

# The Agora<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Inspired by Andrew Piker's incisive question, "What would Socrates have made of Student Learning Outcomes?"

### Abstract

Student Learning Outcomes are increasingly *de rigueur* in U.S. higher education. Usually defined as statements of what students will be able to measurably demonstrate upon completing a course or program, proponents argue that they are essential to objective assessment and quality assurance. Critics contend that Student Learning Outcomes are a misguided attempt to apply corporate quality-enhancement schemes to higher education. It is not clear whether faculty should embrace or reject Student Learning Outcomes. With sincere apologies to Plato, this dialogue explores arguments for and against their use.

**Keywords:** Student Learning Outcomes, Higher Education Assessment, Quality Control

*In the Agora,*

GLAUCON: Adeimantus! I've been looking for you. Gorgias and Thrasymachus want to see us.

ADEIMANTUS: Did they say why?

GLAUCON: I think it's some new plan to secure employment as our teachers. It seems business has fallen off for them lately, so they have a new approach they think we should consider. It is supposed to be far better than simply keeping them on retainer. Euthyphro, they tell me, has eagerly signed up for the new program.

ADEIMANTUS: I'm not sure Euthyphro's enthusiasm quite counts in their favor. Still, let's hear them out. We've apparently already been corrupted and believe in false gods, so it can't do any harm now, can it? Have you seen Socrates?

GLAUCON: Yes, but as much fun as it would be to involve him in this affair, Gorgias and Thrasymachus were clear they want to speak with just us. I imagine they have a point. Socrates' favorite sport is to give chase, corner, and slay their fiercest arguments. We wouldn't get very far on their proposal, I fear, with Socrates on the hunt.

ADEIMANTUS: Ah, but what a chance it would be to watch Socrates hunt! I suppose there will be other days for that.

ADEIMANTUS: Why hello Gorgias, hello Thrasymachus. Good to see you both. Glaucon here tells me you have a proposal for us?

GORGAS: Yes we have, and we hope you will give it the attention and interest it merits. I cannot claim to be the sole author, as Thrasymachus here has had keen insights at key points as we crafted this proposal.

GLAUCON: Let us hear it, then, and we shall certainly give it the careful attention you desire.

GORGAS: Superb! Our concern, you see, is only for Athens and, as young men of Athens, we have put our thoughts to your education.

THRASYMACHUS: Yes, we see you with Socrates and wonder, is your commitment to taking as a teacher someone who refuses, openly and endlessly, to be thought a teacher best for you and for Athens? Socrates himself claims to know nothing and to lead no-one anywhere, so we fail to understand how your continued association with him benefits either yourselves or Athens.

GORGAS: We would not of course gainsay your attending Socrates, but offer in addition our own services as teachers of Athenian youth.

GLAUCON: So you say, but this is not a new proposal.

THRASYMACHUS: Yet our proposal is in how we render our services. You agree, do you not, that there are certain skills, skills of oratory, composition, and poetry, that are as important for the defense of Athens as skill with horse, javelin, or bow?

ADEIMANTUS: It would be silly of us to deny it. But by what new method do you propose to teach us?

THRASYMACHUS: By no new method. You misunderstand me, I'm afraid.

GORGIAS: The point is rather that having secured our services, we shall exactly specify in exchange the skills you will gain as a result. No haphazard maundering this! No, you will know from a list in advance precisely what we will teach you and what you will have gained in the end from our instruction. This list, as carefully enumerated, explained, and explicit as any accountant's list, we call 'Student Learning Outcomes'.

THRASYMACHUS: And what is more, we will prove our Student Learning Outcomes by demonstrating that what you had not known you now knew from our dedicated efforts on your behalf; you need not even pay us until we have supplied this proof. This is far more, I think, than you would ever expect to see from your dear Socrates.

GLAUCON: Not one bold proposal, Adeimantus, but two! As the eatery will list their meals on menus, describing each dish, its ingredients, and how it is made, so will you make explicit our advantage from your instruction. And as the proof of the cooking is in a satisfied belly, so will you prove to us the hearty value of your teaching for our knowledge and character. Ingenious, don't you think, Adeimantus?

