

WILLIAM SPADY: A PARADIGM PIONEER.

Associate Professor Roy Killen
Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Newcastle, Australia

“What we do and the alternatives we allow ourselves to consider and choose are limited and constrained by what we allow ourselves to see as possible or desirable” (Spady, 1998:1). William Spady sees and pursues many educational possibilities that others fail to recognise or refuse to accept. It is this characteristic more than any other that has distinguished Spady from many of his contemporaries.

For many teachers, “Spady” is just a reference that they see in writings about outcome-based education (OBE). Those who read a lot in this area probably see the name so often that “Spady” and “OBE” are synonymous. Few probably ever stop to think why Spady writes about OBE, what prompted his initial interest in it, how he came to formulate his ideas, how his ideas have changed or developed in the past twenty years, or what he does now. So it is with many of the people who have shaped the way we think about teaching and learning—Dewey, Piaget, Bloom, Vygotsky and the many other famous names that are sprinkled throughout the educational literature—they are just names. So it was for me and “Spady” until I met him in 1999. That meeting had more impact on me than any other event in my 26 years of teaching and lecturing, so I will use it to give you some insight into Bill Spady the educator before exploring the impact his work has had on education globally.

In 1998 I was invited to present a series of ten workshops on outcome-based education at a technikon in Durban, South Africa. About a week before I left Australia I received an email from the workshop organiser that said, almost as a throw-away line, “By the way, you will be working with Bill Spady”. Prior to that I had read of lot of Spady’s writing about OBE but had never really stopped to think about the person behind the writing. So, I approached our meeting with some trepidation—expecting to be told by the “master” that I did not really understand OBE and that he would present the workshop in his way. Fortunately for me, the workshop organisers had set aside three days before the workshops to allow Bill, me and Jim Rand (a vocational educator from Scotland) to simply talk to one another about OBE. What eventuated was three days of intense intellectual exchange and debate in which all three of us grew in our understanding of the theory and practice of OBE at the same time as we developed a lasting friendship. Those three days gave me a rare insight into Bill Spady “the person” and into his philosophy and vision for education. I very soon learned that he was committed yet open-minded, and never satisfied that his ideas had reached a point where they could not be improved through dialogue and reflection.

Bill’s philosophy is really a very simple one. He believes, passionately, that it is our collective responsibility to design, structure and operate school education systems that do the best job possible of preparing all young people for their life beyond school. A central feature of Spady’s views on education is that its prime purpose is to prepare learners for the “life roles” that they will face after their formal education is complete. For most young people, those life roles will be much more complex than the life roles of their parents and grandparents so, for Spady, it seems illogical to presume that the school systems of their grandparents will serve today’s young people well.

Like many others who are famous for their influence on education, William Spady did not commence his academic life as a teacher—he was a sociologist, lecturing at Harvard University and at the Ontario Institute of Education between 1967 and 1973. His ideas about outcome-based education developed during the 1970s and 1980s while he was Senior Research Sociologist at the National Institute of Education, Associate Executive Director of the American Association for School Administrators and Director of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (in the USA). His early work on educational reform was driven by concerns about two things: the future that school children were facing and the fundamental character of the education system that was preparing them for that future. His basic conclusion was that the American education system was “educentric”—its operation and the thinking of those who guided it and worked in it were driven primarily by “what was and always had been” rather than by “what could and should be”. In short, he saw that educentric system as giving little more than lip-service to students’ learning and to their future success in the information age.

Much of Spady's early thinking about schooling was influenced by other now famous educators such as Benjamin Bloom, James Block (of mastery learning fame) and John Carroll. His early thinking paralleled the developing ideas of people such as John Goodlad and Madeline Hunter and developed into a set of beliefs that can be summarised as follows: All students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day in the same way; Successful learning promotes even more successful learning; Schools control many of the conditions that directly affect successful school learning; What and whether students learn is more important than when and how they learn; The purpose of school is to equip students for their lives after school; Students learn best when they have a clear picture of what is expected of them and when they are given adequate time to accomplish these things; and, In-depth learning of significant things is more useful than superficial learning about things of little consequence.

