WINDOW TO THE WORLD: REVISIONING ASSESSMENT FROM COMPLIANCE TO EMPOWERMENT

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2011 ASSESSMENT SYMPOSIUM

Friday, May 6, 2010
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INTRODUCTION

The Nassau Community College Academic Senate Assessment Committee presents an Assessment Symposium each spring. Its goal is to provide a forum for exchanging ideas about how to enhance the effectiveness of the College’s assessment program at all levels of the institution. 2011 marks the twelfth year of the Symposium and the fourth year that we have produced this Highlights of the Annual Assessment Symposium. The objective of Highlights is to make the information provided at the Symposium available to the college community at large.

The 2011 symposium this year was led by Dr. Daniel K. Apple, one of the foremost experts on assessment. Dr. Apple is the founder and president of Pacific Crest, an educational consulting and publishing firm established in 1985. He is an expert on Process Education™, an educational philosophy focusing on developing students’ transferrable learning skills and creating self-growers. From the first Teaching Institute held in 1991, Pacific Crest has worked with thousands of faculty, staff, and administrators with the goal of achieving increased faculty development and improved organizational effectiveness, in order to strengthen student learning outcomes. Dr. Apple is a hands-on leader and spends a majority of his time facilitating professional development events, mentoring faulty and educational leaders, and even working with students during Pacific Crest’s week-long Learning to Learn Camps.

Dr. Apple’s background is interdisciplinary with an undergraduate degree from the University of California at Santa Cruz in Mathematics, Chemistry, and Information Science, an M.S. from Syracuse University in Industrial Engineering and Operations Research, and a Ph.D. from SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry specializing in Public Policy and Analysis.

The day was divided into three sessions. In Session I Dr. Apple presented his vision of how assessment can enhance institutional effectiveness; then the audience broke into small groups to work on exercises designed to illuminate and reinforce his ideas. Session II was an interactive exchange in which Dr. Apple, referring to the “Strengths/Areas for Improvement/Insights” (SII) rubric, guided the audience toward the realization that assessments, used properly, can lead to self-empowerment for faculty as well as to improved student learning. In Session III, three faculty presented original assessment methods they had developed. After
each faculty presentation, the audience critiqued the presentation (“assessed the assessment”) by applying the SII rubric. Finally, Dr. Apple “assessed the assessments of the assessment”; in other words, he assessed the audience’s application of the SII method to the presenters’ assessment methods.

This document presents the most salient points that emerged from the seminar. Additional information may be found on Dr. Apple’s website (www.pcrest.com), especially in the Assessment Institute Handbook, on line at http://www.pcrest2.com/measurement/Assessment%20Handbook%20June06.pdf.

We sincerely thank Dr Apple for sharing his insights on assessment, which teach us to regard assessment as a positive, affirmative process; we also thank the Symposium Planning Subcommittee and the symposium speakers for their contributions to the success of this year’s event. Finally, we thank Dr. Paul Sheehan and Dr. Virginia Hromulak for their contributions to this publication. We know that the information shared at the Symposium and documented here will strengthen the assessment process at the college.

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Session I:  ASSESSING FOR INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Part I. Goals of the Symposium

Dr. Apple began this session by stating that the main learning goal for the day’s workshop was to educate the educators: that is, to train the participants to become campus experts on assessment. These experts would then teach others. Another goal was to develop the idea that assessment benefits assessors; this should then motivate people to embrace the process.

He then discussed the differences between Assessment and Evaluation, described the SII Reporting method, and discussed Assessment Methodology in general.

Assessment vs. Evaluation

There are four types of assessment:

1) Self (inward).
   The purpose is to improve what I can do.

2) Another (outward).
   The purpose is to help you improve what you can do OR you assess me to help me improve what I do.

3) Each other (mutual). This is peer coaching.
   The purpose is to improve what we each can do. (Note that in peer coaching the coach learns the most.)

4) Us (group). This is assessment at the department or institution level.
   The purpose is to improve what we all do by assessing our combined performance together.

Whatever type is planned, it is important that it be a true assessment, rather than an evaluation. “Assessment” and “evaluation” are frequently used interchangeably, but they are really very different processes with very different goals. The goal of assessment is to improve performance, something desired not only by the faculty, but by the students themselves, who after all desire an education to improve the quality of their lives. In contrast, the goal of
evaluation is to judge the quality of performance against a standard. Judgment, then, a stressful, confrontational process, is inseparable from evaluation.

