

How Can Assessment Work for Us?

Faculty have good reason to suspect the current assessment fad. But there's no good reason to leave our futures in the hands of others.

By Sherry Lee Linkon

Assessment, it seems, is everywhere in higher education these days, as institutions develop assessment plans and accrediting bodies require evidence that students are meeting appropriate educational goals. Defining student learning as the central activity of higher education is not, in itself, controversial. Indeed, the assessment movement originated with faculty efforts to design innovative teaching strategies. But the current push to measure students' learning typically arises when state legislators and governing boards pressure institutions to be more "accountable" to the public that funds higher education, and the assessment movement is often linked inextricably with such pressure. As educational psychologist Bill Cerbin noted in a recent workshop, the movement has thus been "hijacked" in ways that undermine its positive uses.

Calls for accountability focus increasingly on economic issues rather than on helping students become thoughtful citizens and lifelong learners. A September 2004 forum in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked commentators to explore how colleges could "prove they're doing their jobs." The forum's introduction pointed out that both the U.S. Congress and state legislatures are challenging universities to demonstrate that they have met "performance goals" and are "serving important economic and social needs." As the cost of public higher education rises, the *Chronicle* noted, students and parents "are demanding proof that students are getting what they are paying for and learning what they need to know." Commentators suggested that colleges could demonstrate their value by, among other things, the amount of external funding they bring in, the number of new businesses they help start, the quality of public health, and job creation. Learning is thus defined as workforce development, and public service means contributing to the state's economy. For many professors, such discussions illustrate all too clearly the changing values of higher education and the attack on academics as professionals.

Another trend accompanies this emphasis on the economic value of our work: the idea that the university should be run as a business, with the student as both customer and product. As sociologist Stanley Aronowitz suggests in his 2000 book, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning*, the university is being defined as a knowledge factory in which professors do well-defined, concrete jobs that can be evaluated in standardized and fairly simple ways. This definition oversimplifies our work, making it seem easily replicable and even low skilled. At the same time, some institutional assessment programs are couched in terms of "continuous improvement," a concept that may seem innocuous, perhaps even laudable, but that can also be interpreted as meaning that "nothing you do will ever be good enough." No wonder such programs foster mutual suspicion and hostility among faculty, staff, and administrators on our campuses.

These trends evoke worry, irritation, and paranoia, because we know that while assessment may sometimes reflect genuine concern for student learning, it also suggests that someone—the provost, a state legislator, an accrediting officer—believes that we don't do our jobs well enough. Requiring a worker to demonstrate that his or her work is sufficiently good always implies that it probably isn't. Our situation fits quite well the old line about paranoia: just because we're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get us. As long as assessment functions as an externally imposed instrument to measure how well we contribute to the state's economic growth, faculty will rightly reject it.

Despite the real concerns that assessment raises for faculty, I want to argue that we should embrace the responsibility for critically evaluating our work as teachers. We should do so not only because we care

about our students' learning, but also because our critical engagement may allow us to change the way assessment is practiced and understood. If we can claim assessment as the "property" of faculty, then we may be able to make it work for us rather than against us.

Issues of Resistance

Faculty have many good reasons to resist and reject assessment. As professionals, we are insulted and irritated by being asked to prove the value of our work. Like other professionals, we believe that we should be trusted on the basis of our training, our continuing professional engagement, and our practice of rigorous peer review. Further, we believe that our work is intrinsically valuable, not merely a contribution to the economy. We see the social value of our work as the production of thoughtful, critical citizens and new knowledge. Defining education as a commodity offends our sensibilities, partly because we understand that such a view defines us as workers, not as professionals.¹

We have witnessed the deleterious effects of assessment on the public image and professional independence of K-12 teachers, and we fear that the same professional decline will happen to us. Teachers were once respected and trusted to do their jobs well. But as attention has shifted to the performance of individual teachers and schools, as measured by standardized tests, teachers have become the scapegoats for all failures of the American educational system.

