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Student Learning Enhancement: How Mentors Can Eliminate the Mystery of Assessment

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Identified mentors can be the catalyst for implementing assessment. Even experienced faculty in higher education find that assessment suggests program evaluation. Traditionally, identified specialists oversee the assessment process for the entire institution, although individual programs are responsible for submitting data. Mentors can assist the faculty in differentiating between grading and assessment. Although assessment may be synonymous with evaluation, the process is linked more to the quality and success of instruction. In the 1980s, when first introduced and embraced by institutions, assessment tended to be distasteful to faculty members (Ewell, 2009). In the twenty-first century, assessment continues to be modified and integrated into instructional settings to bring change and improvement. Mentors can help faculty to accomplish this process.

Keywords: Mentors, assessment, success of instruction, change

Introduction

The so-called assessment movement, as stated, began in the early to mid-1980s. It was " stimulated by a combination of curriculum reform reports that called for greater curricular coherence, the use of powerful pedagogies known to be associated with high learning gains, and knowledge about student outcomes and experiences" (Ewell, 2009).

Assessment is frequently categorized as either improvement or accountability. In most cases, assessment is driven by institutional mandates focused more on accountability, although improvement is undoubtedly intended to be embedded in the process. Models of assessment emanated from the desire and necessity to legitimize success and excellence. Sadly, trends toward assessment were driven by a need to justify financial support for programs by federal and state governments, governing boards, and alumni.

Unfortunately, effective assessment was slow to be implemented in many institutions for several reasons, including a lack of parameters, consistency among the partners, and faculty rebellion (Ewell, 1987). During the past 40-plus years, institutional assessment has become a somewhat standardized process, although with unique approaches. Of interest is the idea: "Institutional accreditation in American higher education is situated at the nexus of educational practice, institutional integrity, and governmental decision making, and is often a polarizing issue in and of itself" (Busby et al.).

Literature Review

Collaboration and transparency have been touted in the success of institutional assessment among higher education institutions (Robinson et al., 2017). Accreditation mentors can establish transparency and collaboration to negate the myths and mysteries associated with assessment. Abundant research studies and articles discuss the assessment of mentors. Those, however, that detail how a mentor can facilitate faculty in the assessment of student learning have not been located. With the involvement and support of experienced mentors, faculty may feel competent and confident in their approach to assessment.

Assessment has been touted as a process for instructional improvement, implying that more learning at a high level can be accomplished to achieve excellence. Although not documented, assessment in individualized courses or projects is not commonplace. For that reason, this project has focused on how mentors can effectively encourage the implementation of assessment into coursework and project requirements through a straightforward, uncomplicated approach.

Ewell (2009) suggested four guiding principles for responding to calls for accountability that preserve and develop institutional capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement. Approaching Ewell's ideas in reverse order is a suggested process of assessment to enhance student learning:

- Embed assessment into the regular curriculum.
- Emphasize the transition points.
- Show action on the assessment results.
- Respond visibly to domains of legitimate concern. (Ewell, 2009)

Rather than continuing with assessments that are overly complex and unwieldy, this document aims to provide a replicable model that can help mentors simplify the assessment process. Although experts in assessment might dismiss the idea of streamlining the process, the approach outlined

in this article is intended to encourage mentors to abandon myths and demystify assessment for faculty thus allowing them to focus on enhancing student learning.

Project

To restate, assessment is intended to be a measure of student success. Yet approaches to assessment in courses and programs can be daunting and off-putting to faculty. As stated, complexity, in many instances, delays the implementation of assessment not only in institutions but also in courses and programs. Even after the first quarter of the twenty-first century, most courses in higher education curricula do not include assessment methods. The most challenging obstacle to overcome for faculty is the idea that assessment is not tied to grades.

Grading and assessment, while related, have distinct purposes. Grading focuses on assigning a letter or numerical score to summarize student performance, often at the end of a unit or course. In contrast, assessment is an ongoing process of evaluating student learning to provide feedback and support student progress. Grading tends to be primarily for administrative purposes, reporting, and record-keeping. Assessment aims to improve learning and inform teaching practices (Eberly Center, 2025). To reiterate, the purpose of this document is to provide support to mentors who can present to faculty a workable approach to assessment that can be implemented into individual courses and programs.