There are similarities between the two. Both use criteria and measures and are driven by evidence. But while assessment is positive, individualized, and strives to provide constructive feedback, evaluation is judgmental, is applied against a standard, and aims to point out shortfalls in performance.

To clarify the difference further: the assessor’s mindset

- values the ideas of the assessee
- respects the assessee for seeking feedback
- gives feedback without giving or implying judgment of quality
- focuses on feedback that can help the assessee improve
- focuses on characteristics of the performance, not the performer.

Let’s consider how judging quality affects the behavior of students, faculty and the institution:

1. **Student behavior**

   When the instructor returns a paper to a student with comments and a grade
   - over 50% of the students will look at the grade and never look at the comments
   - about 35% will look at their paper for mistakes (rather than for comments that would help them do better next time)
   - 15% of the students believe the grade does not reflect how much they studied, or how much they thought they knew and
   - only 5% actually analyze the feedback in order to help them improve.
2. **Faculty behavior.**

When faculty receive the results of a course evaluation most get agitated and file the evaluations away, never taking advantage of potentially useful input. We need to turn the process into an assessment report instead.

3. **Institutional behavior.**

Site teams visit; accreditation reports are made; self-study reports are generated. Then the institutions, like the individuals who populate them, put the reports away. A great deal of effort has been spent on this, with nothing gained by the institution.

Another way to view this is to ask: who benefits? The answer is that the *assessee benefits from assessment; external stake-holders benefit from evaluation*. Unfortunately, we have a culture of evaluation rather than assessment: we, the instructors, need to turn this around, and focus on assessment.

**The SII (Strengths, Improvements, and Insights) Assessment Reporting Method**

Assessment results are most likely to generate action when they are concisely stated, supported by evidence, and delivered in a positive manner. The SII assessment reporting method accomplishes this via a three step procedure:

**Step 1. Strengths of the performance.**

Three strengths should be identified that are positive and affirming and address what was valuable in the performance.
Step 2. Areas for Improvements.

Three improvements, or changes should be suggested. These should include specific information for how the improvements might be made (an action plan). Areas for improvement should be clear, evidence based, and helpful.

Step 3. Important Insights.

Report what was learned from the assessment process. Although this is the most difficult step, it is also the most important, because both the assessee and the assessor will learn from a strong assessment.

The advantages of the SSI method were made clear to the audience in the third session of the seminar when it was applied to three faculty presentations (see page 15).

Assessment Methodology

Conducting an assessment consists of four steps.

1) Develop guidelines that define the purpose of the performance to be undertaken
2) Design the approach to be used
3) Collect and analyze data
4) Report the findings

The goal is to share information at all levels of the institution. The key to the effectiveness of assessment for the institution is alignment: to have the assessments conducted at each level inform the next higher level of the institution.

Accrediting bodies look at the assessment process at institutions using the following criteria:

- Are the members of the institution in control of quality improvement in their culture?
• Is the strategic plan inclusive?
• Are there clear targets? Measures?
• Is there systematic assessment at each level?
• Does feedback get rolled into operational planning?
• Do those operational plans align with the strategic plan?
• Finally, do operators in the culture believe in what they are doing?

Conducting true assessments will automatically lead to the institution’s meeting most of these criteria.

Part II. Synopsis of Audience Responses to Critical Thinking Questions.

The audience broke into small groups to discuss critical thinking questions relevant to the assessment process. When the audience reconvened, a spokesperson from each group shared discoveries their group had made in response to two of the questions. Following is a list of the key points that were made.

Critical Thinking Question 1.

Why does an assessor need to know the purpose of the performance before setting up an assessment with the assessee?

Discoveries Relating to Question 1:

• You can’t assess without a goal; goals lead to greater creativity/academic freedom.
• Assessment without using criteria cannot lead to improvement.
• Feedback really needs to include area(s) for improvement for it to be valuable.
• Performance is defined as what we are trying to teach or assess.
• If we can see what we want to do (our purpose) we can develop performance criteria for it; then we can create appropriate performance measures.

• If we share dialogue performance improves.

**Critical Thinking Question 2.**

An assessor must have many talents including knowledge of the content area to be assessed, good observation skills, and a desire for objectivity. Which of these do you think is the most important when assessing at the classroom level? The program level? Why?