ADEIMANTUS: It seems so! But let me ask, what form will this proof take? How will you demonstrate to us that we have accomplished your Student Learning Outcomes? A dish well-made is proven simply in the enjoyment of it. How will you prove your services to us?

GORGIAS: This was what Thrasymachus saw. It was not enough to explain exactly what you would gain from our teaching. We must also show, openly and publicly, having taught it.

ADEIMANTUS: To be sure, this is ambitious! Just how will you do it?

THRASYMACHUS: Consider the thrown javelin lies further than it did if the coach has done his job well.

ADEIMANTUS: Surely. Less far or even just as far would not encourage athletes to seek out this coach.

THRASYMACHUS: We prove the coach, then, by the distance between throws, yes?

ADEIMANTUS: Naturally.

THRASYMACHUS: So likewise we test you on our Student Learning Outcomes before and after our instruction to show you how much further you can throw.

GLAUCON: And by subtracting the former score from the latter score we have a measure, I take it, of how far we have achieved these outcomes?

THRASYMACHUS: Just so. What is more, as the coach will review the efficacy of his efforts, so we will use these Student Learning Outcomes to review and improve our efforts. The improvement afforded by careful measure will not just be yours, but ours as well! Will you, then, secure our services?

GLAUCON: Perhaps, but before we do I think we should be sure we have a firm grasp of your proposal. You first give us a list of Student Learning Outcomes and test us on them to set the initial mark, yes? Just as the coach of an aspiring athlete would no doubt have him make a number of throws, to see what the athlete can do before instruction?

GORGAS: Correct.

GLAUCON: Then having undergone your instruction we take a similar test to determine the final mark and thereby secure proof of your instruction?

GORGAS: Yes. You grasp our proposal quite well.

GLAUCON: I wish I were so confident. For it strikes me that we have no clear notion of this list of Student Learning Outcomes. It would add nothing, wouldn't you agree, for our javelin thrower's coach to list, "You will throw further," since that would just restate the very point of hiring the coach. This Student Learning Outcome, at any rate, would be merely redundant. A coach would already make this claim, which hardly makes your Student Learning Outcomes innovative. Yet I would scarcely believe that you would propose a mechanism that adds nothing.

THRASYMACHUS: Nor should you! It is not, you see, that the coach would list "You will throw further". Rather, the list would consist of those items the coach specifies to ensure that the javelin thrower will throw further and more accurately. Imagine instead a list of outcomes which included such items as "You will learn to hold the javelin as did Achilles" and "You will learn how to time your steps to your throw and the distance to the target."

GLAUCON: This is much better, then. The coach will specify exactly those particular skills upon which he and the athlete will concentrate their attention so as to improve the aim and extend the throw. It is these particular skills that will be measured before and after instruction and which will, for the list of outcomes to not be redundant, combine in the athlete in such a way as to result in the further throw. And should another coach happen by and advertise on his list of outcomes "You will learn to hold the javelin not as Achilles but as Heracles, who was by far the better" then we will have proof in the testing of whether Achilles or Heracles is the better master of how to hold the javelin. Having demonstrated one way or the other, we shall let the athletes decide for themselves which coach to hire. Likewise, should a teacher arrive who, subscribing to your system, has better proof of teaching skill with oratory, then we, like the athlete, would be able to choose whose instruction adds the greatest value for our money spent.

THRASYMACHUS: We assure you the skills we offer to teach you and the methods by which we teach them are superior, even if all the sophists adopted our methods of outcomes and proof.

ADEIMANTUS: I am sure you are quite right. The skill of Gorgias in oratory is renowned and unmatched in reputation. Yet the chef's plate, no matter how well-prepared, is only so good as his ingredients. The coach's success likewise depends upon his athletes' strength and discipline in applying the coach's teaching. I imagine truly the best of coaches, given the poorest athlete, would be unable to prove himself against the worst of coaches, given the best athlete. An Achilles would prove any coach, which is no proof at all! For what then might the coach point to as demonstrating his own contribution? Will not every teacher merely game your system by seeking out the superior student, as much as the coach would seeking out the superior athlete?

