

Learning objectives vs. learning outcomes? *Golf as not just a metaphor of life but of ‘optimal outcomes-based learning’*- Excerpt from Cameron Richards’ *‘Optimal lifelong learning from experience, reflection, and ‘inner wisdom’: The four stages of the human lifecycle revisited* (2026).

Several references have been made in this essay to the GROW and related ‘inner game’ models of Gallwey, Whitmore and others to assist professional sportsmen (especially tennis players) to achieve ‘optimal performance’. This is a model that has since been extended by others in related publications as well as adapted to the fields of business, health and ‘education’ (etc.). Whilst it is mainly focused on ‘body-mind performance’ I immediately recognized (when I first read Gallwey’s 1974/2009 book) that this model was a variation of the kind of ‘optimal leaning designs’ (i.e. by addressing particular problems or questions) that I was otherwise engaging with in the general field of ‘education’ – in addition to related ‘optimal knowledge-building’ in academic and interdisciplinary research. That is, it was clear Gallwey had likewise worked out that ‘turning upside down’ conventional, superficial and ad hoc notions of effective practice by a focused ‘working back’ from a particular goal or outcome was the key to an applied as well as conceptual ‘optimizing of performance’ in not just sport but in ‘learning’ more widely.

In Essay 7 we noted that (like a slow but engaged and extended ‘round’ of the full form of traditional Tai Chi Chuan practice) the game of golf likewise involves much usually underestimated complexity and a related ‘inner game’ - typically also requiring extensive concentration and anticipation skills as well as the other more obvious ‘proficiency skills’ needed. And so it was that around the time I wrote an early draft of a related ‘Socrates learns Tai Chi’ essay, I found myself giving a talk in a hotel ballroom full of Malaysian educators on the topic of *‘how an outcomes-based paradigm of education might be introduced more effectively’*. Putting aside how formal education so often turns OBE (and other new learning approaches) into just another self-negating superficial or bureaucratic exercise, I started my talk by asking if anybody present could confidently distinguish between new notions of a ‘learning outcome’ and existing concepts of a ‘learning objective’.¹ I broke the expected silence of the audience response by then going on to begin my talk with a metaphor. This likened a ‘learning outcome approach’ to how Tiger Woods (and other similarly coached professional golfers) might approach a Par 3 golfing fairway with a flag flying on the green 175 meters or so ahead. That is, many if not most professional golfers these days have been trained to typically visualize the outcome of the ball going into the hole on the green - and then working back from there to optimize the performance of hitting off the tee, and any further chips or putts needed to make par or even birdie (and more rarely, a direct ‘hole in one’).

In contrast, I noted that golf amateurs (or hackers) like myself are more likely to apply a ‘learning objective’ approach – that is, to get up on the tee and then just proceeding to hit the ball hopefully in the general direction of the flag. The *‘ball in hole outcome’* visualization technique helps good golfers to adapt ‘prior knowledge’ (e.g. club selection linked to prior experience of distances and related shot options as well a prior proficiency with different clubs and shot

¹ This was not long after the 2008 policy implementation of outcomes-based education by the Malaysian government in public schools and national universities. With my prior experience of OBE and learner-centered models, I could tell that also in Malaysia the dominant view of OBE was one of a *‘restructuring of curriculum, assessment and reporting practices in education’* - generally ignoring and even tending to undermine the original rationale of improving the (real) quality of teaching for the enhancement of student learning.

selections) to ‘particular environmental conditions’ – the extent and direction of the wind and particular fairway features and ‘obstacles’ (e.g. trees, bunkers and any water or hills in play). But most of all, the ‘working back’ method helps to encourage optimal focus, planning and performance by *‘blocking out the distractions’* – and to also thereby optimize mind-body coordination. On top of so often being blind to the need to ‘adjust to the conditions’, if a typical amateur with a mere ‘vague objective’ sees any water, trees or bunkers in play, then there is a fair chance that they will mess up the shot. This is partly because the ‘reverse psychology of the brain’ interprets or confuses rather a vague conscious self-command like ‘don’t hit the ball into the water’ as one of ‘hit the ball into the water’ (like a child told not to touch a hot stove).

