The simple fact that Learning Outcomes are NOT the same as Learning Objectives is a key principle to “Developing Effective Learning Outcomes & Objectives.” As noted in that presentation outline,

The differences lie in the level of specificity each provides and the relationship of each to assessment methods and instructional activities. Failure to understand and accommodate the differences can restrict academic freedom of faculty and complicate institutional efforts to manage curriculum and assessment.

Using the course I teach – COSC 1401 Introduction to Computers – I want to briefly illustrate the difference and the relationship between a learning outcome and a learning objective.

**OUTCOME**

9. Demonstrate proficiency in the use of word processing, spreadsheet, database, and presentation applications.

**OBJECTIVE**

Given plain text of an existing research paper with 3-5 references cited in the bibliography, students will be able to format with 80% accuracy a MS Word document according to MLA guidelines including all document specifications (margins, headers, footers, use of styles, tab stops etc.) and use of the reference manager to manage the formatting of the bibliography.

The learning outcome provides a high level view of what a student will be able to accomplish by the end of the course; it points all faculty in the same direction. However, from the learning outcome, do you have an idea of specific activities to be engaged? or specific assessment methods that will be used? No. In my opinion, that vagueness of learning outcomes is what enables a coherent curriculum while permitting academic freedom. Both of those are critical to the profession.

In contrast, the objective is much more specific and serves to clarify, in part, what the outcome means. From the objective, I believe you likely have a very good idea of the specific activities students will be engaging, and I believe you can easily begin to envision the assessment process as well. **If interested, feel free to describe the specific activities and assessment process in the comments.**

Certainly, a number of learning objectives defined within the course may support and facilitate one learning outcome; that’s clear from the fact that there’s other tasks that must be addressed to be considered proficient in “word processing,” and there’s also tasks that must be addressed regarding spreadsheets, presentation software and databases.

**The difference between an outcome and an objective is critical. Why?**
Learning outcomes should be specified, at the very least, by institutions; that creates a coherent curriculum. However, the development of learning objectives belongs in the hands of faculty or, at most, groups of faculty within an institution. If the two are not clearly delineated, the terms “outcomes” and “objectives” may be (and are being, in some instances) used interchangeably. That misplaces the locus of control for the development of outcomes and objectives. Institutions or, worse yet, accrediting or regulatory agencies specifying outcomes that are more akin to objectives creates a much more prescriptive curriculum than what is intended or desired. That begins to restrict academic freedom and erode the professional creativity and responsibility of faculty, making the curriculum development process much more difficult.

Second, there should be many more objectives (tasks and assessments) in a course than learning outcomes of a course. Without clear delineation between an outcome and an objective, the mission of professionals at varying points in the curriculum development process becomes clouded. Without clarity in the differences between an outcome and an objective, a group charged with writing high level outcomes may quickly digress into writing objectives – thinking in terms of what activities and assessments could or should be included in a course. That potentially leaves the curriculum development process with too many course outcomes that are actually objectives, and those objectives may be poorly written in an effort to not imply specific activities or assessment methods.

For example, imagine the objective in my example above being listed as an outcome and worded as, “Format a word processing document according to MLA guidelines.” It’s too specific to be an effective learning outcome, and it’s not specific enough to be an effective learning objective. Combine that with the additional poorly worded objectives necessary to address additional word processing tasks plus all of the tasks necessary for the other applications. The result is at least 8-9 poorly worded objectives being listed as outcomes in lieu of the single learning outcome noted in the example. Of course, 30-40+ “outcomes” is unwieldy, so some will be removed from the curriculum leaving a confusing mish-mash* of objectives and outcomes to define the scope of a course. Basically, it becomes a mess. (*mish-mash is a technical term in this instance.)

Further yet, with all of that confusion, imagine the difficulty imposed on institutions regarding assessment and accountability responsibilities. Faculty reporting samples of assessment results of all course outcomes over a given period of time (4-5 years) is a manageable, necessary (yet still time consuming) process. How difficult or impossible does that responsibility become with 20+ mish-mashed, poorly worded objectives rather than 7-8 well written outcomes each supported by well written, faculty developed objectives?

AND, all of those issues precede the issue of developing effective learning objectives. That’s another, related-yet-separate ball of wax.