Notably, the initial statement in the process of student learning enhancement is the well-known student learning outcome (SLO). Instead of remaining centered on SLOs, generations of students have been evaluated based on goals, objectives, or strategies. Confusion regarding assessment terminology persists. Goals are typically long-term, usually broad, and frequently aspirational, in contrast to objectives that are specific, often short-term, measurable, and are actionable steps that might be employed to reach a goal. Strategies refer to the type of instruction that focuses on how an instructor fosters student engagement, which promotes a more in-depth type of learning. The intention is to engage in critical thinking, develop problem-solving skills, and implement collaborative learning environments. Strategies were a popular approach when individual learning styles and experiential learning were the primary focuses of instruction. Student learning outcomes initiate the learning process and are directly aligned with course objectives, subsumed under overarching goals, and supported by employing teaching strategies.

Methods

Courses and programs proposed decades ago may not include well-stated or updated student learning outcomes (SLOs). SLOs should be "clearly worded, prominently posted, updated regularly, and receptive to feedback" (NIOLA, 2017). Many course proposals did not include SLOs when they were approved during a time when other ideas and terminologies were in vogue. Therefore, the first component of the assessment process is to provide an initial, updated summary statement of the comprehensive SLO.

Student Learning Outcome

An example might be, Communication of Scholarship, followed by a statement of what the student is expected to learn: The student can communicate ideas, methodology, analyses, and interpretation in a written document and an oral presentation.

Measure

The next step in the process is to present a well-developed, specific direct measure. The measure is the point at which the SLO is detailed in an assignment, project, or practicum and presents basic information needed to accomplish the SLO. An example of a statement follows: A project encompassing a selected topic in the major field of study, including a stated thesis, purpose, and a review of related research in a scholarly document and disseminated in a public presentation.

Rubrics

Rubrics are created in the subject area to address the measure at varying performance levels. Brookhart (2018) reviewed studies of rubrics in higher education and learned that all studies described positive outcomes for rubric use. Most importantly, rubrics must be clearly stated and relevant. A vital step frequently ignored is the sharing of rubrics with students at the point of assignment. When students can view the SLO, the measure, and the rubrics, they tend to understand the task and expectations (Winstone & Carless, 2020). Rubrics can be extensive, more comprehensive, or stated fairly simply, as in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Example of Rubrics

Does not meet expectations:
The document and presentation demonstrate only surface understanding of scholarly research, writing, and communication. (1 point)
Approaches expectations:
The document and presentation demonstrate a basic understanding of scholarly research, writing, and communication. (2 points)
Meets expectations:
The document and presentation demonstrate an adequate understanding of scholarly research, writing, and communication. (3 points)
Exceeds expectations:
The document and presentation demonstrate an advanced understanding of scholarly research, writing, and communication, incorporating innovation and sophistication. (4 points)

Target

The target is set to determine the overall success of the assignment. The target indicates the success of a group of individuals who complete the task and provides the instructor with an indication of the effectiveness of the assignment. The target is set at a percentage determined at the point of assignment (Finney & Biscotte, 2023). The target, however, should not be arbitrary but based on reasonable expectations. Students typically will not see the target since it will appear later in the analysis and findings. An example of a target is: 80% of the students completing the project will score a three or higher based on a 4-point rubric scale.

Aggregation of the Data

The most effective assessment occurs ideally when three persons submit the rubrics. The evidence of the assignment's success is examined by aggregating the data (the compilation of scores based on rubric scores). An example of the assignment of the averaged rubrics is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.
Example of Aggregated Data

SLO - Communication of Scholarship					
	1	2	3	4	Total
Number	0	10	10	6	26
Percentage	0%	38%	38%	23%	100%

Findings

The findings are a summary of the aggregated data when compared to the stated target. Typically, the findings begin with a restatement of the SLO, followed by evidence presented in the submitted rubrics' aggregation. Then the data and target are compared. An example of findings follows in Figure 3:

Figure 3.
Statement of Findings

Based on the "SLO—Communication of Scholarship"
10 students scored at a level of 2 (38%).
10 students were scored at 3 (38%).
6 students scored at 4 (23%).
Compared to the target of 80% (students will score at a level of 3 or 4),
only 61% met that expectation.
Therefore, the target was not met.