I soon received feedback that my metaphor had helped the educators present that day to make the relevant distinction and appreciate that an outcome-based learning approach had powerful possibilities (if applied effectively or was ‘allowed’ to happen). If we extend the metaphor, we can see that it does not just apply to one golfing hole or even a full game of eighteen holes – but also remains relevant to a professional career or to an amateur over a lifetime. A full game of golf (typically around 5 hours long) even repeated on the same golf course can be likened to an epic adventure into the uncertainty of a new day and the infinite variation of ‘inner’ focus, decisions and planning against challenging ‘external forces’. And whilst professional golfers are ultimately competing not just against themselves but a universal standard of ‘par golf’, the amateur likewise (should) be battling the ‘eternal fight’ to maintain their handicap. This epic battle is repeated every game and also endlessly over a career or lifetime.

Whilst all sports and activities can also serve similarly as *a metaphor of life*, golf has some additional layers of complexity that makes many golfers very passionate about the game (or, depending on the perspective, even ‘perhaps obsessive’). In elderly golfers in particular, this passion can evidently add many years of purposeful living to the individual human lifecycle. Again, it’s also on the golf course or other sporting fields that sustained ‘optimal performance’ is possible in an exemplary sense. This becomes obvious when champions rise to the challenge through a particular ‘flow experience’ allowing them to apparently slow down time and more clearly (than anyone else) ‘see’ in space various, different, and future options of play. But anyone can more sustainably fulfill their potential when dealing with obstructions or frustrations by similarly navigating the either-or gap between ‘doing without thinking’ or ‘thinking without doing’.

The ‘inner game of mind-body coordination’ (in golf or other sports and activities): Also a metaphor for the ‘Socratic threads of inquiry’ template which exemplifies the innate ‘universality’ of the human lifecycle?

As Oliver Sacks put it in the quote included at the outset of Essay 4, “*At nearly 80... I feel glad to be alive... to bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together*”. In this way Sacks usefully pointed out that human memories about particularly significant and often extended experiences across a lifetime also function like a number of threads in any fabric of overall or culminating meaningful significance. We think that ‘threads’ of problem-solving and general inquiry (as well as related decision-making and planning) also work cumulatively or progressively in much the same way in terms of some overall interplay of general wholes and particular parts. This is along with a related notion of ‘relevant focus’ and design or planning that is perhaps just as much the hallmark of a good golfer on a golf course as it is an effective ‘knowledge-builder’ in various domains of life (e.g. the writing of a PhD dissertation). This is especially so in terms of the systemic

‘complex problem-solving’ which in a sense is ultimately (not just all problem-solving but) a basic function of all individual as well as collective experience in adaptation to changing external conditions and environments. This becomes clearer when recognizing the various ‘micro cycles’ that make up the larger ‘macro cycles’ that can extend across a day and also an individual lifetime or lifecycle as well as ongoing shared traditions.

We have discussed the ‘flow experience’ that characterizes the most effective engaged learners, thinkers or problem-solvers. It’s no accident that the term is also applied to champion sportsmen and women (both individually and also as ‘champion teams’) – as well as to ‘warriors’ in battle (and I think also to ‘supreme nurturers’ in a distinct but ultimately related sense). ‘Champions’ are able to demonstrate an ability in their chosen sports (often at the most critical times) to suspend normal time and space as they demonstrate their rare capacity to rise to the occasion to optimize their performance on a football field or tennis court (and even a golf course) – and in doing so, effortlessly find or achieve opportunities (and solutions to a problem or crisis) that others merely struggle to see or negotiate.

As we discuss further in later essays, it is possible to recover the universal significance of Socrates’ elenchus method’ in terms of how a strategy of productive knowledge-building might build upon both naïve and critically negative stages of posing and then addressing a question or framing a problem. On closer inspection this model (and the modern versions of dialogical thinkers like Paul Ricoeur, Hans George Gadamer and Hannah Arendt) represents a universal ‘deep-level or foundational thread’ of reflective thought and inquiry upon which various ‘supporting threads’ are interwoven and built upon to achieve some relevant answer, solution or desired outcome. In this way such inquiries or explorations might be transformed into having larger or wider transferable relevance to other such questions and problems as well as to different situations, contexts or domains of human experience.

As modern Socratic thinkers like Ricoeur have long been aware, a relevant question or problem potentially ‘opens up’ the direct outcome of a particular answer or solution. Likewise, such ‘threads’ can further exemplify a universal process of knowledge building, meaning construction, and also ‘mind-body coordination in performance’ that aligns as much with transformations informed by the experiential human lifecycle as it does with some apparent external objective reality or condition. In this way too, the insights from learning or knowing based on deep-level experience further exemplifies how the innate ‘wise ignorance’ of *All* compares rather with the ‘blindness’ of the close-minded ignorance or arrogance of *Some*.