We also have practical reasons for resisting assessment. We know that good assessment takes time, especially as it is being developed. Ideally, perhaps, we would integrate assessment into our regular teaching practices. A well-designed rubric might help an instructor grade papers more quickly and generate assessment data at the same time. (Rubrics describe levels of performance on specific learning goals and thus allow for the manageable assessment of student work in qualitative, rather than quantitative, ways.) But we need to learn how to design and use such tools, and that can be a lengthy process. Eventually, assessment tools may become so familiar that they are easy to use, but until then, assessment feels like one more element of a general academic speedup.

We might be willing to invest the time if we saw significant benefits for our students or ourselves. We don't. Indeed, studies show that faculty resist assessment because it seems to yield little real difference in our classrooms or our institutions. Furthermore, few rewards exist for these efforts. Faculty rarely receive any compensation or recognition either for participating in assessment or for demonstrating improved student learning. In fact, calls for assessment often seem to come not with a promise of a reward but with the implied threat of punishment. For many faculty, assessment feels like a game we can't win. As one of my colleagues explained in a department meeting, "they" seemed to want us to define learning outcomes that our students could not meet and then gather evidence to show how badly we were doing. This perception may reflect faculty paranoia, but it is widely shared and not without some basis in fact.

Assessment also raises concerns about academic freedom. The assessment process generally begins with departments defining shared learning goals, which may seem to infringe on individual rights. In most fields, after all, strong divisions exist between and among different theories and approaches. These divisions generate arguments that develop new knowledge, and some worry that defining common learning goals requires us to erase intellectual diversity. Others fear that assessment will force conformity in teaching methods. If assessment data "prove" that a certain technique works well, will we all be forced to use it? We have already seen K-12 teachers being forced to use standardized methods that are "scientifically proven." It's reasonable to expect that college classrooms may be the next target for this kind of teacher control.

Professors also resist assessment because we believe that learning is a complex process that cannot be easily measured. We cannot adequately reflect the complexity of students' learning with a few simple activities. As the American Association of Higher Education's (AAHE) *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* (www.aahe.org/assessment/principl.htm) states, "Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know, but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind." Because of this complexity, the

AAHE argued, assessment should "employ a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance."

Unfortunately, because assessment focuses on measurable outcomes, it can easily be interpreted as demanding increased reliance on standardized testing. The State University of New York system, for example, recently agreed to develop a standardized exam to measure the learning of all its graduates. Although this form of assessment is manageable, many faculty see it as demeaning both our teaching and our students' learning, because it reduces education to multiple-choice questions. Scholars also argue that such generic approaches do not adequately measure students' learning in higher education.

Standardized testing is especially problematic for those of us in the humanities. As a cultural studies teacher, I encourage students to defer reaching conclusions until they have read and reread a text, considered how it relates to its cultural context, and talked with other readers. I encourage them to pursue questions that generate multiple and even contradictory answers. Yet the learning of students who are preparing to be K-12 teachers is (supposedly) measured by a state-mandated multiple-choice exam that gives them one minute to answer each question. The test includes some thought-provoking questions that might yield several good answers. But it requires students to read quickly, make fast decisions, and select only one right answer.

Other forms of assessment, such as rubrics or portfolios—which gather samples of student work over time to document change and growth—could effectively capture the complexity of students' knowledge, although assessment councils sometimes discount these methods because they don't yield quantitative data. Further, these more qualitative approaches are time-consuming to construct and evaluate. As documented by the American Association of Higher Education, institutions that use portfolio-based assessment have invested significant time and technology in them. It is possible to develop assessment strategies that produce rich data on student learning without spending so much time or money, but doing so requires faculty creativity and leadership.

Professors resist assessment for good reasons. We should address the assault on our professionalism, overreliance on standardized measurement strategies, concerns about appropriate uses of our time, and questions about the benefits of assessment. We should apply our academic experience and scholarly expertise to public debates about assessment, accountability, and changing expectations in higher education. But we must not rely on the strategy of conscientious objection or, worse, choose the path of least resistance to express our critique of assessment.

Better Responses

We should reject bad forms of assessment and stand up for our rights as workers and professionals. One way to do so is to intervene in the assessment movement by developing and advocating better models of assessment. We cannot turn back the tide of accountability, and we ignore it at our peril, since it is increasingly being used to determine funding. Fighting against it will contribute to the negative image of college faculty as intellectual snobs who don't really care about teaching.

