, content-mastery approach, process-oriented assessment, time-bound curriculum, and many other educational systems and practices have inadvertently thwarted the natural path of success for learners. In this extrinsic context, learners are left with no choice but to comply with the institutionalized standards that is based on normative, objective, and generalized principles that define not who the learners are, but who the learners should be.

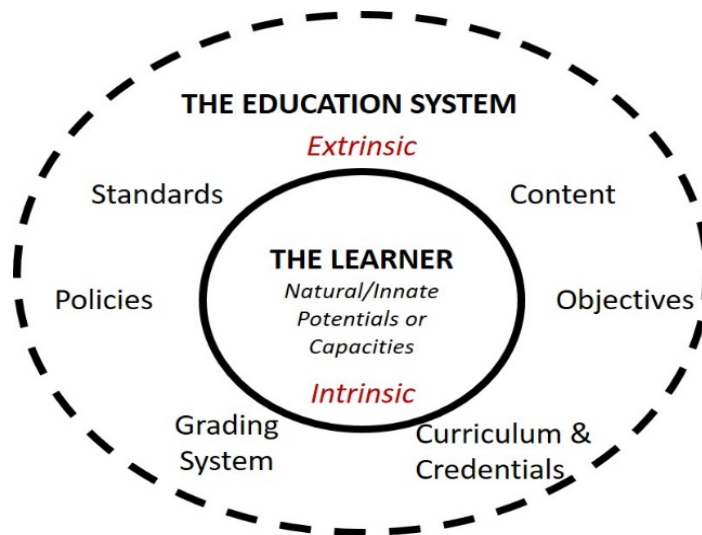


Figure 2. The Two-Dimensional Factors Affecting Learners' Potentials

The Learning

Conventionally, learning is defined as ‘change in behavior which occur as a result of experiences.’ Similarly, in OBE, learning is evidenced by positive changes in one’s skills or abilities. It is important to note that in OBE, learning is supposed to be crucially qualified rather than quantified. As stressed in the second premise of OBE, “successful learning promotes even more successful learning”. It signals then that learning is not just simply referring to the increment or quantitative increase in knowledge, and there is something more important to that. OBE emphasized that learning should be assessed and evaluated multidimensionally, and thus, the traditional practice of paper and pencil type of assessment, which only measures the cognitive aspect, e.g., knowledge, comprehension, analysis, is deemed inadequate as basis or evidence of learning. In OBE, learning is explicitly associated with the framework’s centerpiece, the “outcomes”. Hence, the ultimate measure of learning is done by assessing how well a learner can demonstrate the desired outcome. According to Spady (1994), outcomes are the tangible application of what students have learned, and that these are performance manifestations of learner’s competence in using content, concepts or ideas, and tools successfully. Accordingly, learning outcomes should transcend what and how much knowledge a learner has accumulated, and rather imposes the learners to demonstrate what they can successfully do with the amount of knowledge that they have acquired. This position points out the inadequacy of measuring and assessing learning in a purely mental aspect and rather emphasizes the importance of demonstration of skills or competencies as evidence of learning outcomes attainment.

It should be clarified though that meaningful learning outcomes are products of (a) necessary content (those that would enable learners’ abilities in performing the desired skills), (b) demonstrated competence (successfully demonstrated behavior or performance after acquiring the content), and (c) realistic context (authentic life situations, physical settings, and actual experiences).

In a more complex dimensionalities and definitions of outcomes, OBE explains that not all the outcomes that we harness in school are of the same level of importance, in fact, many of them

are not really important. OBE gives more weight on the outcomes that can facilitate and directly relate in preparing the learners to perform future-life roles that they should successfully execute the moment they exit the education system; this is expounded in Spady's concept of 'outcomes of significance'. The outcomes of significance are those that would matter in the long run or can have life-long use for the learners (Spady, 1991, 1994, 2018).