**Discoveries Relating to Question 2:**

• All three talents are essential or the process is a waste of time.

• As you shift from being subjective to objective the quality of assessment will increase.

• From a teaching point of view objectivity is most important for an effective assessment.

• Content knowledge is less important and objectivity is more important—and more difficult—at the program level.

**General discoveries:**

• Evaluation compromises the value of assessment.

• So for evaluation or assessment to be effective they should be separated in time.

• Assessment involves constructive criticism.

• Part of the assessment process is in fact to learn to appreciate constructive criticism.

• Some people are resistant to the assessment philosophy because constructive criticism is not a positive thing in our culture.

• But improvement doesn't have negative connation.

• A common misconception is that assessment aims for remediation.

• If we turn evaluation into assessment the assessee will be empowered.
• The assessment process really needs to be set up as a shared process.

• Both the assessee and assessor need to be motivated and committed for the process to be effective. Both must want to do it.

• Thus, in an assessment culture, collaboration increases.

• Imagine the power at the course level if a standard rubric is used across a course.

• It would be especially powerful if one could come up with a consistent set of transferrable rubrics that could be employed across disciplines in order to share data effectively.

• The assessment process should let people know that they can be stars.

[Note that time constraints prevented the following two critical thinking questions from being discussed at the seminar, but as they are truly thought-provoking, they are presented below:

3. Although both assessment and evaluation depend upon criteria and measures, it is rarely a good idea to intentionally mix them.

4. “An individual who pursues continuous improvements finds value in re-casting evaluation feedback as assessment”. Is this possible? How would it work?]
Dr Apple’s goal for this session was to teach participants the content of the NCC Fact Sheet on Assessment (Appendix I). The Fact sheet is the product of a group effort between Dr. Apple and members of the Annual Assessment Symposium Committee, to create a single sheet containing the essential components of assessment. Dr. Apple enjoined the seminar’s participants to find five individuals from five different contexts and take thirty minutes to teach them about the content of the fact sheet.

First and foremost, the institution must have a shared vision and the institution must agree on shared values. This allows the institution to develop strategic objectives. However, shared values do not mean that common concrete steps should be implemented institution-wide. Such steps are not practical. They become ossified and meaningless.

The audience broke up into small groups to discuss the information on the Fact Sheet, and spokespersons for each group shared their discoveries about it with the entire audience. They also raised questions that emerged about assessment that were not answered during Dr. Apple’s presentation.

Some of the audience’s discoveries were:

- Standards imply a limit. Once you reach that limit, learning is done. But if you remove the standard, growth can be limitless. Dr. Apple pointed out the difference between criteria and standards: criteria are areas of quality; a standard is a level of quality.

- Collaboration and shared practices are very important.

- Assessment and judgment are different processes.

- It is important to self-assess rather than self-evaluate—it is hard to get beat up and listen objectively to information coming from an assessment.
Some of the audience’s questions were:

- **How do you get past all the egos?**
  
  Dr Apple’s answer: Convey to faculty and other members of the institution how assessment can lower their anxieties and decrease their workload.

- **How can an instructor have a collaborative approach when trying to impart information to the student?**
  
  Dr. Apple suggested asking students what they wanted to learn from the course, perhaps implementing “free writing” at the beginning of the term. Also, one could conduct a “midterm assessment” using the following four questions:

  1) What’s the best part of the course?
  2) What have you learned so far?
  3) How could the course be improved?
  4) What would you like to learn?

  Then change three things based on the feedback. And tell the students about the changes! Keep in mind that if student feedback *evaluates*, we should disregard it (just as students disregard their evaluations). Let’s elevate the process from the fray of evaluation and turn it into assessment feedback.

- **How does an instructor include all the students in the process without crushing them?**
  
  Dr Apple said there were at least two things we could do:

  First, give everybody roles (and rotate them). The less social individual can be placed in the role of reflector, the one who assesses the group’s performance internally (then the instructor will assess that reflector’s assessment, and so on).
Second, stop doing things for the learners. Allow them to do things for themselves and they will all become stars.

