One is the Loneliest Number ...

Those of you who have gotten to know me this year might have learned that I like to sing—for birthdays, parties, or just about anywhere else. The song listed in the title of this article is a good one, but most people don’t know that it applies to assessment.

Across the university, we have an assessment coordinator for each academic degree who facilitates the planning, implementation, analysis, and reporting of assessment. As I’ve read the Assessment Narratives that were submitted on October 1st, I’ve seen a wide range of faculty involvement across departments. In some cases, a single person is tasked with “doing assessment” for the department, and it really is a “lonely” and less effective process. It is hard to make the case that assessment is part of the culture in such departments.

The A-Teams

In contrast, I’ve been very impressed with many departments that have changed this isolated approach. Through better collaboration, the work of assessment is divided among several coordinators, and all faculty in the department are involved in various aspects of the assessment process. In many cases, all faculty are asked to include learning outcomes in their syllabi (which should be happening anyway), and all faculty are included in the discussion of what the assessment results mean and how they can be used for improvement. The strongest areas of assessment have created assessment teams, or “A-Teams,” that can strategically carry out their assessment plans. These departmental teams allow faculty to share best practices with each other, as well as strategies for teaching and learning improvement through conversations that often don’t occur outside the context of assessment. I would encourage all departments to consider developing A-Teams, as well as to identify “second generation” assessment coordinators who can carry the baton forward at the appropriate time.

Learning Outcomes (Positively) Exposed

As I wrote in the last newsletter, assessment should not be performed behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz. Rather, students should be aware of the learning outcomes and assessments for their classes and degree. Toward this end, each department will be required to post their learning outcomes for their degrees on their departmental website by October 1, 2013. I will have more information on suggestions for doing so during the spring semester. Please contact me if you would like help in establishing an assessment team or in putting your learning outcomes on your departmental website. I thank you again for a job well done on your assessment plans this past year. It has been very exciting to see the progress we are making as departments and as an institution in assessment. You are doing profound and enduring work!

~ Nathan Lindsay

Happy Holidays!!!
Assessment begins with choosing learning outcomes. One of the most difficult parts of that process is not crafting those outcomes but making choices among the many possible outcomes crafted. In my own courses, I have made the difficult choice to cut some “content” in order to make room for deeper learning of core concepts and the skill necessary to put those concepts into action. I urge others to lift “the curse of coverage” when choosing learning goals and assessments.

In legal education, as in much of the rest of the academy, there are increasing calls for improving a range of skills our graduates will need upon entering the workforce: critical reasoning, information literacy, problem-solving, cultural competence, collaboration, communication skills, the list seems only to grow. Yet demonstrating an understanding of learning outcomes and placing them into a standard curriculum may seem impossible because there is so much content to be “covered” in our courses. “Too often, classes aspiring to skill development morph into classes about the substantive legal framework of a particular subject, with professors expressing concern about whether they have covered enough of the substantive framework during the course of the semester” (Goldfarb, 2012).

The problem is not confined to legal education. “The curse of coverage” has bedeviled curriculum development throughout academia. Harvard Education Professor David N. Perkins, refers to this phenomenon as “aboutitis” creating “endless learning about something without ever getting better at doing it” (Perkins, 2009). This, despite the research on learning that establishes that teaching more content does not necessarily result in more learning. “If learning is to endure in a flexible, adaptable way for future use, coverage cannot work. It leaves us with only easily confused or easily forgotten facts, definitions, and formulas to plug into rigid questions that look just like the ones covered” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)(Shulman, 1999).

In the choice between depth and breadth, the ever-present drive for “coverage” implicit in the growing size of course books consistently lends advantage to the “breadth” side of the equation. The assessment question in this debate resolves itself in recognizing that one must always necessarily choose to forgo some breadth if one wishes to set learning outcomes at a level of proficiency above mere rote learning. For deep and transferable learning, we must aim for higher levels of proficiency, which requires thoughtful choices about the knowledge and skills in using that knowledge for which we desire that proficiency.

