If a student learns, and there’s no one around to assess it, does it make a sound?

Reframing Assessment as Meaning Making

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About Me

Isaac plays slide trombone

The family with the Fargo wood chipper
Does something have to be observed for it to exist?

How does the act of observing something change the nature of the observed?

What is the gap between what we observe and what is?

If it falls on a mime, does anybody care? (Gary Larsen)
Does the work of assessment matter?
What I mean by “assessment” in this talk

- Assessment is very broad term, with multiple uses.
- For this talk I am focusing on degree program / co-curricular program or institutional level assessment.
- Includes inquiry into student learning / development and the actions taken to use assessment results.
Me, 1996

Me, 2016-ish

Me, 2036?
(Dana Carvey as “Grumpy Old Man”)
Justin Bieber is actually still a “baby”
What if it all were a waste?
“…worthless bean-counting and cataloging exercises” (Shireman, 2016)

“For good teachers, outcomes assessment is mostly a distraction; for bad ones, it provides a bureaucratic cover to validate what they are doing” (Pontuso & Thornton, 2008).

Assessment (and the assessment director) unfavorably compared with the devil.
It could just be a mid-life crisis, but I think it is important for us to consider these issues about assessment. Does assessment make any difference at all?
Discussion

• Have you heard similar concerns about assessment at your institution?
• How have you responded to those concerns?
• Do you personally have concerns about the benefits of assessment at your institution?
• What have you done, if anything, to address your concerns?
1. Accountability
2. Improvement
Assessment has value because it allows us to be accountable to our stakeholders and demonstrate the value our institutions produce.
But this often becomes **compliance**, which looks like…

Template-ization of assessment (assessment by ‘Mad-Libs’)
Assessment rules and tracking adherence to the rules
Punishment for non-compliance
David Eubanks’ ASSESS listerv comment (April 14, 2016)

Is this really the work of assessment?
Accountability requires us to count things that are countable, and countable in the same way, so we can be compared to each other…

…which results in problematic metrics that are not meaningful or fraught with complexity
“Job placement”

May have more to do with the economy, the institution’s location, or the institution’s reputation than with our ability to prepare students.
“Retention”

Is important but certainly is not the goal of education

My retention plan: “Give everyone an ‘A’”
“Measures of Efficiency”

“Number of dollars required to generate one degree”

As if “degrees” and “dollars” are things that could reasonably be compared?

And the creation of other meaningless “metrics”
Does anyone even pay any attention to most of these accountability reports?
“…how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained”


Franz Kafka
Accountability, as the purpose or reason for assessment, leaves me unsatisfied
Improvement
Assessment for Improvement is a more palatable option
What percentage of assessment projects at your institution lead directly to a tangible improvement activity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Range</th>
<th>Options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%-40%</td>
<td>41%-60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>61%-80%</td>
<td>&gt;80%</td>
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Don’t know / prefer not to answer
61%-80% My first guess, but overly generous when considering direct benefits to students

41%-60% My estimate when I remove “improving assessment” as a tangible improvement

21%-40% My estimate when I remove “facilitating conversations” as a tangible improvement

1%-20% My estimate when I remove improvements the department would have implemented anyway
“I think you should invest faculty time in the summer in scoring samples of student work and create a 10 page report so you can enhance the conversations you have about student learning at the fall curriculum meeting.”

--That’s a hard sell (not to mention that a. they don’t have a fall curriculum meeting and b. if they did, they wouldn’t talk about assessment)!
What if a department is already performing at a very high level?
“Forty years of breeding and training, and we don’t have any horses that can run any faster” (p. 235).

“But our tendons and ligaments can’t really be strengthened in the same way – they can handle what they can handle, and there’s not much we can do about it” (p. 233).
Will the quest for “improvement” distort the process of assessment?
“The more important that any quantitative social indicator becomes in social decision-making, the more likely it will be to distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor” (Amrein and Berliner, 2002, p. 1).
How could the focus on improvement distort assessment?

• Counting any change as an “improvement,” no matter how minor or before it has been re-assessed
• Focuses on problem areas or issues that are easily addressed, instead of on complex learning
• The area that is assessed is great, everything else is terrible (people pay attention to how they will be evaluated and manipulate their work so as to achieve the needed metrics – see my “everyone gets an ‘A’” retention plan)
• Limits the kinds of projects we can pursue – where does a needs assessment fit in, for example, if you are only interested in improving the current activities?
Accountability
• Becomes about compliance with arbitrary rules
• Creation of meaningless metrics
• Many reports never read by anyone
• Ultimately unsatisfying

Improvement
• Too few projects result in tangible improvements for students
• Could already be at a very high level so amount of improvement possible is limited
• Focus on improvement can distort the assessment process
• Ultimately unsatisfying
Reframing Assessment as Meaning Making
“Meaning is an effort to understand the event: why it happened and the impact it has had. The search for meaning attempts to answer the question, What is the significance of the event?”

