

A Scholarly Approach to Assessing Learning

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Assessing learning in higher education is what faculty do. We teach, our students learn, and we check their learning to ensure that they are, indeed, grasping what we want them to understand. Assessment of learning is nothing new, and faculty do it better than most. But mention the word “assessment” in a gathering of faculty colleagues, and you are likely to start a stampede away from you. Why is this? Why is something that is such an integral part of teaching and learning considered anathema?

The push for organized assessment practices in higher education began in earnest in the late 1980s. Regional accreditors began requiring that institutions demonstrate that they were setting and measuring levels of student learning. This initial focus on assessing learning stemmed from an accountability perspective – institutions were required to create student learning outcomes, measure them, and use those findings for improvement in ways that were approved by their regional accreditors. In terms of enhancing assessment practices, this was a very good thing – without this requirement, it is highly doubtful that most colleges and universities would put as much effort and resources into assessment as they do. But, this external influence on requiring assessment had some unintentional consequences. Assessment was seen as a requirement to be met rather than an ongoing process for improvement. Thus, we have had for almost 40 years the apparent dichotomy of assessing for enhanced learning versus assessing for accountability.

In this essay, I make the case that assessing for learning does not have to be either for improvement or for accountability – assessing for learning can be both formative and summative. And, assessment data is something that can be shared as a scholarly activity as part of the work done in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

Levels of Assessment

Assessment of student learning can be done on many levels within an institution. According to Miller and Leskes, the first level of assessment is assessing a single student within a course (2005). This type of assessment asks questions about what that student has learned over the course of a semester, for example. The second level is that of assessing a student’s learning across courses. An advisor might want to know if that student has gained the skills and knowledge necessary for a particular major or program. The third level assesses the course. How well is this course doing in terms of getting students to learn prerequisite material? This level of assessment is often used as a faculty member considers modifying a course. The fourth level is that of program assessment. Is the program doing what it purports to do? Are the students meeting the learning outcomes stated for that major or discipline? And, finally, the fifth level of assessment, that of the institution. How much have students learned over their time at the institution? Are students properly prepared for employment?

Faculty who are interested in SoTL and assessment probably focus most often on the second, third, and fourth levels because these are the areas that look most closely at the connections between teaching within a course or a major and the learning outcomes that students meet. Identifying which level is being assessed in SoTL will help to better clarify the assessment work being done.

Process of Assessment

It is the paradox of assessment – the overall concept is simple, but the execution and the details can be difficult, frustrating, and extremely time-consuming. First, the simple part: assessing learning means that you have to identify what learning should happen (the learning objectives), develop a method for appropriately measuring them, and then use the results to inform future decision making. But, the difficulty comes in at every step. How do you measure those aspects of learning that are impossible to quantify or count? It is much easier to assess those things that are easily measured, but these aren't usually the type of learning that we care most about. How do you measure "originality?" How do you measure "cultural awareness?" So, we often end up assessing things that are easy to measure but that we really don't care much about. This makes the assessment process easier to do, but doesn't give much in return.

So, to make assessment worth the time invested, what can be done? A meaningful assessment process must first identify the learning areas that you really care about knowing. What is essential for your students to learn? Is this something that they will learn in a course or over an entire program? Identifying what the students should be able to do is the first step. One way to think about this is to consider the "ideal student." This can be an actual student that went through your course or program, or a fictitious student that you hope to meet some day. This student has graduated from your program successfully and you meet her five years about that graduation. She is so excited to see you and wants to tell you what she learned from your program and how it has helped her be so successful. What would this student say? Your answers will guide the identification of your goals and objectives.

The next hurdle is to consider how to assess these objectives that may not be easily measured. Consider this question, "what would a student be able to do who had this skill or knowledge?" There are probably assignments already in place that could work as measures – papers, exams, projects, even online threaded discussions might work as a measure. This is where "assessing" differs from "grading." If you were grading this assignment, you would be giving individual grades to students who had completed the work. Some students will do well and some may not do so well. But when using the same assignment for assessment, you look across all the students to determine if the students (as an aggregate) are learning what you want them to learn. If they are, wonderful! If not, what could you do differently to help to enhance the learning?