The Learning Process

Several learning theories explain the processes and the elements involved on how learning takes place. Learning Sciences have contributed a great deal of theories and models that are currently used in many schools and in wide-range of educational systems. In OBE, as pointed out earlier, the importance of ensuring the consistency of both the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions is crucial in ensuring learning to successfully take place. The process starts by primarily distinguishing learners' unique predispositions or intrinsic attributes, e.g., pre-existing beliefs, prior knowledge, interests, motivational attributes, thinking and learning styles, before proceeding to the actual teaching and learning experiences. Thus, it is common in OBE classrooms that diagnostic assessments, baseline testing, and survey of beliefs and conceptions are implemented prior to facilitating and implementing relevant teaching and learning activities. The information gathered through these assessments should effectively inform and guide teachers in their approaches and strategies in facilitating learning. It can be surmised then that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy and approach to teaching and learning facilitation, because each student is unique, so does the class compositions.

In order to facilitate successfully the attainment of the desired learning outcomes, through performance and demonstration, everything in the extrinsic dimension should be organized and executed strategically (e.g., instructional system, academic policies, assessment techniques, etc.). Spady (1994) offered the following strategic operating principles that should serve as important guides to learning implementers: Clarity of Focus, Expanded Opportunity, High Expectations, and Designing-Down. These operating principles should be implemented simultaneously, consistently, and creatively. Working together, they strengthen the conditions enabling the learners to be successful. A thorough understanding and adherence to these operating principles is important in order to systematically accomplish the accountability of schools in ensuring success for all learners, as emphasized in one of the OBE premises stating that "schools control the conditions that determine whether or not students will be successful at school learning" (Macayan, 2017).

The preceding discussions on the learning process imply that in OBE, schools are accountable and responsible in implementing two important pro-success provisions: learner-centered approaches that bring out the best in students' innate potentials and success-driven purposes in life and outcome-supportive learning processes that provide success-oriented/focused instructional systems and goals.