GORGIAS: These are good questions, Adeimantus! Still, I think your worry unfounded. To be sure, the teacher is only so good as the pupil. Our technique only looks at how far a given pupil has mastered new skills. No doubt the exceptional pupil will exceed the poor pupil regardless of the quality of his instruction. The poor pupil will thereby have demonstrated his lacking, yet this does not seem to me to impugn the teacher. You see, that the superior teacher provides instruction to help the poor pupil, even if the improvement in the poor pupil is much less measured against the improvement of the exceptional one under the tutelage of the middling teacher, only impresses upon us more the value of the proof. A superior chef may make a passable meal of poor ingredients and be applauded all the more for his success. A chef of little experience and talent, were he able to make a good meal of good ingredients, would flail and embarrass himself with the poor ingredients. Similarly a coach who manages to improve the poor athlete's performance accomplishes more, and should take more pride in his accomplishment, than Achilles' most fortunate coach. Nevertheless, this is not presently our advantage, for rarely has Athens boasted such fine young men as yourselves.

ADEIMANTUS: If so, the good coach will now prefer the poor athlete to the good to better show his superior coaching techniques, while the poor coach will prefer the good athlete to the poor to help him hide the inferiority of his coaching techniques. Yet surely, as like seeks like, the good coach should seek the good athlete, and the good athlete will insist on the good coach in turn.

THRASYMACHUS: This, though, is why we call them Student Learning Outcomes! For it is in the outcome that we see the teacher's success, and it is on this basis that we are to be compensated for our efforts. How much more further might the good athlete advance under the good coach's instruction than with the poor coach's misdirection!

ADEIMANTUS: How do we know, though, whether the pupil is truly poor or exceptional prior to instruction? Prior to instruction, the untutored pupil is indistinguishable from the slow or the lazy. Your system of Student Learning Outcomes, as I understand it, only works for

the sake of comparing different methods of instruction if we know in advance the quality of pupil and teacher alike, yet we cannot know the quality of pupil and teacher in advance of instruction, since it is only after instruction that we are able to see whether the instruction has succeeded, and then only if the pupil and teacher are seen as a whole, as it were, each having contributed what he can and will.

GLAUCON: You make a good point, Adeimantus. Yet we should in fairness acknowledge that Thrasymachus and Gorgias did not necessarily advance this method of Student Learning Outcomes as a way to put themselves up for comparison against other like-minded sophists. Rather, if I follow you correctly, Thrasymachus, you have a reason for your proposal which does well even when other reasons might not. Whether it guides us to the best teachers or not, by your method of Student Learning Outcomes you tell us in advance precisely the skills we will have gained as a result of your instruction. Thus you have informed us of the benefit of your instruction, a benefit we can decide in advance whether we think it wise to pursue.

THRASYMACHUS: Just so!

GLAUCON: The cobbler might likewise attract an apprentice by listing the techniques and skills he will train in the apprentice to learn the art of shoe-making. The shipwright will say in advance the skills his apprentice will learn that he needs to select the best woods and how they may be shaped to be strong and true so as to learn the art of ship-making. Similarly, you will offer us a list of the skills we will gain from your instruction to learn the art of oratory. Where Socrates may be a harmless amusement, you offer us specific and measurable skills by which we may one day be masters of oratory ourselves.

GORGAS: Well, yes, should Polyhymnia inspire you to greatness as she has me.

GLAUCON: As with cobbler and shipwright, so with orator. The arts are separable into their individual, particular, and measurable skills as would be displayed on their respective Student Learning Outcomes and by which they, when properly combined in and by the right pupil under the tutelage of the right teacher, may lead to mastery of the art in question.

GORGAS: Yes, Glaucon, I think you grasp the proposition well.

GLAUCON: Might you, then, favor us with an example of your Student Learning Outcomes, so that we will have a specific proposal before us to consider?

