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How to Make Assessment Meaningful

March 28, 2017 | By Yuerong Sweetland
Assessment/Evaluation

One of the challenges with assessment is answering the “so-what” question. After the initial nationwide calls for assessment more than three decades ago, most institutions are conducting assessment. However, when it comes to using assessment data, there are varying levels of success at higher education institutions, even though accrediting bodies are placing more and more emphasis on closing the assessment loop by using evidence of student learning to inform changes in curriculum and instruction (as well as co-curriculum).

Source: www.lovelearningideas.com

What might be the problem? Having been an “assessment person” for more than a decade at two different institutions, I feel that one of the biggest obstacles is the separation of assessment from the rest of the “world.” When this happens, assessment becomes the exclusive arena for a few folks whose titles include assessment; assessment is reduced to the simple act (annual, in some cases) of collecting and aggregating data and then writing reports about them. These reports frequently end up in a bureaucratic “black hole,” yielding little to no impact on teaching and learning. Under this condition, it is no wonder that assessment gets a bad reputation of being meaningless busy work — it exists solely for accreditors.

Years ago, when I started working in the field of assessment, I learned the [Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning](#), which were developed **by 12 eminent scholar-practitioners and adopted by the then** American Association for Higher Education. After a quarter of a century, these principles are still significant, especially to the situation as described above. Among the nine principles, #6 and #7 are particularly relevant:

#6: “Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.”

#7: “Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.”

Clearly, assessment should not be viewed as the territory of a few individuals. Those of us that have assessment titles do not have an exclusive ownership of assessment. However, we do have the responsibility to help raise awareness that assessment is a community property as well as responsibility. Our work should not be just crunching numbers as reporting deadlines loom. Rather, we need to work closely with faculty, staff, and administrators, to help integrate assessment into the regular teaching and learning activities. If we happen to be faculty ourselves, we need to practice what we preach!

As stated in Principle #7, assessment professionals need to help plan “in advance how the information will be used, and by whom.” At Franklin University, we recently revised our Student Course Questionnaire (commonly known as the SRI – Student Ratings of Instruction, even though it is not only about course instructions), to include three distinct categories: instruction quality, course curriculum design, and student learning. Data in each of the categories is employed by a unique group of stakeholders for identifying gaps or improvement needs in curriculum design, teaching strategies or practices, and student engagement. Overall, we design our assessment to be outcome- or goal-oriented, with each assessment activity clearly aligned with particular outcomes/goals.

It is worth noting two concerns that faculty and administrators often have regarding meaningful assessment. One, can we have meaningful assessment evidence, when our programs (or the classes) are so small? The notion needs to be demystified that a gold standard exists in numbers for assessment to be valid. Large numbers are not the necessary condition for validity. Two, if we use nationally normed instruments to assess learning, does that guarantee validity? The answer is no, when those instruments turn out to be a poor fit for the local curriculum and the student populations we serve. Valid and meaningful assessment will need to be well aligned with the intended learning outcomes/goals.

I would like to end this blog by borrowing the notion of authentic assessment from Grant Wiggins, the well-known assessment expert who argued for assessment to be realistic and performance-based. I strongly believe that meaningful assessment needs to be “authentic” in that, it does not have to be created by some external experts and imposed into our classrooms or programs, but rather it should be naturally and seamlessly built into the ongoing teaching and learning operations as an integral part of the entire package. And, what’s more, it takes an entire village to make it meaningful.

References

American Association of Higher Education. (1992). Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning. Retrieved <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/PrinciplesofAssessment.html#AAHE>