

Assessment: Whither?

These days, when I talk about assessment and accountability, I feel like Mersault in The Stranger. I can describe what they are and even explain them. But it is hard to justify them within a rational framework of public policy. Educational policy, in particular, is a cratered city under siege. It has been that way at least since A Nation at Risk in '82.

Higher education bureaucracies, government agencies, and hysterical pundits rake through assessments and data to confirm fixed opinions. Many twist data to fit fables of (un)accountability. They fold these fables into political narratives of either American decline or hegemony, Californian decay or resurrection, MOOC miracles or madness, for-profit salvation or damnation, the success of what college does or the excess of what college costs.

Across universities (but never here, ahem) some faculty and administrators still refuse to participate in assessment and accountability. They point to the misuse, claiming, "See, see!" Or, like Bartleby they "prefer not to." These reactions, when probed, often resolve into an elitist view of intellectual work. It is an esoteric art, a Faberge egg. Its quality is immeasurable; a dull, unappreciative public will demean it by assigning value.

I would like to say that rigorous assessment will propel us into an era when data determine decisions at the highest levels. That will not happen. People will do their best to subvert the process for their interests. That is inevitable, when higher education reports to and is funded by agencies in a democracy (not that I can think of a better alternative). To leave decisions to evidence introduces risk! Such interference is annoying but not fatal.

WASC, the CSU, the state, and etc., mandate assessment. It is unfair to the people whom we hire to leave them with the task of making up at the last minute for our not doing it well.

More to the point, there is great value if we gauge the effectiveness of what we do. We, at least, can try to be rational within our walls. This effort never will produce the results of a double-blind study. Nor do we have the time and wherewithal to discount the prior and external experiences that affect how teaching transfers to learning. This predicament is common. We often have to make decisions based on probability. We try to compensate for the limits of any one measure by multiplying measures; we look for convergence. This is the nature of public reasoning.

If we do assessment well, we should be able to infer whether students are learning what we think that we are teaching in class and online. We should be able to see whether these results align with the outcomes that we project for majors and general education. Findings should help us to understand the relation, if there is any, between careers and the domain knowledge, heuristics, and sets of skills in majors.

We should test the common claim that college develops one's capacity to think. To know without surrendering doubt is essential for an open society. To doubt without losing confidence

to commit allows us to persevere in a world of open questions. The “blood dimmed tide” of heedless conviction is not inevitable.

We are out of our minds if we try to assess every nook and cranny of the university. What is most pressing for a department to know about its effects on students?

We should do assessment, therefore, as if it is *not* implicated in processes beyond the university. We should do it because it helps us to estimate the consequences of our speech acts as teachers and mentors. Naturally, we assume that our ideas and practices ought to be mirrored in students’ knowledge and activities. Theoretically, we know that cognition, symbolization, and reception are much more complicated. Can we then apply what we know to what we assume, to improve the fidelity of teaching with learning?

Assessment should fit with what we do already. A grade reflects an evaluation of a student by a professor at the level of a course or below. Most often, assessment is an evaluation of students’ learning over time, in several courses, at different levels. It is an index of change in an actual cohort of students or in a virtual cohort in which we control for students’ characteristics. It also can compare student learning, at fixed times, against a postulated standard.

Through assessment, we infer student’s evolving command of what faculty consider essential—core facts, interpretative skills, research skills, etc. Assessment can be embedded in courses, included in assignments, or arranged outside of courses; it can be included in portfolios. It can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed. It can be a measure within a program, a department, or across colleges. Usually, it sits in a department. Typically, it requires faculty consensus on objectives, methods, rubrics, and norming. It can be cross-tabulated with patterns in grades, transfer patterns, sequence of course-taking, size and format of classes/courses, and progress to degree—to cite examples. Departments and colleges have coordinators who work together.

We must use direct assessment of student learning, not just surveys, interviews, self-reports, observations, and not just job placements, surveys of employers, and extrapolations from grades. Such approaches, especially when assessing fieldwork and clinical practice, can be essential; but they are not sufficient.

At the level of the university, we administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the National Survey of Student Experience. The CLA samples growth in critical reading and writing skills from freshmen to senior year. The NSSE surveys students to detect changes in their attitude toward learning, their confidence as thinkers, and their awareness of what an education is for. Since both are administered nationally, they bridge findings in our local assessments to trends elsewhere.

Some results, therefore, put what we do in a national context. They help to clarify public accountability. They suggest, through comparisons, whether the state’s investment of money and

the students' investment of time and money produce change for the better. This change is amplified by program review and by links to data about post-graduate study and career paths.

But the main use of assessment is local. Assessment must become a major way of initiating changes in curriculum. Agencies call this closing the loop. Assessment is not, therefore, a meta-reflection that gets used by administration to rank programs, determine funding (except in instances of non-compliance with assessment itself), and occupy shelves. Like environmental scans for new and/or revised programs, it cycles evidence into the faculty-driven process of developing curriculum.

This means that chairs, deans, central administrators, and faculty committees must make a major adjustment. We must spend less time on manicuring exemplary course outlines and textual formalities in curriculum. We must ask whether there is evidence for change and document that.

Not only is this the right thing to do. It is expected that we do it. When WASC rolled through two years ago, they were very explicit. Assessment, as I describe it, had to be done. Period.

And when they roll back into town for a mid-way check in 2016, they expect the loop to be closed. Just speak to anyone on campus whose program has been reviewed in the last two years. They have been corrected/commanded to close the loop. And indeed, it is expect that we assess the impact of the change as soon as possible.

Thus, it is essential that every program in and across every college clarify with their coordinators what their assessment process is, by the end of this term. Then, they must be on a schedule of assessment that meets the coordinators' and deans' approval. Many have done these tasks already.

Beginning next fall, Academic Affairs will approve no substantive change in courses and/or programs unless there is credible evidence as justification (assessment, findings in program reviews, etc.) or a waiver that cites an external requirement or mandate (change in law, accreditation standard, professional guidelines, CSU "adventure," etc.)

Possibly, some people see this as an infringement on professional judgment. It very well might be. We will not really know, though, until we do it well.

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