So for example, in my Seminar in Family Violence, which I co-teach with an adjunct professor whose full-time career is spent representing victims of violence, we have narrowed our learning goals down to three core goals that we have determined are essential for every student to demonstrate in order to achieve credit for the course: Understand the dynamics of domestic violence sufficiently that they can competently interview and counsel a victim. Understand the limits of law so that they can effectively refer to and collaborate with professionals in addressing problems posed by domestic violence. Understand the rules and procedures governing protective orders so that they can effectively represent a client (either a petitioner or respondent) in a protective order hearing.

Each semester, we worry over the content we must sacrifice in order to make room for the learning opportunities and formative feedback so students can achieve these outcomes.

No more marching through all the many places in the legal system where domestic violence is addressed: divorce law, criminal law, immigration law, employment law, housing law, the list seems endless and we provide only very brief glimpses into each so that we can spend two hours practicing interviewing a victim, or touring a shelter, or talking to mental health professionals about treatment options. No more final exam blue books in which students are tested for their ability to recall and use 1000 pages of content. Instead, the final examination consists of a simulated protective order hearing. In the years I have been teaching this course, I have become convinced, not only by the students’ performance in the course, but by the performance of our graduates in the legal system, that I have sacrificed nothing in trading “coverage” for whole learning.

Sources

~ Barbara Glesner Fines
Winter/Spring 2013 Assessment Sessions for FaCET (All sessions are from 2:30-4:00pm)

January 30, 2013 - Workshop on Major Field Tests
/ETS-Proficiency Profile/ RooWriter

February 20, 2013 - Workshop on Departmental Satisfaction/ Learning Outcomes Surveys

March 13, 2013 - Workshop on Curriculum Maps

Many thanks to the University Assessment Committee (UAC) for their hard work completing this year’s review of assessment plans in WEAVE !!!

Linda Garavalia  Barbara Glesner-Fines  David Cornell  Brenda Bethman
Colleen Kelly  Lynda Plamann  Da-Ming Zhu  Chris Van Ness  Serkan Toy
Jennifer Phegley  Ken Mitchell  Linda Breytspraak  Larry Bunce
Steven Krantz  LaVerne Berkel  Margaret Mullaly-Quijas  Peggy Ward-Smith
Sabrina Madison-Cannon
Fattening up Assessment with the Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IF-AT)

At a meeting in early November, the University Assessment Committee (UAC) was treated to some educational training and entertainment by Barbara Glesner-Fines, Associate Dean for Faculty and Rubey M. Helen Professor of Law at the UMKC School of Law. She introduced a game platform that can be used to promote assessment in the classroom.

The system, called the Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IF-AT) is the brainchild of Epstein Educational Enterprises, Inc. IF-ATs are multiple choice cards that reveal the correct choice by scratching off the answer. The benefits of using this include more active learning and creative collaborative learning.

Glesner-Fines offers a more specific advantage the small scratch-off forms seem to offer. “IF-ATs are helpful to formative assessment because they provide immediate feedback (the IF part of their name) and they help distinguish among students who understand the material a little and those who understand it not at all,” she said. “They are especially helpful in team-based work as they allow dissenting voices to be heard and minimize the zero-sum game mentality of choosing an answer. The physical layout (scratching off the answer) evokes lottery tickets and lends an air of playfulness to the multiple choice quiz process.”

More information on this innovative assessment and teaching idea can be found at https://if-at.com/home/about/benefits.aspx.

~ Dan Stroud

Assessment in the Conservatory: Striking the “Right Pitch” Between Formative and Summative Assessment

During the summer of 2011, I was asked to serve the Conservatory of Music and Dance as Chair of the Conservatory Assessment Committee. Terms like “goals,” “student learning outcomes,” “measures, “findings,” and “action plans” became part of my daily vocabulary and I quickly became an expert on the differences between summative and formative assessment. Like many faculty members—especially in the arts—new trends in assessment had eluded me and the learning curve was steep.

The first hurdle was the large number of degrees offered in the Conservatory. While most other divisions or departments on campus have a handful of degrees to oversee, the Conservatory has twenty-two. This issue was compounded by the fact that it was not clear who was responsible for many of the degrees—some, like the performance degrees, crossed several divisions, while others, like the BA and MA degrees, did not have any divisional ownership. The Conservatory addressed these issues by placing our twenty-two degrees into five different categories: composition, academic, performance, dance and education/therapy. A point person was then named for each degree, and that person was held responsible for developing those assessment plans, in collaboration with appropriate faculty.