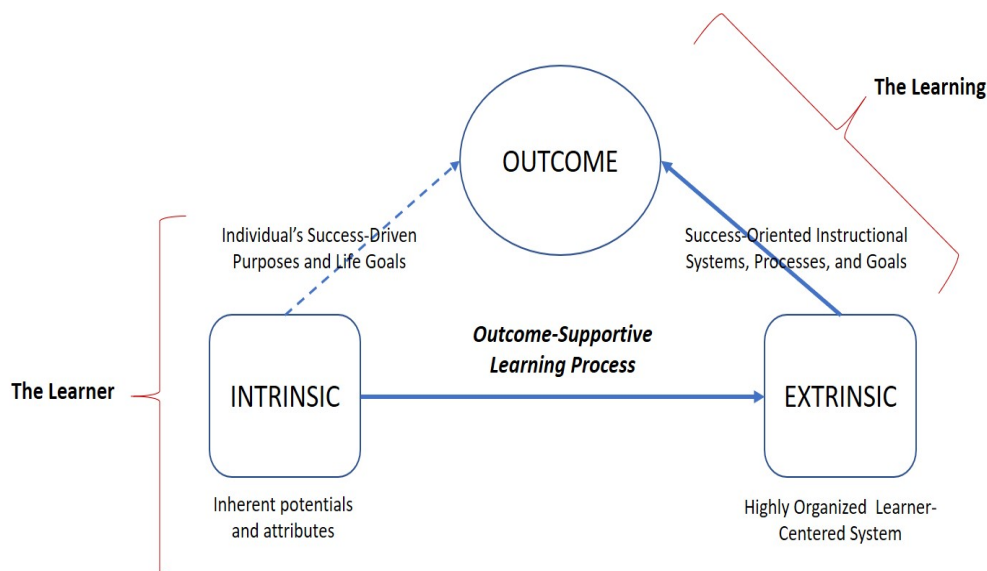


Figure 3. Learner-Centered and Outcome-Supportive Learning Processes

Doing Education Research Using OBE as Theoretical Framework

Research in education is usually done with the aim of advancing the knowledge and understanding of the roles of different variables and constructs relevant to learning, motivation, engagement, performance and behavior of learners. Research proceeds systematically by following logical sequences starting from the background the study (or introduction) that should effectively and coherently convey to the readers the existing issues or problems that the study intends to address. This is where research gaps should be clearly articulated. These gaps are the bases of the research questions that a researcher wants to answer at the end of the study, like; how to strategically optimize the learning potentials of students? what motivational characteristics can have better results? why some students are positively engaged, while some are not? and many other important questions that are commonly labelled as research problems, from which, assumptions and hypotheses are framed. These fundamental preliminary research elements should be undergirded by a strong and plausible conceptual anchor, a theory. The use of theory in education research makes the inquiry scientific. While many researches in education are practice-oriented, which place heavy emphasis on practical applications and implementations of strategies and systems, still, the role of a theory is indispensable. Theories inform the practice, it should serve as the basis of the *what's*, *how's*, and *why's* of our practices.

OBE as discussed in the preceding section offers strong theoretical assumptions about the critical facets of education and learning. To summarize OBE's theoretical standpoints about who the learners are, what learning is, and how the learning can successfully take place. Table 1 presents these in two dimensions, the intrinsic (person/learner) and the extrinsic (school/system). Again, in order to ensure success in education, there should be great alignment and congruency between the two dimensions.

These theoretical positions are greatly expounded, explicitly and implicitly, in several of Spady's papers (1991; 1994; 1998; 2001; 2018).

Table 1.

OBE Theoretical Standpoints in a Nutshell: The Learner, The Learning, and The Learning Process

OBE Theoretical Standpoints	Congruent Dimensional Factors of Genuine Learning and Outcomes Attainment	
	INTRINSIC (Person/Learner)	EXTRINSIC (School/Systemic)
The Learner	• Every learner is a unique human being; inimitable in many ways (<i>e.g.</i>, interests, motivation, thinking and learning preferences, etc.). • Every learner possesses pre-determined (innate) potentials and drive to thrive and become successful.	• Recognition, Respect, and Accommodation of the inherent uniqueness and diversities of learners as human beings. • Setting and implementing the conditions (systems, processes, provisions, etc.) that will foster success for all learners.
The Learning	• A self-led development process that results into positive change (increase) in one's skills, abilities, characteristics, or attributes that will prepare learners to successfully perform future-life roles personally, socially, and professionally. • Engagement in authentic and meaningful learning activities that are not only confined in shallow drills and routines, but rather on those that are contexts-based and those that can be used in real-life settings.	• A future-focused and learner-supportive approach that will aid and scaffold self-directed learning to empower learners to become successfully self-reliant, self-sufficient, motivated, and future-ready individuals. • Learning experiences that transcend mental or cognitive attributes (<i>e.g.</i>, knowledge, comprehension, etc.), and give more weight on tangible applications of what students have learned in various realistic contexts.
The Learning Process	• Taking off from one's unique and inherent potentials, capacities and attributes, successful learning is volitionally pursued and subjectively defined by the learners as one that will matter to them in effectively performing important future-life roles. • In order to sustain learning, learners should be engaged in an organized and outcome-focused learning experience that imposes challenges but allow for greater flexibility. Learners can thrive more in an autonomy-supportive learning environment and a process that promotes self-directed learning.	• Considering the vast uniqueness and inherent predispositions of learners, the learning process starts by distinguishing learner's individuality and uniqueness in various aspects (<i>e.g.</i>, pre-existing beliefs, prior knowledge, motivation and interest, etc.) • The learning systems and processes must be learner-centered and outcome-focused. This can be successfully facilitated by implementing simultaneously, consistently, and creatively the 4 operating principles (Clarity of Focus, Expanded Opportunity, High Expectation, and Design-Down).

