Responding Constructively to Criticism in Assessment

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The Myth of Sisyphus

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

-Albert Camus

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Punishment_sisyph.jpg
Recent Publications

Recent (very public) Criticisms of Learning Outcomes Assessment

Eric Gilbert
Does Assessment Make Colleges Better: Who Knows?

Robert Shireman
SLO Madness
The Real Value of What Students Do in College
Eric Gilbert

“Does Assessment Make Colleges Better? Who Knows?”  
Chronicle of Higher Education, August 14, 2015

Commentary in the Chronicle of Higher Education that Equates Assessment with a Study about Dangers of Unnecessary Medical Testing.

Primary Arguments

• Assessment is unimportant to incoming students/parents because it has little to no effect on educational quality.
• Assessment is problematic because we are using time/resources which do not lead to positive long-term effects.
• There is no research or documentation of the effectiveness of assessment.
• Resources devoted to assessment could be spent in better ways.
• There is no evidence that the benefits of assessment outweigh its costs.
• Our institutions do not benefit from assessment. Students do not benefit from assessment.
Robert Shireman

“SLO Madness”  Inside Higher Ed, April 7, 2016


We need to focus on equity in access to education and college completion. Does an emphasis on writing and assessing student learning outcomes hinder rather than enhance both this equity and determination of educational quality?

**Primary Arguments**

- The emphasis on student learning outcomes (both writing and assessment) by accreditors misses the mark in evaluating the quality of learning
- Writing student learning outcomes should trigger a meaningful review of what students have learned. Instead, it’s a pointless exercise that detracts from an actual meaningful review
- Institutions should be able to determine their own processes for ensuring quality, with a focus on actual student work
  - Accreditors then ensure that the institutionally determined quality assurance processes are “comprehensive and valid” (including review of student work and involvement of external reviewers)
- Student learning outcomes-driven assessment doesn’t capture that students have unique strengths and backgrounds
- The factors that keep students in college (reference work by Astin) involve both curricular and co-curricular experiences, which should be assessed using student coursework (not standardized tests or student learning outcomes)
Our Data
Chicago Area Assessment Group (CAAG)

- Assessment community of practice (and support group) formed in 2008
- Serves schools primarily in the Chicagoland area, though open to others in Illinois
- Serves as a professional peer group that provides a forum for sharing good practices, soliciting feedback, and creating an open dialogue for gathering information and thinking through ideas
Additional Criticism Heard by CAAG Institutions

1. What’s the value? Assessment takes up time and resources – is it really worth it?
2. Assessment has no connection to day-to-day work ("real work") – it is busy work that faculty and staff don’t have time to do.
3. Assessment is complicated and not accessible (faculty/staff don’t understand)
4. We don’t assess the right things.
5. Assessment is reductionist.
6. Faculty/staff don’t have time for assessment.
7. Big Brother – what happens to the data? Who sees the data? Is assessment secretly evaluation? (someone pointed out that maybe it partly is and should be – and that faculty/staff should be open to constructive feedback)
8. Academic Freedom is being challenged.
9. Faculty will do it, but only because they have to.
10. Assessment is meaningless – there is no value and no reward in doing it.
11. Assessment actually causes harm.
What Criticism Do You Hear?

• In small groups:
  • What additional criticism do you hear of assessment?
  • Where does this criticism come from?
Responses
Responses (In Support)

• Maybe quality of learning is best determined by those who get students post-graduation (e.g. employers and graduate programs)

• “The emperors of assessment have no clothes, but they sure have a lot of highly paid admin positions. And they are seriously getting in the way of teachers.”

• Who wags the dog? Accreditors or the federal government?

• Faculty autonomy isn’t respected in current assessment systems
Responses (Against)

• Faculty aren’t trying hard enough.
• Attacks:
  • Resistant faculty are probably from poor-performing programs
  • “Gilbert seems to admit that he’s not choosing the institution based on the quality of the education…”
  • “You are possibly the dumbest commenter I’ve seen on the Chronicle”
• Those who oppose aren’t doing assessment “right”
• Opposition doesn’t “understand” (assessment, the nature of higher education, the political environment, etc.)
• Do you really want to judge the quality of your institution based on student work?
• Article is reductive: don’t judge all assessment processes (and accreditation standards) based on a few
  • Some assessment practices are rigid, but some do take into account the uniqueness of individual students
• Wouldn’t determining quality based on student work still necessitate standards?
Initial Responses from CAAG

**Defensiveness**
Must defend our livelihood

**Dismissiveness**
You don’t understand us
You don’t know what you’re talking about
You’re objectively wrong

**Attacking**
Articles Intentionally Inflammatory
While Satisfying on a Certain Level, Is this Response Productive?

- Sometimes criticism and, our response to that criticism, seems more like complaining
  - We feel like we aren’t in control
  - We’re worried
  - We’re stressed
  - We actually want feedback
  - We really want our voices to be heard in order to affect change (Kowalski, 1996)

- Can be a force to bring people together
  - Negatively: to continue complaining (or fighting)
  - Positively: when complaining leads to constructive planning - which leads to action
Responding in a More Constructive Manner
When We’re Honest with Ourselves, Criticisms All Too Familiar

• “Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself.”

