



## Highlands Regional Library Cooperative

400 Morris Avenue, Suite 202  
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TEL: 973-664-1776 or 800-NET-HRLC (*Members Only*)  
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**Notes on: *So What? An Introduction to Outcome-Based Evaluation* presented by Rhea Joyce Rubin for the New Jersey State Library at Parsippany-Troy Hills Public Library on October 24th, 2006. Notes by Pat Lawson.**

Peggy Cadigan of the Library Development Bureau introduced Ms. Rubin, saying that we in the library profession are good at measuring *outputs*, such as circulation statistics, and less familiar with measuring *Outcomes*. Federal grants, including LSTA, now require this type of evaluation. A librarian and former library director, Rhea is the consultant on Outcome Measurement to the California, Connecticut and Massachusetts State Libraries. Her latest book is entitled *Demonstrating Results: Using Outcome Measurement in your library* (ALA, 2006). Peggy thanked a large audience for attending, and mentioned that the State Library is attempting to bring more of its programs to northern New Jersey. She thanked the Parsippany-Troy Hills Public Library for the use of the fine meeting room in its new facility.

Ms. Rubin began by mentioning that Outcome Measurement, her preferred term, is often called OBE or Outcomes Based Planning and Evaluation: planning and evaluation go hand in hand. These terms would be used interchangeably during the workshop. Just as "Return on Investment" documents don't replace your library scrapbook, Outcome Measurement is not a substitute for traditional output measures such as circulation and program attendance. Those measures represent the entire library, while Outcome Measures serve best to plan and evaluate specific projects undertaken by the library.

Rhea then asked for a show of hands for the types of libraries represented in the room; there were high school, hospital, academic and public librarians. She said that over library types, the terminology used may differ; but the principles of Outcome Measurement are the same. School libraries for example would factor in educational Outcomes, where a public library might not. For all libraries, the task is to identify impacts on the end user, rather than on the library. See [www.rheajoycerubin.org/outcomes.html](http://www.rheajoycerubin.org/outcomes.html) for a further definition.

While it is true that users will benefit from changes that impact the library internally, such as a new computer system, the focus for projects for which we seek grant or other outside funding must be the impact on the user. The question we must ask ourselves is, "so what?". Fifty children attended Story Time. So what? What changed for those children? For their parents? What was the impact?

Ms. Rubin said that simply put, "Outcome" means impact on the end user, and answers the question, "so what?". "Impact" means changes in behavior, attitude, skills, knowledge, and the end user's Condition/Status/Situation.

Outcome Measurement began in the field of health and human services, and the terminology reflects that. Thus we talk about a "treatment" that impacts **Condition**, **Status** and **Situation** of the end user. As librarians we are likely to have our greatest impact on behavior, skills and knowledge, but we can also affect status and situation. Ms. Rubin asked for examples: the user of an academic library becomes a college graduate; a public library user gets a job. She pointed out that it is necessary for a library project manager to make certain assumptions. We can assume that becoming a college graduate is a good Outcome. Rhea took the example of a student who has been helped by Interlibrary Loan. The traditional view was that the student received many journal articles, and saved time and money. Ms. Rubin asked the participants, so what? What was the change in the person? The impact is that ILL has supported her in a measurable change of status, from student to graduate.

Q: How far can we take assumptions about impacts? Can we prove that good effects are attributable to our services, or are we overreaching?

A: In determining what Outcomes we will go after, we must balance the visibility of impacts against the time horizon that we have. It would be ideal to follow up with the end user in 5 or 10 years, but it might not be practical. Pick the smaller Outcomes to measure, since you can measure them within your



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timeframe, but aim for the largest Outcomes as project goals. Sometimes research results are available to bolster our assumptions.

Ms. Rubin went on to describe smaller, more measurable “Interim Outcomes”. The long term goal might be a change in status and situation, from unemployed to full-time employment. Taking examples from the participants, the first step might be acquiring research skills, then making a list of jobs the end user is qualified for; later writing a resume, and having the quality of the resume confirmed by an expert. The librarian cannot say that Sylvia got a job because of a library project, but can show the results of each step in the project. Even stronger would be an interview with selected users, perhaps two years later. If the goal of a citizenship project were to produce more effective citizens, how could we measure that? We would need to define the term. Participants suggested definitions such as, did the end user vote in an election, or attend community meetings.

Ms. Rubin spoke of the move to Outcome Measurement as a paradigm shift. In addition to the federal government, United Way and many other funders now hold their recipient programs to this standard. Quoting from her workbook handout, she put it, “From the user in the life of the library, to the library in the life of the user”. Seen from this perspective, the number of library cards registered says little about the impact of library service on the user. You wouldn’t apply Outcome Based Evaluation to the whole library, but it’s a great tool for looking at your individual services. Are they on target?

Part of the value of Outcome Based Evaluation is in keeping librarians focused on “so what?” rather than on process. OBE can also work to increase our understanding of, and enthusiasm for, our work. She gave examples from the field of adult literacy of the “old way” (client has finished the purple book, and she is now in the pink book), and the “new way” (client reports that he is now confident enough to talk to his child’s teacher).

Outcome Based Evaluation is not a scientific study, since there is no control group that does not receive the ‘treatment’. We can rarely provide concrete evidence for achieving our goals. Ms. Rubin urged that we be up front about that, never claiming to be the sole cause of the effects, but rather taking a snapshot of the defined Outcomes of a project. The state of Texas has attempted to quantify the value of library Summer Reading Clubs; we are seeing more OBE used in this way.

Q: Perhaps the children who gained in reading level over the summer did so because they have the kind of caring parents who took them to the library.