The academic areas were either already involved in assessment or adapted quickly to the new requirements. The performance areas, however, struggled. These degrees span three different divisions in the Conservatory (vocal, instrumental and keyboard), but were considered one degree by the university. Each division has its own requirements and policies on how the capstone experiences (recitals) were assessed, making it nearly impossible to find common measures, findings and action plans. To make this even more complicated, there was a general sense of resistance to assessment directives among the performance faculty. Performance faculty assess constantly—in every lesson, studio class and performance. It is part of our art, and many resented having to put this “art” into an administrative box. Subjectivity is an issue in all assessment, but is magnified in a field where two people can hear the very same performance and assess it completely differently. There is seldom a
“right” or “wrong” performance, and the subtleties of assessing student learning outcomes in this field make completing an administrative report nearly impossible.

When first given the task of developing assessment plans, the Conservatory naturally gravitated towards summative assessment, as capstone projects already existed for all of our degrees. The composition and music education areas used exit interviews to discover how well their degree plans prepared students for field success. The thesis was re-evaluated by the music theory and musicology areas, with increased attention to tracking and evaluating student-learning outcomes, in an effort of make long-term decisions about how well the curriculum prepared students. Comprehensive exams were already used in all graduate degrees, so faculty made a concerted effort to ask questions that reflected and evaluated the student learning outcomes for each degree. These exams are also being used to track student progress on a larger scale to make adjustments to curriculum or the process of creating the exams. Portfolio evaluation was used in some areas, as were professional exams that students are required to pass for certification in areas like music education and music therapy. Most of these summative assessments were successful, providing valuable insight into how well our students are learning. Efforts to evaluate the recitals that served as capstone experiences in the performance areas, however, were not fruitful, for the reasons listed above and because of difficulties in creating and implementing a common evaluative tool for all of the different instruments studied in the Conservatory.

Issues discovered at the summative level have recently led Conservatory faculty members to delve into formative assessment. The composition area implemented mid-degree reviews of capstone projects, in an effort to provide better guidance to students as they work through their degrees. Music education faculty are relying on the “Professional Readiness Form” for student reinforcement, redirection and self-evaluation. This form identifies eighteen professional behaviors, indicating each student’s progress toward developing and demonstrating behaviors conducive to successful matriculation into the profession. In musicology, “First Friday” presentations are used to assess student oral skills in speaking intelligently about music in a variety of forums. Variances between student learning outcomes on Conservatory degrees led to a survey of all Conservatory faculty about curricular goals for students, in an attempt to understand what the common core curriculum should be teaching. The results of this survey have led to a revision in the content and delivery of this core curriculum.

The performance areas are also exploring formative assessment, after realizing that evaluating the final recitals of students was not providing any meaningful data. To quote Dean Witte, these are “high stakes, low frequency” events, with many faculty members finding it difficult to separate student evaluation from faculty evaluation. New ideas on formative assessment in performance include building an assessment loop into the core curriculum, recording student lessons and performances for student self-evaluation at various points in the degree plan and implementing independent projects to determine student success in independent learning.

Assessment in the arts remains a challenge, but I remain hopeful that meaningful change for increased student success is a goal that can unite our faculty. My own adventures in assessment have already dramatically improved my teaching and student outcomes, as I have implemented rubrics in all of my courses and use student-learning outcomes as a guide when evaluating curriculum and course content. The Conservatory continues to face unique obstacles as we work toward university assessment goals, but we are constantly improving in faculty investment as we in turn remain committed to our students’ success.

~ Diane Petrella
As we work with our students, we need to recognize that they are not always learning what we are trying to teach them. This is where assessment can help in measuring what the students actually know.

**TEACHING DOGS TO WHISTLE?**

**Don’t Forget About the ETS/RooWriter Workshop! January 30, 2013 at 2:30 at the FaCET Office in Miller Nichols Library.**

Answers to Volume 1, Issue 3 Assessment Crossword Puzzle