Dissemination

When the findings have been determined, the next step is disseminating the information. This includes sharing the findings and results with the appropriate stakeholders (Mosavel, Winship, Ferrell, LaRose, 2018). In some instances, faculty might be included, or if applicable, students could be included in the discussion. Discussion of the results with the constituents focuses on whether the target was met. Based on the previous example, half of the group scored at levels 3 and 4, those discussions might include:

- Those completing the assignment may not have been motivated or prepared for high-quality achievement.
- The expectations for the assignment were not presented clearly enough.
- The target was selected randomly and may be too high in terms of expectation.
- The rubrics stated may not have reflected the level expected in the assignment.
- Those submitting the rubrics may not have shared best practice interrater reliability calibration before submitting the ratings.
- Other relevant factors.

Action Plan

The next step in the assessment process is developing an action plan. Typically, it is a document that outlines the steps to address findings and improve performance. An action plan focuses on implementing changes that can also change and improve performance. Methods of developing action plans can be complex and complicated or stated simply and clearly. Action plans should reach beyond simply identifying issues but instead must provide concrete steps to address them. Most importantly, action plans must include some component to address improvement. Several ideas follow:

- Revisit the SLOs and consider restatement.
- Examine the measure in more specific detail and how it was set.
- Ensure student preparation, understanding of the assignment, and level of expectation.
- Review and revise the stated rubrics to ensure validity.
- Provide preparation of evaluators that establishes best interrater reliability before submitting the ratings,
- Change the targeted expectation to a more realistic level for the assignment.
- Ensure the accuracy of the aggregated data.

Closing the Loop

Although not an actual component in most assessment processes, closing the loop refers to how the current assessment is compared to previous findings. This usually occurs within a year. In other words, how has an action plan been implemented? Although this aspect of the process is rarely a component of the initial process or document, closing the loop determines how well the action plan has been implemented and if it has generated change and improvement. This process typically takes place when reviewing previous assessments by constituents who will revise or reinforce the next one upcoming.

Findings: Considerations for Mentors

The purpose of the project and document has been to provide mentors with a functional and less complicated approach to assessment. The assumption is that the mentor is experienced and understands the basic responsibilities and challenges required during the process. Moreover, the intent is for mentors to inspire faculty to utilize assessment in coursework rather than relying only on grades to determine student achievement and instructor success. Although the idea was first presented some 40-plus years ago, assessment has not been accepted or implemented in many courses and programs. For many faculty, implementing an assessment process may seem to be overly complicated and complex. The experienced mentor can provide understanding and instill confidence. Thus, many subscribe to the idea that only assessment experts and specialists can implement the process. Presented in a straightforward approach, his document is intended to dispel the myths and mysteries through mentorship so that anyone can implement the process. As the mentee becomes more comfortable with the process, understanding, enhancement, and innovation can occur.

An area of assessment that has traditionally been subjective, and indeed problematic, is within the arts: visual, music performance, theatre, and dance. Setting up assessment processes for evaluating art products and performances tends to be more quantitative and, therefore, more reliable (Chase, Ferguson & Hoey, 2014). An example of a Master of Music in Performance Skills Degree Recital Evaluation follows, beginning with the SLOs:

SLO 1: Graduating students in the MM Music Performance Program demonstrate entering-professional-level technical ability in performance applications according to the requisites of their specializations.

SLO 2: Graduating students in the MM Music Performance Program demonstrate entering professional-level understanding and capability with musical forms, processes, and structures in performance applications according to the requisites of their specializations.

SLO 3: Graduating students in the MM Music Performance Program demonstrate a basic understanding of historical awareness in performance applications according to the requisites of their specializations.