Around 1986, Spady started to think about outcomes and student success in ways that were distinctly different from the ways in which his colleagues were conceptualising them. Rather than thinking of student success in terms of improved test scores, Spady started to advocate the idea that success should be measured in terms of outcomes—"high quality, culminating demonstrations of significant learning in context" (Spady, 1994:1). The idea that success should be measured in terms of things that learners could demonstrate after their educational experiences were over (after they had finished school), rather than by an accumulation or average of things that could be demonstrated during their educational experiences, set him apart from his contemporaries. This future-focused, complex life-performance approach became the defining feature of Spady's approach to what he called "transformational outcome-based education".

Transformational OBE was based on four principles which, if applied consistently, systematically, creatively and simultaneously would ensure that all students were equipped with the knowledge, competence and qualities necessary for successful fulfilment of their various life roles. These principles became known as: *clarity of focus*, *designing down*, *high expectations*, and *expanded opportunity*. The essence of "clarity of focus" is that educators must establish a clear picture of the learning they want students to be able to demonstrate; make this their top priority in planning, teaching and assessment; share this outcome with learners; and maintain alignment between outcomes, teaching and assessment. The basis of "designing down" is to establish significant culminating outcomes and then derive from them the enabling outcomes that will provide the foundation for achievement of the broader outcomes. The principle of "high expectations" has three components: raising the level of performance that is considered acceptable, abandoning norm-referenced approaches to assessment and giving all students access to challenging, high-level learning. The concept of "expanded opportunity and support for learning success" is very broad. It includes the idea that time (hours of instruction, timetables, the calendar) should be used to organise and co-ordinate learning opportunities, but they should not define and limit them. It also emphasises the importance of teachers using different methods of instruction to accommodate students' different modalities of learning.

When these principles are followed, "Outcome-based education 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 experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for all students to be able to do, then organizing curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens" (Spady, 1994:1).

Spady's ideas were accepted broadly in the USA in the early 1990s, but widespread opposition to them commenced around 1993. The reasons for this opposition are described in detail in Spady's 1998 book "Paradigm Lost". The principal reasons appear to have been misguided beliefs that OBE was advocating "new age ideology", that it was some form of psychological manipulation, that OBE lacked academic rigour, that OBE was simply a form of government control, and that OBE would "dumb down" the education system. In the USA, OBE did not survive these attacks.

Despite this setback, the foundational concepts of Spady's approach to OBE have been adopted and adapted by many educational reformers, not necessarily with due recognition to Spady. For example, three of the five principles of authentic pedagogy suggested by Newmann and Wehlage (1993) are integral to Spady's model of OBE. (They are "connectedness to the world beyond the classroom, social support for student achievement, and depth of knowledge—all part of the Productive Pedagogy model in Queensland and the recent Quality Teaching model released by the NSW Department of Education and Training.) A further example of the indirect influence of Spady's ideas is that his concept of

“clarity of focus” and the alignment of outcomes, teaching strategies and assessment are central to the taxonomy of learning, teaching and assessment published by Anderson and Krathwohl in 2001.

In the past decade, Bill Spady’s direct influence on education has been stronger in Australia and South Africa than it has been in the USA and many of his ideas have been evident in educational reforms in Scotland and New Zealand. In the last three years he has done a considerable amount of work in Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Interestingly, although the NSW Board of Studies claims to have outcomes-based curricula, their approach is far from the ideal espoused by Spady. Spady’s notion of life-roles as the driving force for curriculum reform has never been accepted in NSW. Rather, there is a strong focus on content-bound outcomes and some lip-service to life-roles via the Key Competencies. Nevertheless, as teachers become more comfortable with the idea of teaching to syllabus outcomes the foundations are being laid for those outcomes to take on a less traditional focus. This was evident, for example, in the New HSC Physics syllabus.