GORGAS: Of course! I have been eagerly awaiting just this request. Since we have been discussing oratory as an example, I'll draw from my own Student Learning Outcomes. I list three: First, the student will show they understand the principles and concepts of good oratory; Second, the student will develop and present oration so as to apply

the principles of good oratory in informing and persuading an audience; Third, the student will develop critical listening skills to assess oration according to the principles of good oratory.

ADEIMANTUS: An intriguing list! Already I should anticipate learning much from you. How, though, will we students show we understand these principles and concepts of good oratory?

GORGIA: Well, I shall test you on them, of course. I will ask questions about them and rate your understanding by how well you answer them.

ADEIMANTUS: But is not the understanding best shown in application? Wouldn't the quality of the oratory itself be a far better test, as the shoe shows the quality of the cobbler, the ship the quality of the shipwright?

GLAUCON: Further, wouldn't the critical listening skills you mention be shown in the interaction of audience with orator? Surely their responses to the oration will show at once their successful comprehension and the orator's success in holding forth on the issue at hand. So in the end the list you provide boils down to the creation and practice of oratory before an attentive audience, which is what we had already surmised it to be given your reputation. I don't see what more, then, is added by these Student Learning Outcomes, unless it just be as with the coach who announces that his athletes will throw the javelin further.

GLAUCON: Let us suppose you are more specific, though, about these principles of good oratory and how your students will be trained up to them. There is yet one more matter troubling me. It is in the nature of the cobbler's art that he learns to shod many sizes and kinds of feet. It is likewise in the nature of the shipwright's art that he learns not to build just one kind of ship one way but to build and repair ships of many shapes and sizes. Similarly, we judge the mastery of oratory not from the skilled reading of one speech at one time, which could scarcely be counted as skill, but from brilliant oration on many topics and in many settings, as you yourself Gorgias have repeatedly demonstrated. If, then, the particular skills are genuinely measurable much as the distance of the thrown javelin, we will only know that a kind of foot has been shod, a type of boat put to sea, or a single speech mastered. Yet mastery of a single speech is not, you will agree, oratory. So either the skills mentioned in the Student Learning Outcomes are so specific as to be precisely measurable, in which case they give us none of the confidence the art in question has been mastered we had hoped to see, or, as it sensibly seems to do, your Student Learning Outcomes lists quite general skills which of necessity evade measure, and which therefore do not tell us anything more than that the pupil will learn good oratory or proper ship-building, as the case may be.



THRASYMACHUS: I think you have too careful a grasp of measuring, Glaucon. It also need not be a one-off or overly specific thing. The coach measures his success not just on one throw of the athlete but on many throws over many contests. Likewise, the student of oratory may be expected to demonstrate his growing skill in oratory a number of times on many subjects.

ADEIMANTUS: Is that not already what the sophist does in teaching oratory, weighing and criticizing his pupil's many attempts at mastering the art? So these Student Learning Outcomes are not an improvement, only unnecessary advertisement.

GORGIAS: Writing Student Learning Outcomes, though, does give the teacher an opportunity to think about and establish the particular skills upon which he must focus his attention if he is to improve his pupil's performance. So the instruction will be better, as the teacher breaks down his efforts and has opportunities to see their effect.

GLAUCON: Maybe so, but if you'll indulge me I find I now have one further puzzle. You see, all along we have been discussing your Student Learning Outcomes in terms of the skills the pupil will gain as a result of their application.

THRASYMACHUS: Yes, of course.

GLAUCON: Skills are such as can be taught and measured, else the cobbler and the shipwright would have no hope of passing their arts to future generations.

THRASYMACHUS: Precisely! I should think this an obvious advantage of the Student Learning Outcome.

GLAUCON: I will grant what you say. I will allow that Student Learning Outcomes are not simply a superfluous complication over what the teachers of oratory, shoe-making, or ship-building have always done. I will even grant, although I suspect this is not quite correct, that the art of the orator, cobbler, and ship-wright will improve as a result of the use of Student Learning Outcomes.

THRASYMACHUS: Excellent! Then have we your agreement?