This brings us to the final aspect of assessment – using the information to inform teaching and learning decisions. Given what you found when you looked across student work, what needs to continue? What should be modified? This is what makes assessment a transformative process. With all three of these steps, information can be gathered, used, and shared with others either for accountability purposes or as a piece of SoTL research.

Doing Scholarly Assessment

As faculty, we all are part of an overarching culture of scholarship. As scholars, we should be continually committed to encouraging academic excellence in ourselves and in our students. Therefore, the goal of assessment is not to simply provide evidence of student learning to others, but to use that data to improve our students' learning. And, as we do this, we should also share our efforts with others. To take this idea even further, the case can be made that assessment is indeed a scholarly process that plays a crucial role in the ongoing conversations about teaching and learning. Assessment is more than a service activity, it is scholarly work that should be publically shared and discussed.

As John Barr and Robert Tagg (1995) have suggested, higher education's purpose is learning. "To say that the purpose of colleges is to provide instruction is like saying that General Motors' business is to operate assembly lines or that the purpose of medical care is to fill hospital beds. We now see that our mission is not instruction but rather that of producing *learning* with every student by *whatever* means work best" (p. 13). And, how do we know that learning has occurred? We assess the student. And, by looking more broadly at a course or at a program we can understand the conditions under which learning is more likely to occur. This means that assessment is an absolute necessity to understanding which and how much learning happens. By sharing these results, assessment becomes a scholarly activity that has a rightful place in SoTL research.

Assessment as Both Formative and Summative

Knowing what students have learned and what they have not learned can help to guide educational decisions. Using pedagogies such as "Just-In-Time" teaching can alert a faculty member to the areas that students may still have questions about and this can guide their use of class time. Why spend time reviewing information that students already know? Assessing student knowledge is an integral part of education. Once we know what they know and what they don't, we can more easily create an atmosphere of challenge that is appropriately rigorous. This part of assessment is formative – faculty use it to know what to modify and what to keep. Clearly, this type of formative assessment occurs in many college classrooms. But these data can also be used for summative purposes. Gathering knowledge across students within a class or across students in a major can provide useful and necessary feedback to the faculty of the department or program. Are students getting sufficient practice on needed skills? Are students prepared for their senior year? Does the capstone course really do all that the faculty intend for it to do? Summative assessment can give this type of feedback to the faculty and be used to demonstrate to accreditors or even others within the institution that the department is doing what it says it will do and is continually improving and enhancing what it does to increase student learning.

Opportunities to Share Assessment Findings

By creating a meaningful process to assess student learning, faculty set the stage for SoTL work. Not only does the process of how to do it need to be shared, but also the findings. What works? Why does it work? What doesn't seem to have much impact? What is truly necessary for students in the program or major to have accomplished? As with other SoTL projects, scholarly assessment needs to be shared in order to make public the work of teaching, learning, and assessment. Assessment is, by its very nature, a process that is

based on inquiry and asking the right questions to find out answers about learning. Viewing assessment work as worthy of being considered for publication is needed in order to tell the compelling story of student learning.

Assessment is a way we can document our effectiveness. A systematic, ongoing cycle of setting goals, measuring attainment of those goals, and using the results to make informed decisions is crucial to continuous improvement. Assessment data provides information that is necessary to inform good decision making about what we should do in the future to enhance our effectiveness as an institution. Transformative assessment is a process that will inform decision making that is appropriate, meaningful, sustainable, flexible and ongoing, and uses data for improvement with the potential for substantive change (Wehlburg, 2008). Assessment can be used for both formative and summative uses. And, while transformative assessment is created for the purpose of providing individual course and program level information in order to enhance learning, once the assessment work has been done it can be shared as part of the larger SoTL literature. By making public the results of assessment work through publication, not only can we share information with our academic colleagues that will expand what we know about learning and assessment, but we can also help those outside of academia to better understand the goals, outcomes, and the overall learning that occurs at the college level.

References

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