(Taylor, 1983, p. 1161)
“Whether we like it or not, visitor meaning making is an inevitable consequence of opening museum exhibits to visitors. It’s something visitors always do…” (Hein, 1999).

Students, staff, faculty, taxpayers, parents, legislators…they are all involved in meaning making!
“I just finished my first semester at college. I didn’t pass my chemistry class. Maybe I’m not supposed to be a nurse?”

“Not very many people in my dorm knew my name. Maybe I don’t belong here?”

-Wants to make sense of his/her experience and what it means for the future…shouldn’t that be part of the work of assessment?
Faculty member

“The students really bombed on this project. I didn’t expect that. What happened?”

-Wants to understand why students were struggling with certain aspect of learning...shouldn’t that be part of the work of assessment?
“This institution keeps wanting more money. Why should I give them more money when other important areas, like roads, health care, K-12 education, are also demanding more money? We gave them more money last year, but nothing seemed to get better.”

-Wants to understand the significance of the institution and how it matters to the state
Assessment should be about making meaning from this complex, messy, difficult thing called learning
Therefore the value of assessment is not measured by improved programs or accountability actions (although those things are important), but rather by the meanings that are made by our stakeholders.
A Model for Meaning Making
Meaning making as a way to support the creation of a “mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus, meaning connects things”
Assessment as Meaning Making

Based on Park, 2010
• People have framework to interpret experiences (global meaning)
• Encounter a situation that challenges that global meaning
• If the experience is greatly different from global meaning, experience distress
• Distress starts a process of meaning making
• Meaning making efforts seek to reduce the discrepancy between event and global meaning
• When successful, leads to better adjustment to the stressful event and growth
Represents beliefs about the world, about self, etc., includes goals, and a sense of meaning or purpose. Also influences how new events are understood.

“We prepare future business leaders in an environment of great teaching and strong scholarship.”
Start to hear complaints from businesses and recent graduates that students just aren’t prepared for the work environment.

Capstone projects from last few years show some issues in the ethics area.
Initial appraisal of the event, looking at data from capstone assessment, suggests perhaps recent graduates are not adequately prepared

(Some do not believe the data can be correct because they so strongly hold on to the global belief)
There is a discrepancy between this event (assessment data and the global belief)

This causes distress
- Assessment gets (unfairly) blamed for the distress
Goal is to reduce the difference between this **event** and the **global meaning** (reduce the discrepancy) – one or the other must change!

Many response options, such as:

- Ignore the discrepancy (“Maybe these complaints will stop”)
- Give the event low significance (“It’s just a few students”)
- Respond emotionally (“Am I going to lose my job?”)
- Re-appraise the event (“Maybe the scores weren’t so bad”)
- Accommodation – changing the global view (“We need to do something about how we are teaching ethics”)
Meanings Made

This process results in some possible meanings made, such as:

• Making sense of the experience (“We didn’t realize how unethically our students might behave”)
• Acceptance (“Well, I guess we will just have unethical students from our program”)
• Changed identity (“We don’t teach ethics, that’s up to the employers to cover”)
• Changed sense of meaning in life (“I wonder if Accenture is still hiring?”)
• Growth or positive changes (“Let’s bring in a consultant on teaching ethics and see what we can do about this”)
When assessment is meaning making, assessment supports:

- Students’ making sense of their own learning and transformation,
- Faculty members’ understanding of their teaching and how it impacts students,
- Legislators recognizing the important role the institution serves and why it needs support,
- And parents seeing the importance of the experience and how their children have grown.
Implications
1. Engaging in assessment can challenge deeply-held beliefs about the world – it can represent a real threat to how we understand ourselves and the world.
1a. Assessment sometimes will get blamed unfairly when blame should be placed somewhere else

Barrier to engaging in outcomes-based assessment:
“Lack of Understanding of the Student Learning and Development Theories that Inform the Practice”
Bresciani (2009)
Recognize how assessment can feel threatening and work to make it safe to experience distress.
2. Too often assessment generates the discrepancy, but doesn’t support the meaning making process.
Intentionally include time for reflection and support active engagement in meaning making as part of the work of assessment.
3. Reframing assessment as meaning making opens up assessment to a wider range of methodologies and approaches.
Avoid being dogmatic with assessment approaches and focus on what will help the program or department engage in meaning making.
4. Reframing assessment as meaning making solves a problem our programs and departments actually have.
• Most programs don’t see a need for major improvement.

• Nearly all programs don’t see accountability as their problem.

• But our programs DO struggle to understand their impact on student learning and development.
  – Our stakeholders struggle with this too!

• Framing assessment as meaning making allows us to tackle a solvable problem.
5. Accountability and improvement are still important. However, reframing assessment as meaning making changes the focus of assessment to support meaning making efforts by our many stakeholders.

Assessment starts, not ends, with the presentation of assessment evidence!
Trees are falling all over our institutions

Assessment helps us understand why they are falling and what it means when they fall

Assessment is a critical component of supporting learning and student success