Evidence of Student Learning: What Counts and What Matters for Improvement

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Colleges and universities today are collecting a broader range of information about student learning, and more of it, than even a few years ago. Whereas in 2009 institutions reported gathering an average of three types of assessment information, by 2013 that number had risen to five (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). Reports from provosts suggest that campuses have "shifted from being able to provide plans to assess student learning to instead being able to document and provide evidence of student learning"— evidence that is essential to improvement (Cain & Jankowski, 2013, p. 4).

Of course, evidence does not automatically translate into improvement. Human beings are notoriously able to ignore the facts in front of them. For instance, only one in seven cardiac patients modifies their behavior when told their life depends on it (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 1). And the same pattern persists in student learning outcomes assessment. A campus may be rich in data and information but woefully short on actionable evidence (Seymour, 1995), which differs from information in that it is more intentional and purposive, and, as the product of reflection and deliberation. (WASC, 2014), more likely to lead to meaningful change.

Part of the problem is that what counts as evidence in the assessment of student learning is often contested. What one person sees as persuasive, another sees as anecdotal. The chemistry department wants numbers while the English department eschews them (see Becher, 1987); student affairs professionals look to sources and types of evidence different from what interests their colleagues in institutional research. Perhaps not surprisingly, in their review of campus assessment efforts, Trudy Banta and Charles Blaich (2011) noted that only 6% of such efforts "contained evidence that student learning had improved, no matter what measure had been used" (p. 22). Indeed, tales abound of assessment reports stashed on shelves where no one sees them or seeks them out.

The good news is that provosts today report that the use of assessment results is on the rise in their institutions (Kuh et al., 2014). And, as noted earlier, a much broader and more promising array of approaches is in play, yielding more and more varied kinds of evidence. Prominent among them are student surveys (still the single most prevalent source of evidence); portfolios and rubrics (up dramatically from a few years ago), and, perhaps most notable in light of concerns about use and improvement, evidence of student learning outcomes generated in the classroom through well designed assignments.

Evidence from Classroom Assignments

Because the assessment movement was initially framed as a corrective to faculty subjectivity and policymakers' concerns about grade inflation, coursework (papers, projects, exam questions, simulations, and presentations) has had

a difficult time establishing itself as a recognized source of evidence for student learning outcomes assessment.

But an emerging movement for authentic assessment — performances on complex, real-world tasks — has pushed in the other direction, fueling an interest in evidence that comes from the classroom (and other instructional settings). Thus, the use of locally designed assignments and assessments, including culminating projects or capstones, has risen dramatically in the last few years. Commenting on this shift at one campus, a provost noted that the most hopeful aspect of assessment was "the realization that classroom based learning assessment is both legitimate and valuable."

This trend is not without its challenges. The design of classroom activities, projects, and exams that reliably elicit the desired learning from students is complicated. But where faculty members, programs and campuses have developed clear, explicit outcomes — and assignments are carefully crafted and aligned with those outcomes — assessment can be integrated into the ongoing work of faculty and students in ways that raise the likelihood of improvement by starting and staying closer to the action.

This is the vision of assessment set forth in the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) introduced by Lumina Foundation in 2011, which "keeps faculty judgment at the center of assessment" by putting the focus on carefully designed (and aligned) assignments (Ewell, 2013, p. 3). It is also the central principle behind NILOA's DQP Assignment Library (see http://www.assignmentlibrary.org/).

The most persuasive rationale for this kind of evidence is that its usefulness is built in; it is assessment not as aspiration but as an expectation and requirement, generating evidence that is used to ensure each student's worthiness to be awarded a degree. Accordingly, the results are clearly not at risk of being stashed and forgotten on a shelf; faculty members look carefully at their students' classroom work and care deeply about what they see. Moreover, new technologies now make it possible to translate this kind of fine-grained evidence from individual students into formats that speak meaningfully to audiences at other levels. Prince George's Community College's All-in-One system, for example, allows the campus to map student learning vertically, starting with individual student performance and moving up to the course, program, and institutional level (Richman & Ariovich, 2013).

Assuring Quality Evidence
Throughout the several decades of the assessment movement, assessment professionals have focused on the validity (does a tool or approach actually measure what it purports to measure) and reliability (whether it provides a consistent measure). What has received less attention is a different principle, central to the use of assessment to catalyze productive change: the degree to which evidence stimulates action, leads to improvement, and, therefore, becomes consequential.

Of course, traditional conceptions of validity and reliability matter. For instance, faculty — especially those with expertise in measurement—are unlikely to pay attention to or use the results of outcomes assessment if the quality of the data is suspect. But even with such concerns resolved, a focus on the power to prompt action-consequential validity (Messick, 1989) — becomes an important further condition for improvement, and evidence generated and used in the classroom has special power in this regard.

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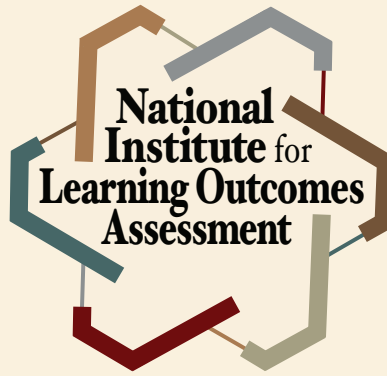
Assignments, when well designed, can achieve high levels of consequential validity when students are asked to demonstrate specific proficiencies. For one thing, classroom-based assessments have clear consequences for students as they strive to show what they know and can do to meet the goals of their program of study. Equally important, evidence from students' classroom work can have powerful implications for the redesign of courses and classroom activities, including (to bring the circle fully around) assignments themselves.

Assessment that is truly focused on improving students' educational experiences means putting a premium on evidence. It also means being smart about what constitutes evidence and how to use it effectively. When all is said and done, improving student accomplishment depends less on the amount of information gathered and more on whether it leads to action by those, like faculty and students, in a position to use it productively.

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