

Assessing Assessment

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See Comments at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/24/essay-criticizes-state-assessment-movement-higher-education>

In higher education circles, there is something of a feeding frenzy surrounding the issue of assessment. The federal government, due to release a proposed rating system later this fall, wants assessments to create ways to allow one to compare colleges and universities that provide “value”; accrediting organizations want assessments of student learning outcomes; state agencies want assessments to prove that tax dollars are being spent efficiently; institutions want internal assessments that they can use to demonstrate success to their own constituencies.

By far the main goal of this whirlwind of assessment is trying to determine whether an institution effectively delivers knowledge to its students, as though teaching and learning were like a commodity exchange. This view of education very much downplays the role of students in their own education, placing far too much responsibility on teachers and institutions, and overburdening everyone with a never-ending proliferation of paperwork and bureaucracy.

True learning requires a great deal of effort on the part of the learner. Much of this effort must come in the form of self-inquiry, that is, ongoing examination and reexamination of one’s beliefs and habits to determine which ones need to be revised or discarded. This sort of self-examination cannot be done by others, nor can the results of it be delivered by a teacher. It is work that a student must do for himself or herself.

Because of this, most of the work required in attaining what matters most in education is the responsibility of the student. A teacher can make suggestions, point out deficiencies, recommend methods, and model the behavior of someone who has mastered self-transformation. But no teacher can do the work of self-transformation for a student.

Current assessment models habitually and almost obsessively understate the responsibility of the student for his or her own learning, and, what is more consequential, overstate the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers are directed to provide clear written statements of observable learning outcomes; to design courses in which students have the opportunity to achieve those outcomes; to assess whether students achieve those outcomes; and to use the assessments of students to improve the courses so that attainment of the prescribed outcomes is enhanced. The standards do not entirely remove the student as an agent — the course provides the opportunity, while the student must achieve the outcomes. But the assessment procedures prescribe in advance the outcome for the student; the student can achieve nothing of significance, as far as assessment goes, except what the professor preordains.

This is a mechanical and illiberal exercise. If the student fails to attain the end, is it because the professor has not provided a sufficient opportunity? Or because, despite the opportunity being perfectly designed, the student, in his freedom, hasn’t acted? Or maybe the student attains the designed outcome due to her own ingenuity even when the opportunity is ill-designed. Or, heaven forbid, the student has after reflection rejected the outcome desired by the teacher in favor of another. The assessment procedure accurately measures the effectiveness of the curriculum precisely

to the extent that the student's personal freedom is discounted. To the extent that student's freedom is acknowledged, the assessment procedure has to fail.

True learning belongs much more to the student than to the teacher. Even if the teacher spoon-feeds facts to the students, devises the best possible tests to determine whether students are retaining the facts, tries to fire them up with entertaining excitement, and exhibits perfectly in front of them the behavior of a self-actuated learner, the students will learn little or nothing important about the subject or about themselves if they do not undertake the difficult discipline of taking charge of their own growth. This being the case, obsessing about the responsibility of the teacher without paying at least as much attention to the responsibility of the student is hardly going to produce helpful assessments.

True learning is not about having the right answer, so measuring whether students have the right answers is at best incidental to the essential aims of education. True learning is about mastering the art of asking questions and seeking answers, and applying that mastery to your own life. Ultimately, it is about developing the power of self-transformation, the single most valuable ability one can have for meeting the demands of an ever-changing world. Meaningful assessment measures attainment in these areas, rather than in the areas most congenial to the economic metaphor.

How best to judge whether students have attained the sort of freedom that can be acquired by study? Demand that they undertake and successfully complete intellectual investigations on their own. The independence engendered by such projects empowers students to meet the challenges of life and work. It helps them shape lives worth living, arrived at through thoughtful exploration of the question: What kind of life do I want to make for myself?

What implications does this focus have for assessors? They should move away from easy assessments that miss the point to more difficult assessments that try to measure progress in self-transformation. The Gallup-Purdue Index Report "[Great Jobs, Great Lives](#)" found six crucial factors linking the college experience to success at work and overall well-being in the long term:

1. At least one teacher who made learning exciting.
2. Personal concern of teachers for students.
3. Finding a mentor
4. Working on a long-term project for at least one semester.
5. Opportunities to put classroom learning into practice through internships or jobs.
6. Rich extracurricular activities.

Assessors should thus turn all their ingenuity toward measuring the quality of the students' learning environment, toward measuring students' engagement with their teachers and their studies, and toward measuring activities in which students practice the freedom they have been working to develop in college. The results should be used to push back against easy assessments based on the categories of economics.

Higher education, on the other hand, would do well to repurpose most of the resources currently devoted to assessment. Use them instead to do away with large lecture classes — the very embodiment of education-as-commodity — so that students can have serious discussions with teachers, and teachers can practice the kind of continuous assessment that really matters.