Next Dr. Apple described “peer coaching”, which, if conducted properly, can provide extremely useful feedback to an instructor. Peer coaching typically is a one-time opportunity during the semester that requires relatively little effort (perhaps four hours). He suggested that an instructor can meet with a peer before class and outline two or three focus areas to be assessed in the class. (In contrast, mentoring is a sustained effort that continues until the outcome goals have been met. It generally requires a greater level of commitment).

To break down the sense of fear associated with being evaluated in the peer-coaching process, Dr. Apple suggested starting with someone the instructor knows and trusts; then the instructor can approach an “enemy”—someone whose responses s/he may not be able to anticipate. This process strengthens all relationships; it is community building; and, most importantly, Dr. Apple has discovered that bad outcomes lead to big growth spurts. In short, self-evaluation is destructive, but self-assessment leads to empowerment.
Session III: ASSESSING FOR BEST PRACTICES

This session was developed by Dr Apple at the request of the Academic Senate Assessment Committee, which felt it would be very helpful to spend some time actually employing best practices of assessment. In this session, Dr. Apple demonstrated how to apply the SII (Strength-Improvement-Insights) to faculty best practices assessments. As an example, the following is Professor Smith’s presentation, followed by the strengths, areas for improvement, and insights that the audience, guided by Dr. Apple, was able to identify in her excellent assessment paradigm.

Best Practices Presentation

“Assessing Student Progress in the Career Development Process”

Jennifer Kelly Smith

The Department of Student Personnel Services is unique to the other academic departments. We provide student services which are not assessed the same way as academic progress. Typically service delivery is individual to a student, confidential, extends beyond a semester and grades are not appropriate. It has been a challenge to create assessment tools that clearly illustrate a student’s personal and social development as a result of services delivered by the SPS units.

In the Career Counseling unit we are piloting a “Contract for Services” with students seeking individual career counseling. The Contract for Services is a form that is shared with students to receive their collaboration and feedback about the Career Development Process. The Career Development Process is illustrated in a rubric type
format. The process includes four categories: Build Self Awareness, Interpretation, Research and Decision Making. The categories include steps to be completed by the student. Appointment dates, in progress and completion dates mark student progress through the process. Together student and counselor can identify strengths and areas where support is needed.

The following STRENGTHS of Professor Smith’s best practice were recognized by the audience:

- The rubric is an individualized, formal contract between the student and the assessor.
- Professor Smith puts her discipline in context.
- The presentation shows Professor Smith’s willingness to work through assessment and keep at it.
- The assessment can be adapted to students at various stages of performance.
- Editing is incorporated into the process.
- The assessment is built on self-assessment.
- The rubric is based on individual counseling.
- There are many steps, but the assessment will be very effective because
  - they are action steps;
  - the steps are based on self-awareness;
  - the process requires dates of progress
- This is a great improvement over “did the student do what they should?” Furthermore, since it is a process, it should be useful throughout their lives!
The following AREAS for IMPROVEMENT were suggested:

- The nature of the research employed in this process should be described, and perhaps included as part of the assessment.
- How the milestones are derived should be spelled out.
- The rubric should be clarified-expanded by adding specific criteria to every step in order to determine where the student is along the assessment.
- The rubric may be too linear; don't make it so structured that it can't have many iterations.
- The student should see the rubric in all its detail, both at the beginning and as it plays out.
- How will the student’s start point and end goals be identified?
  - Dr. Apple suggested that a self-growth paper might be developed collaboratively.
- The assessor should be sure that the students are collaborating in identifying the milestones along the way.

The following INSIGHTS were realized:

- Different disciplines are distinct, and so require special assessment tools.
- But the basic model of assessment applies to an array of non-classroom activities.
- We must make sure that the results of our assessments can be understood by the students being assessed.
- We must make sure that the results of our assessments can be understood by other disciplines.

Dr Apple then described his OVERALL CONCLUSIONS, or “assessment of the assessment”:
the strengths were right on target; the main area of improvement is to add action plans to the assessment; the insights realized by the audience show that this culture is ready for a major change.
Salient Points to Take Away with Us from the Day’s Work

- We cannot assess without goals; goals allow for greater creativity/academic freedom.
- Failure is a basis, a point of departure, from which to succeed.
- The process should start with a shared vision, a shared set of institutional values; otherwise assessment will have no meaning. Strategic objectives will flow from that common vision.
- Standards imply a limit, but that is not what we want. Remove the limit and growth and improvement can be endless.
- The difference between criteria and standards is that a criterion is an area of quality while a standard is a level of quality.
- Sharing best practices elevates our assessment practices and student improvement even more.
Appendix I

The Nassau Community College Fact Sheet on Assessment
Nassau Community College Fact Sheet on Assessment

EVALUATION: a process whereby one judges a performance against a standard. The outcome is a grade or rating on a continuum between success and failure.