A: The results could still be valid; many separate Outcomes were measured. A city child might walk to a neighborhood branch library on his own. This is why the Outcomes you wish to measure should be chosen locally.

Ms. Rubin explained the terminology the participants would later apply to case studies. She asked for examples of **Inputs** (books purchased, staff hours, number of PCs)—or counts of resources; and **Outputs** (circulation and reference statistics)—or counts of extensiveness. These show the library’s effort, from the library’s point of view.

The librarian may be applying the same resources, but we need to adopt the user’s point of view to see the library’s effect—the **Outcomes**. Ms. Rubin reminded participants that the Outcomes we discuss in meetings and workshops are merely our Candidate Outcomes. Actual Outcomes occur in the lives of people who use our services; we can only learn of them from those people. The first step in outcome measurement is to talk to users, past users, and prospective users in order to identify realistic outcomes and indicators that our programs can set out to achieve.

Immediate or Interim Outcomes are the small, verifiable steps that support (or don’t) our assumptions about the effects of the treatment we apply—how much good we can do in a limited timeframe. They can be used as milestones; they can help us to make mid-course corrections.



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Indicators are the target behaviors that demonstrate or imply that the end user has experienced the benefits we hoped for. Behaviors can be seen and quantified. Anecdotes are important too, but Indicators are a crucial part of OBE.

All of these are based on user needs.

Q: How do we determine user needs?

A: Most libraries regularly do community scans or needs assessments, as part of strategic planning. Or they may become aware of an event such as a plant closing. OBE takes the next step, and adds more Outcome-oriented questions. Do this by talking and listening to 1) end users, and 2) people closely involved with the end users.

Ms. Rubin summarized: Outcomes—based on user needs. Indicators—how we know we got those Outcomes. Outcomes are defined by verbs such as, “attain”, “understand” and “enhance”. Indicators are defined by more specific activity verbs like “demonstrate”, “complete” and “use”.

Next, a standard must be set. Ms. Rubin asked for examples; if the Outcome were “Improve Web skills”, an Indicator could be “can find and bookmark a web site”. The standard could be correctly bookmarking three relevant sites. This standard is for success of the participant. In this example, we’d say that if a participant cannot bookmark 3 relevant sites, the participant has not demonstrated an improvement in web skills.

Q: Must we use the “pre-test/post-test” design?

A: It can be easier to show an impact if you know the level end users were at before your treatment. You can assume that people who attend a novice computer class are novices. But if your aim is to show an improvement in existing skills, then yes. It need not be a big test, it can be a brief interview or questionnaire. You are looking for a change in attitude, behavior, knowledge, skills, condition, status or situation. The standard you set tells you how big a change you are expecting.

A second standard is necessary in order to say your project was successful. Set a target that is a percentage and number of people who demonstrate the outcome. “Project Blank will be considered successful if 60 participants (60%) meet the standard”. Ms. Rubin noted that this cannot be done without some baseline figures; some relevant previous experience is essential. Give both the number and the percentage.

Q: Should we tell users our target and standard? Don’t we risk scaring people off?

A: Yes and no. It should not be a secret; you can say “The successful participant will...”. Set targets carefully; if you expect only 50% to be successful based on past experience, perhaps the standard is not realistic. Outcome is more general, and you build the PR for the project from that.

For a project, you should have more than one Candidate Outcome; each Outcome (change) you hope for should have more than one Indicator (measurable). Academic and school libraries may have specific Outcomes defined for them by the larger institution; for instance in the accreditation process. In a public library, OBE is always aimed at a specific program, project or service.

Q: Is this related to MBO (Management by Objectives)?

A: Definitely similar, but MBO is top-down, and driven by the outcomes management wants. Also MBO is global, over time, and systematic. In OBE you set your own goals for the project, and take a snapshot of the project within a limited time frame. MBO is about internal efficiency (how much and how well we did), not about the experience of the end user.

Q: Can we control Outcomes? Should we shut down projects if they miss their Indicators?



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A: An example of the difference between outputs and Outcomes, and how Outcomes can be used to improve programs: United Way has been using OBE for 10 years. Previously, shelters for abused women evaluated themselves based on inputs (volunteers, donations) and outputs (number of clients, user satisfaction surveys). Then United Way began to ask the ‘So what?’ question. Agencies stated their impact as women *not* abused, *not* homeless—sheltered. United Way began offering additional funding to agencies willing to work toward user-defined Outcomes. Asked what they wanted, women said 1) safety, 2) temporary shelter, and 3) *to go back*. (“Why should I leave?”) Agencies began to offer programs for abusers. With OBE we can learn from failure. Listen to end users. Rather than shut down a project, add an Outcome.

Ms. Rubin noted that given enough inputs (resources) we can almost always increase our outputs, but we cannot completely control Outcomes. Therefore, OBE is not a good method for deciding what projects to shut down. But it is a good way to improve a project, and to show funders your successes. It can quantify the anecdotes.

Q: What if you have two Indicators, and failed on one? Are you still a success?

A: Yes, your project is a success in the sense defined by that indicator. You need to consider why the program did not meet the expected target for the other indicator. Perhaps you’ve selected the wrong indicator or set the target too high. This is why it is important to have more than one indicator for each outcome.

Q: Isn’t OBE ammunition? And could it cut both ways?

A: If a funder tries to use it against the library, it is not meant to be used for justification for cutting or shutting down. It can be ammunition in showing the value of your services.

[The participants then were given case studies, with a description of users, user needs, community and library goals, and a proposed new service. Each small group created an OBE plan including Outputs; Interim Outcomes with their Indicators and Targets; Long-Range Outcomes with their Indicators and Targets; and Data Collection Method and Schedule. Ms. Rubin then reviewed those plans, and led the discussion that concluded the workshop.]