If the introduction part of an inquiry critically lays down the groundwork of a research investigation, the methods section is the technical part of the inquiry. Similarly, the methods, designs, and procedures of conducting research should be consistent with the study's theoretical foundation. If for example as emphasized in OBE theory that learners are unique individuals,

inimitable in many ways (e.g., thinking styles, motivation, intelligences, etc.), the rigid adherence to empirical- positivist approach that tends to generalize, standardize, and strongly quantify learners' attributes may not be the appropriate methodological basis of doing OBE research. What would fit congruently in the theoretical standpoints of OBE are those approaches that view learners as unique individuals who may share commonalities but are distinctively different from one another. On that sense, a methodological approach based on constructivist and post-positivist orientations are more appropriately aligned to the OBE's standpoint. Thus, the use of mixed-methods (i.e., quantitative-qualitative, qualitative-quantitative) and other triangulated research designs (i.e., multiphase, multiple case study) can be more constructively fitting to the theoretical positions of OBE.

The theoretical framework should operationally and functionally guide researchers in making decisions relevant to choosing the research design, instrumentation, sampling techniques, data collection procedures, as well as in the analysis and interpretation of data.

For instance, in a research study that intends to investigate on the effectiveness of a specific teaching and/or instructive approach in aiding learners to learn successfully, as evidenced through successful outcomes demonstration, the researcher should be primarily mindful about the theoretical positions of OBE regarding *the nature of the learners (who)* – how a researcher should view the samples and the criteria in selecting samples or participants; the definition, *dimensions and evidence of learning (what)* – how a researcher should define the variables, measure, collect, or analyze the data; and *the processes and mechanisms involved in learning (how)* – how a researcher should design and implement procedures. These conceptual anchors are crucial in the methodological planning and execution of the inquiry.

Discussion

OBE as education framework has been gaining significant attention from various stakeholders including relevant government agencies, local and international accrediting bodies, down to school administrators and educators. Recently, research publication on OBE has also been increasing. Such remarkable momentum indicates a growing interest of a larger population on the concepts that OBE is offering as a model or a framework that can improve and positively transform education system. Noticeably, OBE as a model can be viewed in two ways; OBE as a Practitioner or Organizational Model (OBE-POM) or OBE as a Theoretical or Scientific Model (OBE-TSM).

In the Practitioner Model, OBE serves as important guide on how to organize and implement education to yield beneficial results for students. It covers the full spectrum of how educational organizations/institutions should behave aiming at bringing success to all students. This model is commonly and effectively presented in various events or fora like; seminars, trainings, conventions or conferences.

In the Theoretical Model, OBE serves as the catalyst of scientific discourse or conversations about the deeper meaning and purpose of education. That is, by articulating standpoints about who the learners are, what learning is, and how the learning takes place yielding successful results.

Both of these models are effective frameworks of success. OBE-POM calls for reforms, changes and redirection of educational practices from the traditional content-based, time-bound, and norm-oriented forms of education to success-driven, future-focused, and outcomes-founded form of education. When implemented correctly, this will potentially bring significant positive results to students, schools, and to the society. However, there's a caveat on the OBE-POM

because people have strong inclination to standardize and objectify concepts into more concrete and procedural forms of implementation. In this case, OBE becomes more process-based and mechanistically-determined, instead of really outcome-based. It may promote compliance rather than adherence. In the long run, education will claim the systems and processes as OBE, but its running under a highly structured, normative and controlled environment.

OBE-TSM likewise calls for reforms, changes, and redirection. But this is heavily focused on the conceptual aspect over procedural. It tackles deep thoughts, beliefs, and positions that should successfully work as anchor of educational practices and implementations. This however open the concept into a never-ending conversations and discussions. Expectedly, conceptual discourses are not always obliging and complementary, some can be opposing and contrary. But that is the real essence of a theory, the richness of arguments, standpoints, and evidences bring everyone to engage, and eventually meet at multiple and even infinite stages of resolutions. As the cycle of conversation-resolution proceeds, OBE-TSM is internalized and eternalized. This now calls for belief subscription and adherence, and not just compliance. Needless to say, this will make OBE more stable and truthful.

This article, “Framing Education Research using OBE as Theoretical Lens” aimed to inform researchers on OBE that it is more than simply an accreditation framework or an implementation model for employability or industry readiness of graduates as explicitly and implicitly suggested in many published articles on OBE. Rather, it should be primarily viewed as a theory and a philosophy that revolves around learners’ inherent success-driven purposes in life.

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Bionote

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