Spady has never felt bound to conform to traditional ways of viewing education, particularly the organisational and systems aspects of school education. He is very much a “systems thinker” and this is why his ideas about educational reform are so challenging. They are not just ideas about what teachers should do in classrooms. They are ideas about how educational systems should be structured, how schools should be managed, how curricula should be designed and, ultimately, how learning and teaching should be driven by significant outcomes. Because Spady’s ideas require a commitment to student learning at all levels and in all aspects of schooling they truly are a paradigm shift in thinking about education. They present a challenge that few education systems have been prepared to face with commitment.

The most ambitious attempt to reform an educational system in the way that Spady envisaged has been undertaken in South Africa. In 1996 the South African government decided to make the entire education system of that country (from Year 1 of school to postgraduate level at university) an outcome-based system. They established a set of twelve “critical outcomes” that were to be the focus of every phase of education and decreed that these outcomes should be embedded in every curriculum. These critical outcomes embodied many of the concepts from the Australian Key Competency statements but also included broader “life-role” issues such as entrepreneurship. At the school level there are Learning Area outcomes that were supposed to have been derived from the critical outcomes, and Phase outcomes that are derived from the Learning Area outcomes. Unfortunately, the development of this new system was plagued with problems, not least of which was the general level of misunderstanding of Spady’s ideas. This, plus implementation problems (due to factors such as untrained teachers and under-resourced schools) led to much confusion and calls for the abandonment of OBE. Fortunately, the Minister for Education has stuck with the overall plan and the system is slowly developing, albeit in a manner that has at times been extremely frustrating for Spady. In South Africa, as in the USA a decade earlier, there has been considerable opposition to OBE. Having worked extensively in South Africa for considerable periods of time during their attempted educational reforms I have concluded that the opposition to Spady’s ideas is due to two main reasons—a fear of change, and the unwillingness of many educators to try to understand Spady’s vision.

It is this latter point that has hampered Spady’s work for the past fifteen years. Those who take the trouble to develop a deep understanding of Spady’s approach to OBE can see its simplicity and its potential. Those who just scratch the surface often fail to see either the simplicity or the potential and choose to take comfort in traditional content-bound approaches to curriculum and mark-bound approaches to assessment. I suspect that history will be kinder to Spady than many of his contemporaries have been.

It is Spady’s ability to take a familiar idea, look at it from a different perspective, and mould it into a new and much more powerful concept that enables him to be at the forefront of educational thought. The most obvious example of this was his ability to take the concept of an “outcome” and develop it into the concept of “transformational outcome-based education”. On a broader level, Spady’s legacy lies hidden in the myriad of educational ideas that build either implicitly or explicitly on his vision of OBE.

SPADY IN HIS OWN WORDS

Q1: If you could turn back the clock 15 years and start again, would you still try to convince the world of the merits of OBE? If so, how would you approach it differently?

Spady: Fifteen years ago is when I realised that the outcomes of traditional school curricula were self-limiting and not preparing learners for the complex and dynamic future they faced. I'm even more convinced of that fundamental reality now than I was then. So, yes, I would definitely try to convince the world of the merits of what we then called "Transformational" OBE. While more traditional forms of genuine OBE clearly showed merit by increasing the numbers of students who were learning more than ever before in higher-challenge programs, what they were learning was mainly preparing them for yet more education rather than preparing them for the complex life roles they ultimately would occupy as young adults.

However, based on what I've seen world-wide, I would have changed my approach to bringing this awareness to the world. At that time, my major focus was on educators and local school districts. Today I would focus much more on building understanding and change strategies among both the public and important political coalitions. Transformational OBE didn't succeed in the long run in the U.S. in the '90s precisely because the public understanding and political leverage that was needed to support it was never there. The people we reached—the committed educators—were with us in large numbers. But when the political going got tough, we simply didn't have the political support needed to fend off the deeply misinformed and highly organized attacks that were mounted against us. In my view, U.S. society is paying a deep price for allowing those attacks to succeed.