GLAUCON: Not quite. Let me ask, what have the cobbler and the shipwright in common? What is it about them such that they will benefit from the application of your Student Learning Outcomes?

GORGIAS: Well, they are trades which may be taught to others, surely?

GLAUCON: That is the sum of it, yes. Student Learning Outcomes as you have explained them to us have their application, accepting they have application at all, to trades and vocations which demand very specific combinations of techniques and skills for their proper practice.

GORGIAS: And do you see this as a problem, my dear Glaucon?

GLAUCON: Well, no, not if my purpose were to pursue a special trade or vocation. Think you that is why we pay our attention to Socrates, though?

THRASYMACHUS: We have no idea why you trifle with Socrates, Glaucon. We only hope for your sake and the sake of Athens that you will take us up on our thoughtful offer of Student Learning Outcomes governed instruction.

GLAUCON: Let me approach the matter another way. Why should I master ship-building, were I so inclined?

THRASYMACHUS: To be a shipwright, surely, and wealthy!

GLAUCON: Fair enough. And why should I master oratory?

GORGIAS: Should you master oratory, then you may join the highest ranks of politicians or, perhaps, sophists!

GLAUCON: And, again, be wealthy, I take it. For what, though, are the ships I make, or the speeches I give, to be used?

GORGIAS: For the good of the sailor and the good of the people, it is obvious. I am afraid, my dear Glaucon, I do not see where you are off to with these questions.

GLAUCON: Just this. It is a small but important point. Were Adeimantus and I in the Agora shopping for skills to pursue a trade, your Student Learning Outcomes would be an excellent advertisement of the wares you have to offer. In that case let us set a value on your wares and begin negotiations. Such, though, is not our purpose. Those merchants and craftsmen are proud of their skills, and justifiably so. Yet a trade is just what a man does, which is why the skills you envision on your list of Student Learning Outcomes are so well suited to learning a trade. For a skill is nothing more than how best to accomplish a practical end, to do something well and profitably, let us say.

THRASYMACHUS: You have made our case for us!

GLAUCON: Not quite as you imagine it, Thrasymachus. For surely Pythagoras had to have known oratory to communicate his understanding of number and proportion, but the oratory he knew was not that for the sake of which he sought to understand number and proportion. Rather, he mastered oratory so that he might confer with others to discover what he could of number and proportion. Likewise, oratory was the order of the day at the Symposium so all in attendance could offer their views of Eros, but Pausanias and the others did not give speeches on Eros to practice oratory. Rather, they used their skill in oratory to comprehend Eros. My point, you see, is this. Your Student Learning Outcomes may, by specifying and measuring necessary skills, improve the pursuit of a trade, but if one seeks new discovery over what is already known, wisdom instead of a trade, or an education instead of a vocation, then Student Learning Outcomes have nothing to offer us. What is gained with Student Learning Outcomes is not, as you have described it, hard-won wisdom but well-worn skill. The skills we must master to make new discoveries are not the purpose we have in pursuing greater knowledge. That we improve our wisdom is its own end and gives us its

own reason, regardless of what use we may otherwise make of it or any profit it might bring us. In our associations with Socrates, we put our skills in the service of our comprehension. We therewith improve our skills, to be sure, but it is not for their sake we do so. Rather, it is for the sake of that which your Student Learning Outcomes cannot specify or measure—namely, discovering what is not known. At the end of your instruction we may have better skill in oratory. Our speeches may even ring with the value of your teaching. We still will not have any idea why we speak the words we do, however eloquently, or whether the words we speak are true.

THRASYMACHUS: Why do you make the leap that our Student Learning Outcomes cannot specify or measure wisdom in addition to skills?