If the assessment movement reflects public doubts about our professionalism as teachers, we have, unfortunately, earned some of these suspicions. We have talked about our students in derogatory ways, blaming them, and sometimes their high school teachers, for whatever difficulties they have in our classes. If students don't perform well, it's not our fault. When we talk of "our work," we're usually referring to our individual scholarship, not to our teaching. We may blame administrators for demanding research productivity, but we also collude in valuing research over teaching when we serve on tenure and promotion committees. Such behavior contributes to the idea that we don't take teaching seriously and may not do it well. If we don't actively demonstrate our commitment to good teaching, how can we ask simply to be trusted to do it well?

The first reason we should take assessment seriously is that we do care about student learning. If done well, assessment can help us teach better. But it can also help us define and maintain high standards for

teaching. In my experience, college faculty not only teach well, but we also already think critically about how we do it, and we enjoy talking about it. While the language of assessment may sound alien, defining and evaluating student learning are activities in which many of us already participate, although we do so more informally than the assessment process demands.

For example, we already have strong ideas about what we want our students to learn, but we may not have articulated them in terms of learning outcomes or discussed them with our colleagues. Our regular classroom practices provide insight into how well our students are learning, but we often haven't looked at this systematically, considered student work as evidence of learning, or compared notes with our colleagues. We also haven't made our teaching public, which can give the impression that we fear that it won't stand up to peer review or outside scrutiny. Making our thinking about teaching more deliberate and more visible requires time and effort, but it can be rewarding in many ways.

Discussions of teaching usually occur informally. Assessment makes those discussions departmental and systematic, challenging our tendency to view teaching as an individual enterprise. We may fear that if we let anyone see what we do, we will be judged or pressured by our colleagues. Absolutely, individual autonomy must be maintained, but in my experience, faculty gain more from talking together about teaching than we lose. Such conversations can provide concrete and comparable information about how individual courses fit into the larger mosaic of a major, which may help us make better decisions about the content or methods we address. Along with gaining awareness of what our colleagues are doing and how our courses fit together, these discussions may help us understand that patterns we see in our individual classes are not unique; whatever difficulties or successes we have are probably not ours alone.

The suggestion that departments can have productive and positive conversations about teaching may seem not merely idealistic but also wrongheaded. As I noted above, however, argument is the lifeblood of academic life. No doubt, our conversations about what and how we teach will generate lively and sometimes painful battles. My department's assessment plan includes the development of a shared rubric to measure students' achievement of our learning outcomes. But how do you get twenty-some English professors to agree on the wording of a description of what "appropriate research" or "critical analysis" looks like?

I'm not foolish enough to imagine that we will accomplish this task quickly, or that we will agree on every point. But a compromise will eventually be reached, with some grumbling along the way. As much as I hate conflict, I believe that the process of developing the rubric will actually help us as a department to teach better; we'll have greater mutual understanding of what we're trying to accomplish and how our diverse group of faculty views those goals.

Given the difficulty of such processes and our suspicions about how assessment data will be used, some faculty have responded by seeking the fastest, easiest, least demanding solutions. Although I understand the reasoning behind this response, I think it is a mistake. For example, standardized tests may seem attractive, even in fields in which we question the validity of such tests, because they require little of us, provide quantitative data, and satisfy the requirements of the assessment council. If we view the assessment process simply as a hoop to jump through, then that response makes perfect sense. But if we accept assessment tools that measure our students' learning in overly simple ways, we send the message that what we do is in fact simple—that it's about knowing facts and terms, not about being able to think critically. In other words, the learning outcomes and assessment tools we use will be used by those outside of our departments to define our work.

If we're more interested in how students think than in their knowledge of specific information, and if we truly believe that what we teach is complex and that critical thinking involves wrestling with difficult questions that can be explored through multiple approaches, we need to assess our students in ways that reflect those standards. If we value academic freedom and diversity, then the best way, perhaps the only way, to ensure that assessment embraces our differences instead of erasing them is to invest the time and energy to develop learning outcomes and assessment tools that reflect our values.

