THE ASSESSMENT MOVEMENT: FACULTY CAN LEAD THE WAY!

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Abstract

Assessment is currently a major activity in higher education, and in education at all levels. Funding levels, teacher raises, committee approvals for teacher promotions and the granting of tenure, are all linked in some way, directly or indirectly with how well students are learning. Tests for students have become increasingly routine to measure how well students are learning and even, what exactly they are learning in schools across the United States and beyond.

For the past few years, as assessment has been introduced and has taken hold as a major activity of departments and colleges, it has been pushed and promoted by administrators. Faculty have been slow to accept the importance of assessment and have even argued against its necessity. Accrediting agencies including regional groups like the Middle States Association Commission on Higher Education, State Education Departments, and various professional discipline specific accrediting groups, such as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, the AACSB, have embraced the importance of assessment. Many of these groups have made assessment, and their assessing of a school's assessment data, a vital element of the school's accreditation or re-accreditation. As the support for assessment has become more organized by the important associations that measure school quality, faculty have been required to deal with the assessment question.

Why do so many faculty fear and dread the word “Assessment?” Faculty are committed to effective teaching and assessment is simply measuring how effective their teaching is. So what's the matter? Mention assessment at any faculty meeting and many present look as enthused as if they were marooned in the middle of a snowstorm with no way out. There may be several possible reasons for this dread of assessment among faculty. Let's look at exactly what assessment is, who is doing the assessing, and how the results are being used. The answers to all of these three issues may well lead us closer to an understanding of the dread and ineffectiveness of many assessment attempts.

First, it is important to define assessment. Second, this paper will examine briefly the rise of assessment “movement,” and look at what is commonly meant by assessment, particularly at the college and university levels. Third, the relationship between assessment and competency based education will be reviewed. What makes a student “competent?” Who decides if a student is competent? Is this the role of the teacher of the course, a committee specially formed for the purpose of evaluating competency, a regularly established department in the college, or an administrator? Fourth, what are some of the best practices used in the assessment “movement” at various schools where they have experienced positive results? Can these practices be applied universally?

Finally, what is the interest of those outside of academe in assessment by schools; is the interest meaningful and will it continue in the future?

The paper will examine writings and research on assessment and actual models of assessment at selected schools, where the data is available.

1 INTRODUCTION

Like faculty around the globe, I and my colleagues have been wrestling with the design and implementation of a proper assessment process. I teach business management and marketing, face to face, hybrid and fully online. Assessment is a challenging process. Fortunately my colleagues and I have been together for many years and can openly discuss goals, interests and concerns which are related to assessment, data collection, accountability and improvement of educational outcomes. This article reflects that experience and asks faculty to take the lead in this important process: with no fear!
2 ABOUT ASSESSMENT

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3 FACULTY “FEAR” OF ASSESSMENT

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4 WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

First, it is important to define assessment. A review of some of the literature of assessment yields many definitions and descriptions of assessing student learning. Assessment is also thought by some in higher education as the foundation to making teaching better. Teachers examine and measure the results of what they are doing in the classroom or on line in various ways. The results are helpful to informing the same teachers on the success of what they have done and stirring inquiry to discover ways to achieve improvement.

Most assessment data comes from our students, thus, it is commonly labeled direct assessment data. It arises from the students’ performances in classes. Teachers may use embedded questions in tests designed to measure the same knowledge among students. Teachers may then compare the student responses to the questions and other measures of student achievements against the expectations of the teacher or norms or trends established by a teacher over a period of time of teaching the same material, but not always using the same methods. In addition to embedded questions, which constitute one of the simpler methods of gathering assessment data, teachers may also use projects, term papers, service and experiential internship logs and journals, electronic portfolios, and more. Some of these yield more in-depth qualitative data about student learning but are more difficult to compare among students and over time. However, all of these methods commonly have a degree of objectivity involved, since the student being assessed is not aware that they are. They are instead, involved in completing some course or degree requirement, to demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired, and which they most certainly believe is important only to their individual success.

A second type of assessment is known as indirect assessment. This type of assessment actively involves the student in considering the experience they have had in the class or the learning experiences, asking them to evaluate the experiences, i.e., was it a success, was it what they thought it would be, did they receive the benefit they hoped for, etc. Indirect assessment most commonly uses a survey or a questionnaire to collect data from students. It is interesting that in indirect assessment, the student’s subjective feeling or perception of learning or benefit is what matters to the teacher, not necessarily how much knowledge was objectively measured or attained.
5 THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT AND THE RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHING

As a faculty member and a former academic administrator at a large private comprehensive institution of higher education, I know first hand the value of assessment. It helps to refine and improve the levels of preparation for students within a specific academic program which leads to better outcomes for students and for the college. It also improves the college’s standings with its external accreditation agencies, regional and professional. Positive assessment results help with alumni donations and securing external grants.

For public colleges, the stakes are even higher because these are supported by taxpayers. Public investment of tax dollars in public colleges flows more easily when the public sees positive outcomes from the colleges in the services provided by the colleges and the numbers of graduates employed. Yet, assessment is not widely supported by higher education faculty. Why?