GLAUCON: Consider when the well-trained athlete, having won contest after contest, is called to war. He is to bring with him the impressive javelin-throwing skills he has achieved under the direction of a coach who has successfully applied your method of Student Learning Outcomes. How shall he decide whether to become the warrior his skills have allowed him to become? Is it the better part of justice for this war to be fought, or not? Is it the better part of valor for him to fight it, or not? If he will, then how will he do so? What position is best for him to take on the field? At which targets shall he take aim to hasten the end of the war? How will he seek honor, if honor is to be sought in this imagined conflict? What is fair for him to take from his vanquished foe in compensation, and what shall he leave them to start anew and not seethe in hatred and dream for revenge?

ADEIMANTUS: I see Glaucon's point. Your method of Student Learning Outcomes succeeds, if it does, only in establishing that which is specific and thereby measurable, the distance of a skilled throw, say. If, on the other hand, these Student Learning Outcomes are general enough to encompass the huge range of problems our athlete qua warrior will encounter in the wise practice of his art, they will be too vague to be measurable. Unlike skills, you see, wisdom cannot be carved at the joints into discrete and measurable bits and pieces. It is achieved, if it is achieved at all, only by seeing the whole well beyond the sum of its parts.

GLAUCON: Student Learning Outcomes measure only what can be measured, which is at most specific skill. That which we deem wisdom, though, is general, and admits no such yardstick. Thus the outcome of Student Learning Outcomes cannot be to achieve such wisdom.

THRASYMACHUS: So you say, and our method would be caught on the horns of your dilemma were it not for the fact that wisdom is discernible, and what is discernible must be measurable. So why, again, can I not discern the wisdom of the warrior in addition to the skills with which he throws the javelin?

ADEIMANTUS: Is wisdom so readily discernible, though? Socrates returned from the oracle utterly perplexed, for how could he, one who

professes to know nothing and knows he knows nothing, be the wisest man of Athens? Yet try as he might to prove the oracle mistaken, he only proved that those who by reputation and self-report were the wisest men knew not what they claimed to know. Wisdom starts in perplexity, yet Student Learning Outcomes, if I grasp what you have in mind correctly, begin by banishing perplexity altogether!

GLAUCON: Adeimantus' point can be taken further. Wisdom can be seen in the actions of our warrior as he sets off to war, but too often only in hindsight and only long after he has acted. The wisdom we gain in conversation with Socrates is discovered and shown in our conversation with Socrates, just as we have here discovered that your Student Learning Outcomes confront, if you will, a sort of three-horned beast. For either they are specific, and so measurable, in which case they at most capture certain practical skills, or they are general enough to pretend to be aiming instead at wisdom, in which case they are so vague as to measure nothing, or they cannot measure any more than what can be already seen in the ways we have of discerning wisdom in discourse. It follows for us, unlike the apprentice cobbler or the apprentice ship-wright, that your Student Learning Outcomes either aim at the wrong target, aim at nothing and so prove nothing, or add nothing and so improve nothing.

GORGAS: This, then, is your answer to us? You seek with Socrates not skill but wisdom, not a vocation but an education?

ADEIMANTUS: Yes, I believe that is the essence of it.

GORGAS: When, after your education, you come also to understand the need for a trade, we will be available for you.

GLAUCON: That is most gracious, and we will consider your kind offer, unless it so happens that in achieving as much wisdom as we may we also find we have along the way accrued the skills we need.

*Later in the house of Cephalus,*

ADEIMANTUS: Were you serious earlier today when you told Gorgias and Thrasymachus we would consider their offer?

GLAUCON: Well, in their defense what they are offering is not obviously ill-suited to their goals. If they seek to offer young men trades, then I can see some advantage to their system of Student Learning Outcomes. It sheds light such that sophists not as capable as our friends Gorgias or Thrasymachus are less likely to mislead their pupils. Who knows? It could be, as they say, that Student Learning Outcomes may in some small way improve vocational training by prompting the less-skilled teacher to reflect on what he hopes to achieve. Becoming a cobbler, or a shipwright, or a politician, however, does not help us see where to walk, sail, or lead.

ADEIMANTUS: Just so. Yet can you imagine Socrates' expression were we to demand his Student Learning Outcomes, inform him that he

should view himself a shop-keeper just as the meanest tradesman in the Agora, and press him to account for the costs and benefits to us of our discussions with him?