Engaging Faculty in the Assessment of Higher Order Student Learning Outcomes
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Austin College recently received a grant from the Mellon Foundation to support innovative faculty partnerships in the delivery of upper level courses. In anticipating assessment needs of the grant, we delivered a workshop to seven pairs of faculty from the sciences, social sciences and humanities. The purpose of this presentation is to illustrate that current research on assessment can be presented to faculty in ways that engage them in assessment of higher order student learning outcomes. The presentation utilizes content from our assessment workshop that emphasizes the following objectives:

• To define the qualities of assessment of learning outcomes that draw on the experiences of faculty in their own development of teaching expertise;
• To clearly differentiate assessment from grading by using faculty experiences in learning how to teach;
• To offer a small array of conceptually interesting ways to think about assessment;
• To describe an array of strategies for assessing student learning outcomes; and
• To advocate for triangulation in the assessment of student learning.

The presentation will provide the workshop content and will illustrate the ways in which faculty developed assessment plans for their courses.

In approaching colleagues, we first define assessment in relation to student learning and emphasize that assessment becomes more interesting when it is authentic and useful. Faculty are told that their assignment for the day is to select a conceptually interesting learning goal, decide on which measurement strategies to use, develop an assessment plan and consider triangulation. Conceptual approaches derived from the mission of the college, AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics, Kolb’s theory of experiential learning, and such higher order skills as analysis, synthesis, problem solving, reflective thought and creativity are briefly introduced. Strategies are illustrated and triangulation revisited in terms of different kinds of triangulation – of data, perspectives, longitudinal perceptions, etc.

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The initial presentation introduces the concept of triangulation in assessment. Faculty members tend to respond favorably to the notion that no assessment strategy is perfect and that multiple strategies either create redundancy (i.e., each of these measurements points to a common conclusions) and confidence or discrepancy (i.e., we need to rethink our assumptions, our measurement strategies and our interpretation of findings) and curiosity. In general, the more scientifically-oriented are drawn to the ideas of redundancy and discrepancy, the more humanities-oriented to ideas of confidence and curiosity. A strong focus throughout the presentation is efficiency and positive use of faculty time. For example, faculty are encouraged to think about overall assessment of either the impact of the grant or of student learning generally. This invites them to suggest strategies that should be implemented on a larger scale. Since staff from institutional effectiveness and institutional research are present and are available throughout the workshop, colleagues can generate an assessment idea, then discover (always with pleasure) that there are aspects of assessment that can be done for them, e.g., transcript analysis, extraction of representative or comparable samples, etc.

Faculty are asked to describe two kinds of teaching experience. First, they are asked for examples of how specific feedback early in their careers led them to become better teachers. Second, they are asked to describe times when they have seen students “take one step forward, then two steps back” before making a large leap forward. This latter question seems important to introduce because when faculty set learning goals that address higher order skills, they may naively assume that student progress will be linear and easy to measure. The question is linked to the idea of “regression in service of transition” in order to encourage faculty to consider longitudinal assessment of student growth rather than isolated “snapshot” measures that may confuse or disappoint. This discussion tends to capture faculty interest in how to improve student learning by reviewing their own experience of becoming better teachers.

Kolb’s theory is helpful in that it encourages faculty to examine a “concrete experience” they provide to students, e.g., a film or a presentation. Then they are asked to consider the extent to which students must use reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, or active experimentation. Although Kolb offers ways to consider brain mapping of the four processes and he regards them as stages, faculty are encouraged to talk instead about what they want students to do intellectually when they are exposed to some novel experience. This also engages faculty in thinking about their often unexpressed assumptions about what students will be doing intellectually during class.

Before moving on to assessment strategies, we address directly the question of the difference between grading and assessment. The conceptual distinction of formative and summative evaluation is one that has long been addressed on our
campus. Here, we emphasize that while both grading and assessment can be either formative or summative, it is best to think about an initial assessment plan as always formative. Faculty will only find assessment interesting if they are not certain what the data will tell them. They may believe that, at the end of a course, students know or can do x or y, but the function of assessment is to determine whether that assumption is correct. In contrast, grading is always summative – in that you must be prepared to defend to a student why she earned a C rather than a B in your course. This distinction is helpful in that it sets the stage for talking about how to use course assignments or parts of them in assessment activity.