ASSESSMENT: an evidence-based process whereby one determines the quality of a performance with feedback about the performance (not the performer!) given with the sole intention of helping improve future performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Assessment</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Assessment</td>
<td>Self (inward)</td>
<td>Assess to improve what I can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Another (outward)</td>
<td>Assess to improve what you can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Coaching (for faculty)</td>
<td>Each other (mutual)</td>
<td>Assess to improve what we each can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental/Institutional Assessment</td>
<td>Us (group)</td>
<td>Assess together to improve what we all can do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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SII ASSESSMENT

STRENGTHS of the performance
This part of the assessment should be positive and affirming and address what was valuable in the performance (aim for 3 strengths).

Areas for IMPROVEMENT
This part of the assessment should also include specific information for how the improvements might be made (an action plan). Areas for Improvement should be clear, evidence-based, and helpful (aim for 3 improvements).

Important INSIGHTS
These should be shared because a strong assessor always learns from performing an assessment.

WHAT MAKES ASSESSMENT EFFECTIVE?
- Precise language
- No discounting or use of qualifiers (e.g., “It was a strong performance BUT...”)
- Feasible/achievable action plans
- Sharing strengths before areas for improvement
- Interactivity
- Focus on the assese (what he/she needs, not what the assessor wants)
- Use of the assese’s values
- Understanding that it can improve even strong performances

Assessment should not be imposed on a performer and must never be adversarial or it will not work. It is a collaborative activity where both assessor and performer work toward the goal of improved performance. Think respect, openness, cooperation, and sensitivity.

Assessment is the “engine” that drives ongoing improvement in outcomes across different educational processes.

Performance
Goal Setting
Assessment
Quality
Performance
Goal Setting
Assessment can strengthen and improve collaborating, designing, facilitating, growing, leading, learning, mentoring, planning, problem-solving, researching, and teaching.
Top 3 Strategies for Using Assessment to Elevate Performance

1. Assessing models and exemplars helps raise the quality bar on future student performances.
2. Practicing peer assessment improves self-assessment (increased objectivity, decreased judgment).
3. Assessment must be adapted to the performer, performance, & context of performance, in order to achieve greatest value.

Focus 1: Students perform self-assessments and learn to assess the performance of others’ work products. Self-Assessment is the “engine” that drives self-growth.

Focus 2: Faculty perform self-assessments (increasing their own growth) and assess the performance of peers for mutual benefit.

Focus 3: Faculty teach the practice of assessment and model it by regularly assessing student performance, helping students learn to assess performance, and openly inviting students to assess faculty performance. Assessment should not be an “add-on” but built into the design of the course and learning activities. Assessment at the classroom level should reinforce and build on the self-assessment of both students and faculty.

Focus 4: Assess regularly, revisit goals, use professional growth development plans to aid the growth of all. Assessment of department or program-level must align with assessment at the classroom level (performance criteria should be mutually reinforced).

Focus 5: Regular assessments require an institution to measure, analyze, and document quality and provide action plans for making future improvements. Institutions which are dedicated to the culture and values of assessment also tend to demonstrate:

- Improved collaboration, increased understanding across programs and departments,
- A willingness to learn from self and others (internal and external models),
- Sharing of best practices,
- Expanded resources for professional development,
- An attitude of shared commitment to growth & improvement

Assessment ensures consistent work toward the performance descriptions defined by each level of an institution. Consider the Daily Classroom level: At this level, performance is defined by Performance Criteria and Rubrics. If assessment here is to support Course-level assessment, there must be alignment between the Performance Criteria of classroom tasks and the Long-term Behaviors of the course. There must be similar alignment between the Rubrics applied to daily classroom tasks and the Performance Tasks and Measures of the Course.

In this way, assessment at every level of an educational institution can positively support assessment at a more comprehensive level.

This means that when the Performance Description and Measurement methods are aligned, improvement in a daily class leads to improvement in a course. And improvement in a course leads to improvement in a program, and so on.