Q2: Are you comfortable with the reality that many educational systems (such as the New South Wales school system, or the South African national education system) essentially have their own versions of OBE that will probably never align with your fundamental principles?

The interest across Australia and South Africa in what people call OBE is a mixed blessing. Because of the widespread use of the label in those two countries, I have had extensive opportunities in the last six years to work with thousands of teachers and educational leaders and bring to them far greater clarity about the power and potential of the concept than they had ever realised. So whether or not the OBE concept is being properly addressed in Australia and South Africa, countless people in local schools now understand it at far deeper levels than would have been the case otherwise. And where I've had the chance of going back and working with people again and again, as in Queensland and South Australia, I've seen some very creative and sound things emerge in a variety of schools.

The other side of the coin, of course, is that whatever the political bodies in those two countries are calling OBE falls WAY SHORT of being anything like the OBE I've been describing to people over these many years. Regardless of what they call it, their's is still a time-based, curriculum-driven system with what people claim to be "outcomes" sprinkled over the top. And the worst part about it is that politicians and the public across the globe think that test scores are Outcomes. If they are, then they're the narrowest, poorest defined version of an Outcome that I can imagine.

I have no problem with there being multiple versions of OBE in the world as long as the implementers consistently, systematically, creatively, and simultaneously apply the four Principles that drive a genuine OBE system. My deep concern with the current reform trends in the world centers on the glib way in which the OBE label is used. Just because people claim to have Outcomes—which in most cases are simply curriculum objectives—doesn't make them "Outcome-Based." Forget the Outcomes part for a moment and really look at the word BASED. Are their systems "defined by, focused on, and designed and organised around" the Outcomes they are committed to having ALL learners accomplish? Clearly not. Then they shouldn't use the word "Based" when they don't mean it.

Q3: Can you summarise the links between your early work on OBE and your current interests?

All of us who were involved in birthing what is now known as the OBE movement over thirty years ago were deeply committed to expanding opportunities for learners of all kinds and backgrounds so that they could be more successful in their learning. We knew they could be if schools would change their traditional instructional, assessment, and credentialing structures and practices. We called the key to our change efforts: "expanding the conditions of success"—and many educators did. Our goal was to have way more learners become way more capable, empowered, and successful than traditional conditions were allowing.

In the middle and late '80s I began to realise that "not all Outcomes are created equal" and that we had better put far more focus on the nature and quality of the Outcomes people were pursuing than we had. Over time our understanding of an Outcome expanded to what we call today a (life) role performance, and that really shook the foundations of the curriculum castle because subject areas and life role performances are fundamentally different paradigms of learning.

About five years ago, however, I began to realise that even this "transformational" approach to Outcomes didn't address fully enough the deeper questions of "Who are we as humans beings?" and "What is the deeper potential that lies within us that our 'education' systems should be honoring and fostering?" That has taken me to a very different place of understanding human potential and what we can do to enhance it.

If forced to summarise this entire career path in one phrase, it would be "An ever-expanding commitment to an ever-evolving vision of LEARNER EMPOWERMENT." And since we're all learners, regardless of age, that really opens up a vast arena of future exploration and development for me.

CONCLUSION

Bill Spady continues to pursue his ideals through consultancy work in Australia, South Africa and the USA. Much of his energy these days is devoted to an organisation called *Heartlight Education* which strives to provide education which helps learners to grow and develop spiritually, intellectually, and socially. He is so committed to a set of beliefs that drive him relentlessly to help others in their attempts to improve whatever education system they work in. Bill continues to strive for deeper levels of understanding of teaching and learning and spends most of his life "outside the square" questioning his own ways of thinking and challenging others to make paradigm shifts. Perhaps his greatest legacy to educators is that he has shown that traditional views can be challenged successfully and that the price for securing a better future for our children is never too high.

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