

The Illusions of Learner Accomplishment



Darrell N. Caulley and Arden D. Grotelueschen

"In reality there are many routes to approaching a problem or accomplishing some purpose or objective. It is an illusion to suppose that there is a list of essential learner accomplishments that are related to subsequent success in education."

... beware of the day
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again.

The most common approach to educational program evaluation is the focus on the accomplishment of learners who have participated in the program or curriculum. Two approaches to program evaluation particularly emphasize the assessment of learner accomplishment. The behavioral objectives approach conceives of evaluation as the determination of the degree to which a program's objectives are achieved by learners. Ralph Tyler (1949) was the originator of this approach, and James Popham has been an enthusiastic proponent. Michael Scriven's approach of goal-free evaluation (1972) also places importance

on the assessment of learner accomplishments, whether these accomplishments are intended or unintended.

Evaluating accomplishment by assessing outcomes in learners is like the hunting of the Snark in Lewis Carroll's poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*. The Snark is an illusion. Learner accomplishment as a primary focus of program evaluation also has its illusionary qualities. This paper discusses some of these illusions. Its aim is to deemphasize learner accomplishment, per se, in program evaluation and to emphasize implicitly the pursuit of accomplishment by learners as an important focus for program evaluation.

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;

They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.

One way of seeking accomplishment is to pursue, threaten, or charm it with measurement, particularly in the form of an achievement test. We often feel this effort is useful to us as we make decisions about the program, instruction, or even learners. Yet, does it really tell us what we need to know? Or is it merely an illusion? It is an illusion if we think it accurately, comprehensively, or fairly measures what is being learned or even what is being taught. In the teaching-learning process we may develop excitement, interest, appreciation, compassion, boredom, resentment, or apathy. These are neither represented by achievement test scores, nor perhaps should they be. But they might be portrayed if we are interested in ascertaining accomplishment.

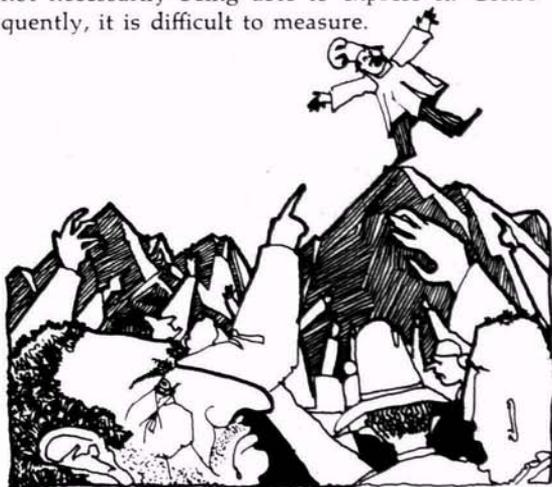
They shuddered to think that the chase might fail,
And the Beaver, excited at last,
Went bounding along on the tip of its tail,
For the daylight was nearly past.

The system of education has been increasingly designed so that it appears to be "fail-safe." Desired levels of learner accomplishment or competency are prespecified as standards of attainment. Teachers teach toward these standards. Learners are tested on them. If learners meet minimum standards, accomplishment is declared, and programs are deemed successful! If learners do not meet minimum standards, repeated efforts are made to obtain mastery of the minimums. If still unsuccessful, standards are lowered, or what the student already knows is declared an essential competency, or the student (not the program) fails. This is an illusion that even the unsophisticated eye can see.

"There is Thingumbob shouting!" the Bellman said.
"He is shouting like mad, only hark!
He is waving his hands, he is wagging his head,
He has certainly found a Snark!"

There are many indicators of a learner's accomplishment. There are also many different

ways that accomplishment might be communicated. But it is an illusion to think that we can tell all that we know regardless of how we communicate it. Polanyi (1958) terms this knowing that we cannot tell as *tacit* knowledge. Tacit knowledge is more than knowing *about* something. It is acquired directly by experience and acquaintance. It is accomplishment that lacks representation in language. It is the student who knows his or her teacher is good but can't explain why. It is the glassblower who can't explain how to shape molten glass. It is the person who attempts to describe a beautiful sunset. In short, tacit knowledge is knowing what one knows and not necessarily being able to express it. Consequently, it is difficult to measure.



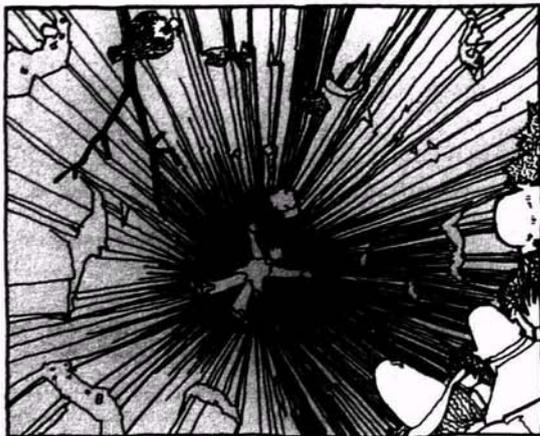
They gazed in delight, while the Butcher exclaimed,
"He was always a desperate wag!"
They beheld him—their Baker—their hero unnamed—
On the top of a neighbouring crag,

Like the Baker, behavioral objectives are beheld as a hero of educational practice and evaluation. However, hunting the degree to which a curriculum's objectives are achieved will not capture the full scope of a learner's accomplishment. Accomplishment is likely to manifest itself in diverse and unexpected ways. Behavioral objectives specify intended outcomes of learning. Accomplishment is likely to involve valuable *unintended* outcomes.