The next step for faculty is to think about potential data sources – course artifacts, transcript analysis, interviews or focus groups, journals, student surveys or self-assessments, etc. Examples are provided and others generated by the group. One of the inevitable questions from faculty concerns how much time should be allocated to assessment. Fortunately, early on in our workshop a young colleague described her experience with brief writing exercises. We were able to emphasize the pragmatics of assessment – that the best and most authentic assessments are dual purpose. They benefit the faculty member and students while provide manageable sets of data for assessment. Examples provided and generated illustrate that assessment need not consume valuable class time.

An additional measurement concept addresses the benefits of “inter-rater reliability.” It is easy for faculty to stay preoccupied with whether grading is different from assessment when they try to collect assessment information alone. We discuss the advantage of having a set of criteria or a rubric that more than one person can apply to an artifact or experience. Then rubrics are introduced in basic terms and the VALUE rubrics (Adler-Kassner, Rutz, & Harrington, 2010) provided. The rubrics from AAC&U’s Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) are helpful in that they offer exemplars without being prescriptive. In fact, faculty are encouraged not to “reinvent the wheel,” but to modify and adapt existing rubrics developed by others.

The final section of the training identifies different kinds of triangulation:

1. Different measurements (e.g., student artifacts assessed by a rubric, student survey data and transcript analysis);
2. Different perspectives 1 (e.g., two professors and student peer assessment using the same rubric);
3. Different perspectives 2 – different groups of students (e.g., those who took class X in Fall 2009, those who take it in Fall 2010 with a changed curriculum, and those who have never had class X);
4. Different perspectives 3 – different times (e.g., assessment at the beginning, end of the course and one year later).
In our workshop, the presentation and discussion occur in 75 minutes. Faculty then take a break and work in pairs or small groups with institutional effectiveness staff and the principal investigator for the Mellon project “floating” to assist as needed. All faculty were able to report very clear assessment plans that they put into draft form within a week of the workshop. Their assessment goals focus on higher order skills and their assessment plans are illustrated by pre- and post-test brief writing measures, essays embedded in midterm and final exams, rubrics that will be applied to student analyses of films, and focus groups with students who completed the course before the interdisciplinary content was added and students completing the new courses.

As noted earlier, faculty are encouraged to think about overall assessment of the impact of the grant. This invites them to suggest strategies that should be implemented on a larger scale. For example, colleagues suggested that, over the five years of the project, a transcript analysis might contrast students who participate in the Mellon courses with a comparable group of students. The hypothesis being investigated is that the transcripts of the Mellon students will provide evidence of greater “diversity” (operationalized as taking elective courses that do not fulfill graduation requirements in a wider range of disciplines) and illustrate greater intellectual curiosity “outside traditional disciplinary boundaries.” Although individual faculty might benefit from this strategy, implementing it on a larger scale provides valuable data for the institution.

Response to this approach was positive. One faculty colleague observed that “had this approach to assessment been utilized ten years ago,” there would have been little or no faculty resistance. The principal investigator for the Mellon grant received the following from her dean:

"I thought the workshop was great. It was quite useful to have [the presentation on] assessment. It was a brilliant move on your part, because it will improve the courses and will, as you said, give demonstrable proof of their uniqueness and effectiveness. Kudos!" For all of us who struggle with assessment on our campus, it was a pleasure to see colleagues enthusiastically engage in conversations about assessment and proudly sharing their plans. We see this as a very positive step in efforts to engage faculty more broadly -- in part because this group of faculty tackled very difficult assessment and found it interesting and useful.

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References:


Center for the Study of Interdisciplinarity http://www.csid.unt.edu/


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WSU's Critical and Integrative Thinking Rubric Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology
https://my.wsu.edu/portal/page?_pageid=177,276578&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL