

Assessment Changes Everything

When I served on college admissions committees in the 1990s, a phrase that kept coming up was “the best students,” in comments like “We’ve got to get the best students” or “Rival College X down the road is beating us out for the best students.” I came to think of the mentality behind these comments as the Best-Student Fetish, a symptom of the increasingly obsessive competition among colleges for the cream of the high school senior crop. The more I thought about the Best-Student Fetish, the more perverse its logic seemed: it is as if the ultimate dream of college admissions is to recruit a student body that is already so well educated that it hardly needs any instruction! Sitting in admissions committee meetings, it was all I could do not to ask, “Hey, why don’t we recruit *bad* students and see if we can actually teach them something?”

The experience helped me realize that, despite our undoubtedly sincere efforts to make higher education democratic, the top colleges and universities and their wannabe imitators are still set up for the students who are *already* the best educated rather than for the struggling majority that needs us most. Perhaps we got so used to the split between intellectual haves and have-nots among undergraduates that we concluded that it’s inevitable and there’s nothing we can do about it. This would explain why, in the hundreds of faculty meetings I must have attended in my forty-plus years of teaching, I have never heard anyone ask how our department or college was doing at educating all its students.

That’s why I’ve become a believer in the potential of learning outcomes assessment, which challenges the elitism of the Best-Student Fetish by asking us to articulate what we expect our students to learn—all of them, not just the high-achieving few—and then holds us accountable for helping them learn it.¹ Whereas the Best-Student Fetish asks who the great students are before we see them, outcomes assessment changes the question to what students can do as a result of seeing us.²

Furthermore, once we start asking whether our students are learning what we want them to learn, we realize pretty quickly that making this happen is necessarily a team effort, requiring us to think about our teaching not in isolation but in relation to that of our colleagues. The problem is not that we don’t value good teaching, as our critics still often charge, but that we often share our culture’s romanticized picture of teaching as a virtuosic performance by soloists, as seen in films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers*. According to this individualist conception of teaching—call it the Great-Teacher Fetish, the counterpart of the Best-Student Fetish—good education simply equals good teaching. This equation is pervasive in current discussions of school reform, where it is taken as a given that the main factor in improving schooling is recruiting more good teachers.

In fact, this way of thinking is a recipe for bad education. According to Richard F. Elmore’s research on primary and secondary education, in failing schools the governing philosophy is often, Find the most talented teachers and liberate them “from the bonds of bureaucracy,” which are often seen as infringements on academic freedom (6). (In the movies, the great teacher always works her classroom magic against the background of an inept, venal, or corrupt school bureaucracy.)³ Elmore reports that the pattern of teachers “working in isolated classrooms” is common in unsuccessful schools, where everything depends on

the teachers’ individual talents “with little guidance or support from the organizations that surround them” (2).⁴ Conversely, as Elmore argues, successful schools tend to stress cooperation among teachers over individual teaching brilliance, though cooperation itself enhances individual teaching.

For all its obvious value, excellent teaching in itself doesn’t guarantee good education. The courses taken in a semester by a high school or college student may all be wonderfully well taught by whatever criterion we want to use, but if the content of the courses is unrelated or contradictory, the educational effect can be incoherence and confusion. As students in today’s intellectually diverse university go from course to course, they are inevitably exposed to starkly mixed messages (on the “mixed-message curriculum,” see Graff, *Clueless* 62–80). Though this exposure is often energizing for the high achievers who possess some already developed skill at synthesizing clashing ideas and turning them into coherent conversations, the struggling majority typically resort to giving successive instructors whatever they seem to want even if it is contradictory. Giving instructors what they want (assuming students can figure out what that is) replaces internalizing the norms of the intellectual community—that is, education.

The freedom that is granted us in higher education (at least at high-end and middle-rank institutions) to teach our courses as we please should have always carried an obligation to correlate and align our courses to prevent students from being bombarded with confusing disjunctions and mixed messages. Outcomes assessment holds us to that obligation by making us operate not as classroom divas and *prima donnas* but as team players who collaborate with our colleagues to produce a genuine program. We all use the P-word glibly, as in “our writing program” or “our literature program,” but we have not earned the right to the word if it denotes only a collection of isolated courses, however individually excellent each may be.

By bringing us out from behind the walls of our classrooms, outcomes assessment deprivatizes teaching, making it not only less of a solo performance but more of a public activity. To be sure, with such increased public visibility may come greater vulnerability: though it is students whose learning is evaluated in outcomes assessment, it is ultimately the faculty whose performance is put in the spotlight. If we have nothing to hide, however, then less secrecy and greater transparency in our classroom practices should work in our favor. At a time when attracting greater financial support for higher education increasingly depends on our ability to demonstrate the value of our work to wider publics, anything that makes teaching more visible and less of a black box figures to be in our interest. Giving teaching a more public face should help humanists doing cutting-edge work refute the widespread stereotype of them as tenured radicals who rule over their classes with iron fists. But it should also help humanists more generally to clarify to a wider public the critical reading and thinking competencies we stand for and to show that those competencies are indispensable enough to the workplace and democratic citizenship to merit greater investment.