Teaching is both an art and a science. Assessment, especially direct assessment, reduces the teaching process to a formulaic one; little room is left to the teaching art, as specific content must be covered and recovered well. Assessment confines faculty; it may shrink the faculty member’s freedom in the classroom to invite questions and to follow the answers to issues that are more expansive than the day’s lesson but which are important for the students to understand in a context, nevertheless.

Assessment also requires faculty to agree on course outcomes for students and to review each other’s work and results as these are illustrated by students’ direct and indirect measurements. Faculty teaching in a discipline subjected to assessment can no longer be “lone rangers,” deciding what to cover or omit each term. Assessment requires assessors, who may be students or other faculty, administrators, administrative assistants, and money. It is not a process easily controlled by faculty.

In New York State, my home state, teacher merit has been tied to results achieved on New York State administered examinations of elementary school children. Complaints have risen through the years of too many schools “teaching to the tests.” Outraged parents have increasingly chosen to have their children “opt out” of State mandated testing. It is argued that there are too many variables in the testing and the test conditions, and a teacher’s pay increase or evaluations should not depend solely on how students perform on a single test. The test issue in the lower school parallels the assessment debate in higher education.

For years, teachers at all levels of education used various forms of assessment to learn how the students learned and how they might reach the students in new and improved ways. The system worked well except that there was no across the board system of collecting this data; in fact, data results were different across disciplines, geographic areas and other demographic variables. Teachers were concerned with improvement but often, that concern was not shared with administrators. When assessment was initiated as a formulaic process, it was by administrators. They designed the formula, specified results, and dictated the methods of measuring satisfactory outcomes. Faculty universally resisted.

My experience with assessment began at the level of course assessment. My department began to collect data on student skills such as writing and speaking, understanding the importance of ethics, of diversity, of technology, and critical thinking. Since we are a business department we also measured knowledge of business topics in various areas, mainly by using embedded questions. We formed a committee of the whole department which worked well since, admittedly, the majority of us had been together for many years, thus were open to discussing out teaching success and improvement possibilities with each other. This aspect of trust is one of the aspects that may, like it or not, be missing or in short supply when assessment is an administratively run process.

Assessment as an administratively driven process has been around some 20+ years. Today, assessment data, supported by huge technology advances, is required in higher education. Technology allows data to be used in new ways to promote better courses, programs and schools. Using assessment data to improve educational outcomes has become faster because the data needed to assess is collected more easily. At the university where I teach, we have many students involved in volunteer service. Now, volunteer service as a course component is crossing over into discipline-based experience applications. Assessment thus has two components: the syllabus based skills and knowledge that are to be measured, and the student’s conduct in the field as a precursor to employment. Now, both a qualitative and a quantitative process, assessment should be embraced by faculty and used for the furtherance of their goals, improving the educational experience for
themselves and their students. Today’s data collection methods make it easier for faculty to continue to successfully illustrate their course and program expertise, as demonstrated by their students.

6 ASSESSMENT AND COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Competency-based education is similarly driven by the need to measure or assess the education attained. According to the US Department of Education:¹

“Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, … among others. This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student.”²

By enabling students to master skills at their own pace, competency-based learning systems help to save both time and money. Depending on the strategy pursued, competency-based systems also create multiple pathways to graduation, make better use of technology, support new staffing patterns that utilize teacher skills and interests differently, take advantage of learning opportunities outside of school hours and walls, and help identify opportunities to target interventions to meet the specific learning needs of students.”³

Clearly, for students to advance in competency based educational programs, solid assessment techniques are required. Competency based educational systems provide for individualized learning paths based on a student’s background, experiences and interests. Measuring a student’s competency as he or she progresses in a program, is traditionally the province of faculty, and is of the utmost importance. This is another essential reason for faculty to become the leaders in assessment programs at their institutions.

7 ASSESSMENT: BEST PRACTICES

A search for best practices in assessment illustrates that many schools share their processes and systems for assessing learning. For example, on the Vanderbilt University Assessment website,⁴ best practices include being goal-directed and being minimally invasive,⁵ certainly important practices to follow for obvious reasons. The University also mentions it’s important to research evaluation methods so you “don’t reinvent the wheel.”⁶

Vanderbilt, like other universities best practices examined, also reminds the reader to check with the Institutional Review Board or IRB on campus, so there is no inadvertent violation of university policy or any individual’s rights to privacy in the data collection necessary to perform assessment.⁷ Brown University,⁸ University of Texas at Austin and Carnegie Mellon University are two more universities that have a plethora of resources on line at their websites available to faculty who are designing assessment methods.

So faculty lead the way with assessing your courses and programs; the process will point to your successful outcomes!

¹ https://www.ed.gov/oiii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ http://virg.vanderbilt.edu/AssessmentPlans/Best_Practices.aspx
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/assessing-student-learning/overview-best-practices. Includes valuable web site links to many other universities’ assessment resources.
REFERENCES

[4] Assessment Commons, assessmentcommons.org, an open resource site
[6] Vanderbilt University Assessment Resources
[8] St. John's University Assessment Resources
[9] University of Texas at Austin Assessment Resources