Another problem is that it is difficult (if not inappropriate) to represent intended accomplishment by statements of behavioral objectives.

Often our representation is either too specific or too general to adequately convey our expectations. Our inadequacy to state behavioral objectives and to convey expectations may be an inherent weakness of the task itself and not a fault of the effort we give to the task. It could be argued that we have come to overrely on behavioral manifestation as evidence of accomplishment. Other forms of learner accomplishment (for example, thoughts, ideas, feelings) that are not necessarily reflected in learner behavior may have to be taken more seriously.

It is an illusion to infer that if a curriculum's objectives have not been achieved then there is little accomplishment. In fact there may be substantial accomplishment, even if the objectives are not achieved. Conversely, if objectives are achieved, there also may be little accomplishment. Countless objectives are simultaneously pursued by every teacher; some are explicitly stated and some are implicit. Teachers often have more objectives to pursue than they can list or of which they are conscious. A list of objectives tends to be an oversimplification of what is desired from the curriculum. It is certainly an oversimplification of what is accomplished.



Erect and sublime, for one moment of time.
In the next, that wild figure they saw
(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,
While they waited and listened in awe.

Much of learning is waiting and listening to what is being taught. It is a receptive process for many. For some it is also an awe-inspiring occa-

sion. For others it is just plain awful. It is an illusion to conclude that what was learned is an indication of what was verbally taught. Just as we cannot tell all that we know, we cannot know all that we tell or teach, particularly if what is taught extends beyond what is verbally said by the teacher. Accomplishment may be different from what was thought to have been taught. It may extend beyond what was taught. It may be constrained by what was taught.

"It's a Snark!" was the sound that first came to their ears,
And seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:
Then the ominous words, "It's a Boo——"

We hear good and bad news about our learning accomplishments. We take that news too seriously if we assume that indices of accomplishment in school tasks relate directly to life tasks. The school task, particularly for children and youth, is rarely the same as the tasks that are faced in adult life. Little is directly replicated from a school situation to a subsequent adult life context. With adults, however, more of life's problems are faced directly by educational programs designed for adults. But it is an illusion to think that these life problems can be successfully approached by schooling in the traditional sense. In either instance (with children or youth and adults) what is indirectly accomplished (for example, feelings of self-worth, initiative, assertiveness, responsibility, submissiveness, knowing how to learn) has more transferability than what is seemingly directly accomplished.

Then, silence. Some fancied they heard in the air
A weary and wandering sigh
That sounded like "— — jum!" but the others declare
It was only a breeze that went by.

Just as there was lack of agreement about what was heard, there is often lack of agreement about what represents accomplishment. Traditionally, there have been three possible ways of viewing accomplishment. First, a learner's performance can be examined before or after a learning experience. For the dull learner, a small

increase in performance may be considered a significant accomplishment, while for the bright learner the increase may be seen as insignificant. A second way of deciding whether a learner's performance is an accomplishment is by comparing the performance to a set of norms of the learner's peers. Thus a learner may be seen as lacking accomplishment if he or she is not performing near the level of peers. This is the norm-referenced view of accomplishment. A third way of viewing accomplishment is according to some absolute standard of performance. Accomplishment is defined in terms of a set of behaviors that a learner is required to perform. This is the criterion-referenced view of accomplishment.

There is also often lack of agreement between the teacher and the learner over what level of performance represents accomplishment. For example, the adult learner might take a course of study in order to acquire a general understanding of a subject matter, whereas the teacher might require the learner to develop a detailed knowledge. There is disagreement between the teacher and the learner over the expected level of accomplishment. The teacher and the learner may have different objectives.

They hunted till darkness came on, but they found
Not a button, or feather, or mark,
By which they could tell that they stood on the ground
Where the Baker had met with the Snark.

Just as they could not find concrete evidence of the meeting of the Baker with the Snark, there is no concrete evidence that specific learner accomplishment ordered in a particular way is essential to success in educational tasks. There is no denying that certain learner accomplishments are useful in varying degrees, but it is an illusion to think that there are many specific accomplishments that are *essential* for the successful attainment of subsequent educational experience. Learning hierarchies detail what learner accomplishments are prerequisite to later accomplishments. There is a tendency to think this is true for *all* subsequent educational opportunities. In reality there are many routes to approaching a problem or accomplishing some purpose or objective. It is an illusion to suppose that there is a

list of essential learner accomplishments that are related to subsequent success in education.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away—
For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.

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Letters

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ing, composition, creative writing, or expository writing.

There is some research on writing, but it's scant. There is concern about writing, at all levels, but it's seldom heard. Maybe if social educators used writing more, as an organon—an aid to organizing thought—our students would learn more, as well as learn to write better.

Writing is too important to be left to the English teachers.

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