But of course the critics of outcomes assessment are far less sanguine than I am in the face of the conservative politics they see driving it. In a talk delivered at our MLA “Outcomes

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Assessment" session, Michael Bennett, presenting what he called "the radical take on learning outcomes assessment," said this position "can be summarized in one word: resist!" Bennett argued that the push for outcomes assessment must be seen in the context of the increasing privatization of higher education, the co-optation of accreditation by the for-profit educational sector, and the attempt to force colleges to accept a version of the No Child Left Behind law in the schools. As Bennett put it:

I see the focus on outcomes assessment as a dodge from the real problems with the American educational system: that it is embedded in an inequitable and violent socioeconomic system. The kind of policies that would truly help the students with whom I work are not more hearings, campus visits, and testing but adequate funding for secondary education; child care; a living wage; debt relief or, better yet, free universal postsecondary education; an adequately compensated academic workforce exercising free inquiry and building an educational community; and universal health care.

Bennett is certainly right that many of the problems of American education—including the so-called achievement gap between students from rich and poor backgrounds—are rooted in economic inequality and that more adequate funding and social services would do much to alleviate these problems. But to see outcomes assessment as merely a conservative dodge designed to distract everyone from structural inequality ignores the ways our own pedagogical and curricular practices contribute to the achievement gap. Though it calls itself "radical," this view is remarkably complacent in its suggestion that nothing in our house needs to change.

Though Bennett and other critics believe that assessment is an invention of recent conservatives that is being imposed on education from the outside, the truth is that assessment originated from within the educational community itself in the early 1990s, well before conservative efforts to co-opt it. I recall attending my first assessment conference in 1991 and noting the considerable buzz about assessment at meetings of organizations like the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The original motivations of assessment lie in legitimate progressive efforts to reform higher education from within, by judging colleges according to what their students learn rather than by their elite pedigrees.

But outcomes assessment *can* be used in undemocratic ways, and educators do need to take Bennett's concerns seriously. We should scrutinize the standards used in assessment, how these standards are determined and applied (and with what degree of input from faculties), and how assessment results are used.⁵ Rather than reject assessment and circle the wagons, however, we should actively involve ourselves in the process, not only to shape and direct it as much as possible but to avoid ceding it by default to those who would misuse it. Had we been assessing outcomes all along in the normal course of our work, I doubt that the legislators and privatizers could have rushed in to fill the vacuum we created.

As David Bartholomae observes, "We make a huge mistake if we don't try to articulate more publicly what it is we value in intellectual work. We do this routinely for our students—so it should not be difficult to find the language we need to speak to parents and legislators." If we do not try to find that public language but argue instead that we are not accountable to those

parents and legislators, we will only confirm what our cynical detractors say about us, that our real aim is to keep the secrets of our intellectual club to ourselves.⁶ By asking us to spell out those secrets and measuring our success in opening them to all, outcomes assessment helps make democratic education a reality.

Gerald Graff

NOTES

The President's Column also appears on the MLA Web site, and members are invited to comment online. This essay is based on a talk presented at the 2007 MLA convention session "Outcomes Assessment: Problems and Perspectives."

1. In a comment similar to those I've heard from many faculty members and administrators, Laura Rosenthal, a fellow speaker at the MLA convention session in which I gave a version of these remarks, described an outcomes assessment meeting on her campus at the University of Maryland, College Park, in which her colleagues asked the very question I have yet to hear: "Much of the meeting," she writes, "was devoted to a discussion of whether or not our students were learning what we wanted them to learn. Imagine that! Truly a first in my experience." The fact that leadership in outcomes assessment comes from state universities and community colleges rather than from the high-prestige elites is another indication of the democratic character of the movement.

2. In the words of Gregory Clark, associate dean of humanities at Brigham Young University, "Learning outcomes assessment forces us out of ourselves, shifting our attention from what we as teachers do—to what our students actually learn." I want to thank Clark for suggesting many of the arguments in this essay.

3. This stereotypical contrast in films set in academia between heroic teachers and obstructionist bureaucrats is trenchantly analyzed by Steve Benton.

4. Arguing along lines similar to Elmore's, my colleague Steven E. Tozer, who directs a program for school principals in the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago (and who brought my attention to Elmore's work), argues that training effective principals, who in turn create a collaborative culture in their schools, does more to transform schools than training any number of good teachers, though again good school leadership itself helps make teachers better.

5. For an argument on how assessment standards should be formulated and even standardized, see Birkenstein-Graff and Graff.

6. For an analysis of how colleges and universities hide their intellectual secrets from students and other citizens, see Graff, *Clueless in Academe* and "Our Undemocratic Curriculum."

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