We have the power and expertise to design assessment tools that we believe in. If we choose not to do so, even if we have good reasons for resisting externally imposed assessment, we create problems for ourselves down the line. Some faculty might argue that what we do cannot be measured and that (as one of my colleagues used to say) a good teacher "just knows" when students understand things. But such approaches add force to existing doubts about the value of the subjects we teach. Claiming that good teaching is ineffable only reinforces the perception that what we do is not real, and complaining that positivist approaches oversimplify knowledge does not help us demonstrate either the value or the reality of complex learning. If we can't define or measure student learning, others may well ask whether it really exists. We know that it exists, and we should be willing to show how we know.

This problem of misunderstanding and undervaluing knowledge in our disciplines is especially challenging for the humanities. The very idea of measurement is, for many of us, somewhat foreign. But rather than reject assessment because its terms don't fit our conception of our work, we should use our disciplinary expertise to develop strategies for documenting, describing, and evaluating students' learning. As leaders in the scholarship of teaching and learning movement have argued, faculty in the disciplines are the best qualified to study students' learning in their fields. We know the content and methods of our fields, and we also know how to gather and analyze data in ways that are meaningful and persuasive to our colleagues. If we can bring these approaches to bear on the task of assessing student learning, we may be able to develop better assessment strategies and, at the same time, demonstrate the value of our disciplines.

Ownership

Arguments for claiming ownership may seem foolish or naive. Of course, we do not control what happens in our institutions or in higher education, and our interventions in assessment will have to be negotiated with those who have power over our jobs, paychecks, and working conditions. Yet faculty have too easily abdicated responsibility for maintaining professional standards for teaching. In our resistance to the idea of assessment, we have accepted definitions of learning and ways of measuring students' progress that reflect neither our values nor the real quality of our work. As feminist critic Audre Lorde famously wrote in her 1984 book, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Too many of us, however, accept the master's assessment tools, or hope that they will disappear if we ignore them, rather than fight for the right to construct our own. Instead, we should "own" our expertise as teachers and claim the right and responsibility to define and measure the quality of our teaching, just as we do with our research. If we participate actively and critically, we can make assessment work for us, rather than against us. I can't, of course, promise that such an approach would reassure the most suspicious of our bosses. Mutual distrust is built into the academic system, as it is throughout capitalism. Instead of complaining or, worse yet, acting in ways that may undermine our profession, we should claim a larger role and a stronger voice in assessment. It is our best defense strategy in a system that is, to a large extent, increasingly rigged against us.

We gain that power, as always, only by standing together. Assessment cannot be the responsibility of a few volunteers. Ideally, everyone in a department should participate. We need to view teaching as shared work, with outcomes for which we are all responsible. We will all teach better if we work together; doing so need not mean conformity of content or methodology. The difficult conversations through which we develop assessment plans and the ongoing practice of talking with one another about evidence of our students' learning will seem strange and uncomfortable at first. Yet these conversations not only create a stronger sense of community among faculty, but also can build solidarity. That solidarity can be leveraged to fight for better rewards and resources, appropriate uses of assessment data, and so on.

My hopeful view of the benefits of engaging in assessment does not ignore the real problems in higher education, of which bad assessment is a symptom. Engaging more actively in assessment is just one step in a larger process of rewriting the implicit social contract of higher education. I am not sure we will ever accomplish that goal, but I choose to work toward it through positive action, by working with my colleagues on assessment and the scholarship of teaching and learning. A more learning-centered contract would increase the value of teaching not by giving lip service to how important it is but by rewarding faculty members who take it seriously. That means counting teaching more—and treating it more critically—in tenure, promotion, and merit-pay reviews. It also means providing released time to

allow faculty to complete teaching projects, including those involving assessment and the scholarship of teaching and learning. A new contract would reflect a greater balance between scholarship and teaching in all aspects of faculty work—workload, rewards, self-definition, and professional peer review. To develop such a contract, faculty have to step forward and demonstrate our desire to make teaching a more central part of "our work."

Note

1. It is worth noting that the tension surrounding how we define faculty members has been one source of resistance to unionization in higher education. Professionals, some would claim, don't belong to unions. Of course, the fastest-growing union in the United States these days is made up of medical doctors. [Back to text.](#)

Sherry Lee Linkon is professor of English and American studies and co-director of the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University. She is also the campus coordinator for the Visible Knowledge Project, a national effort researching the scholarship of teaching and learning.