-Albert Camus

• Personal reflection: What criticisms ring true to you? (take a few minutes to write down)
Response to Criticism: Mindset

A Call to Arms? OR... An Opportunity to Learn?
## Addressing Concerns in Constructive Manners (from CAAG)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructive Activities</th>
<th>Addresses Criticisms:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Giving faculty and staff as much autonomy as possible</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10</td>
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<td>More clearly connecting assessment and its value</td>
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<td>Avoiding inappropriate use of assessment data</td>
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<td>Building capacity among faculty/staff around assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making assessment work shorter/less tedious</td>
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<td>Helping everyone understand assessment as a dialogue, rather than a product</td>
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<td>Ensuring assessment processes are sustainable</td>
<td>2, 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping faculty/staff make meaning of assessment data</td>
<td>1, 7, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting assessment to meaningful structures within the university (promotion/tenure, budgeting)</td>
<td>1, 2, 9, 10, 11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping faculty/staff engage in the process rather than the product</td>
<td>1, 5, 7, 10, 11</td>
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Strategy 1: Realizing/Acknowledging Commonalities

• We have more in common than we might think:
  • What is an outcome, anyway?
    • Is it:
      • Achievement of student learning outcomes?
      • Graduation rates?
      • Retention numbers?
      • Job placement numbers?
  
• We want autonomy, for all
  • In methodology (use the data collection/analysis that makes the most sense)
  • In approach (openness in how programs ask questions, conduct learning outcomes assessment)

• Wariness about assessment gone wrong (misused data, lack of intention)

• We often don’t really want to be “The Man,” either
  • Would rather be doing so much more than “convincing the English department I’m not Satan” (David Eubanks)
Strategy 2 (Inspired by the Response from Linda Suskie): We Have a Failure to Communicate

“I’m talking loud, not saying much”-Sia “Bulletproof”

• Main take-away from Linda Suskie’s response to Bob Shireman: “…my chief takeaway from your report is not about its shortcomings but how the American higher education community has failed to tell you...what we do and how well we do it. Part of the problem is, because American higher education is so huge and complex, we have a complicated, messy story to tell. We have to figure out a way to tell our very complex story in short, simple ways that busy people can digest quickly.”
  • Not only to faculty, but also to students, employers, parents, policymakers, etc

• But constructive communication is a two-way street
Strategy 2: Starting the Conversation About Communication and Storytelling

Things to consider and to discuss:

• How do we have polite conversations—even discourse—in the age of outrage and the outrageous
  • Responses based on emotion rather than science/facts/intellectual discourse?

• How to leverage social media as a way of addressing Suskie’s point that we need short, easy to digest ways of communicating?
  • Accessibility of our messages

• What does communication look like to different audiences?
  • Shireman says that an emphasis on student learning outcomes jades students to the point of education. Yet we could refute that SLOs provide clear communication to students about what to expect and what will be learned
Strategy 2: Starting the Conversation About Communication and Storytelling

• Things to consider and to discuss:
  • How do we better tell the story of assessment?
  • How do we work together to tell the story of educational effectiveness?
  • How do we work proactively with external agencies such as the Dept. of Ed and accrediting agencies rather than reactively to mandates?
Strategy 3: Avoiding Assessment Dogma

“Don’t be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of someone else’s thinking.” - Steve Jobs
“Rules are for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men.” - Harry Day

In Assessment, We Need:

- Flexibility/Adaptation
- Focus on what’s most important
- Everyone to have a seat at the table and a voice in decision-making
- Humility
Strategy 4: Need for Reflection/Introspection/Diversity of Perspectives

**Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm**
- Context: current climate
- Experience: our work in assessment, but also the criticism we face
- Reflection:
  - What is the truth of the situation?
  - Why do I feel this way about it?
  - What might motivate how others respond or feel in terms of assessment?
  - How could we move forward in a way that acknowledges how I feel and the reactions of others?
- Action: Moving from reflection into doing
- Evaluation: Did this bring about the desired outcome?
  - If no, drink wine, then reassess
But, Sometimes Criticisms are:

• Misplaced Frustrations

• Conflation
What Can We Do?
How Can the Criticism Make Us Better?

“I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well...Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

-Albert Camus

What actions do we take to improve?

...As assessment professionals?

...Our institutional assessment practices/procedures?
Activity

In small groups:

• Criticism: Assessment of student learning outcomes is less important for determining educational effectiveness than metrics such as:
  • Ranking and rates of: job placement, loan defaults, graduation, and retention.
  *Also, more people care about those metrics than how students performed on learning outcome #5000.*

• What are constructive responses to these criticisms?
  • Keep in mind:
    • How do you feel about this criticism and what motivates your response?
    • What might motivate those who feel this way?
    • How could we respond in a way that addresses both?

• How would your response (and perhaps mode of response) change for:
  • Students
  • Faculty
  • Policymakers
  • Others outside the university (e.g. parents)
Thank you

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