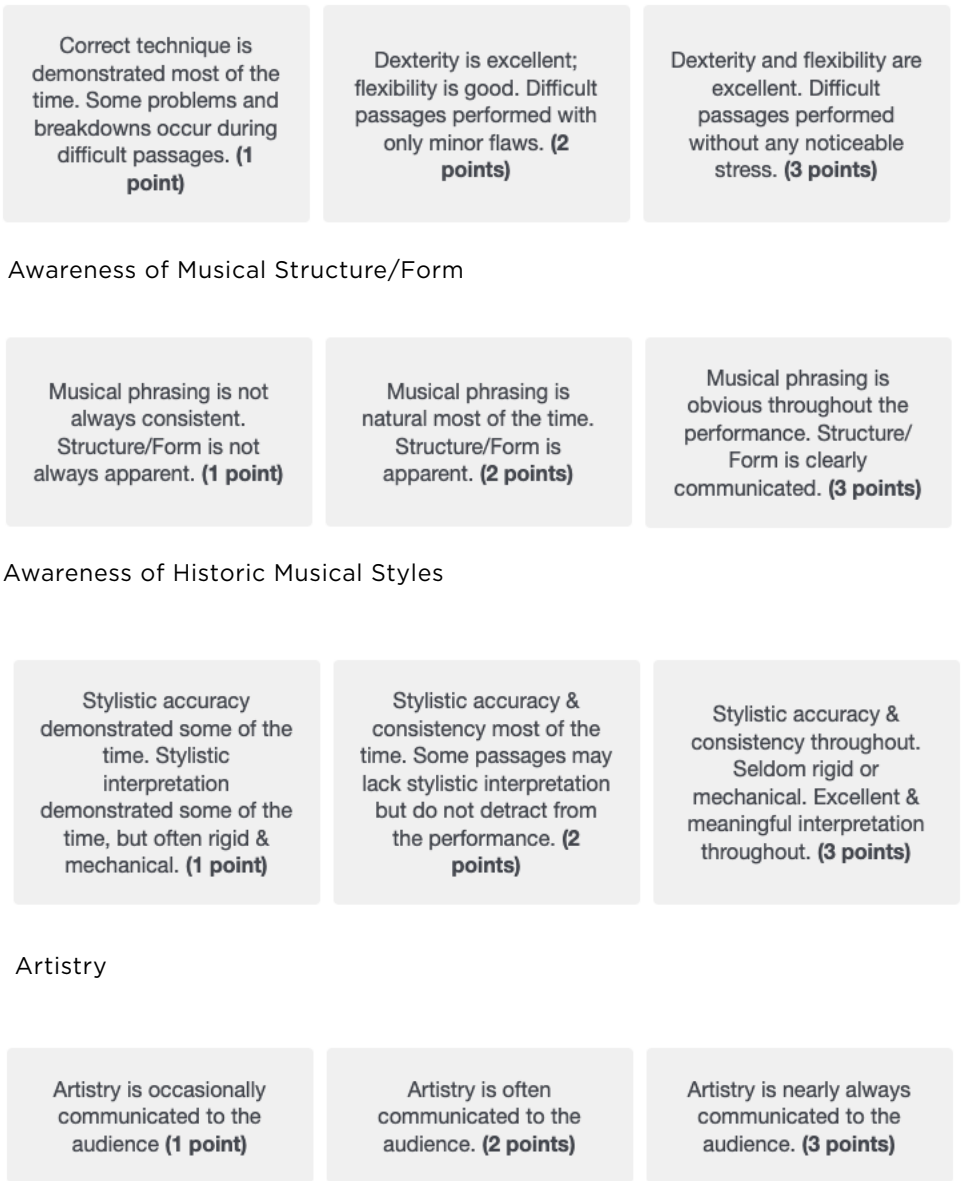
SLO 4: Graduating students in the MM Music Performance Program communicate clear

musical intentions and understanding at the entering professional level.

Evidence

Students perform a recital of a varied repertoire of no less than 50 minutes of music on their principal instrument or voice. This performance encompasses all student learning outcomes required for the program. The performance is evaluated by a jury of at least three faculty members, one month prior to the event and then again by the major professor at the actual event. The evaluation is based on the live recital.

Figure 4
Technical Skills requisite for artistic self-expression (including diction)



This example of assessment guided by an experienced mentor in the arts (music) can be implemented successfully and yield accurate evaluations.

One of the most challenging aspects of the assessment process is collecting, aggregating, and analyzing the data. Determining a method of submitting the rubrics can be a significant roadblock. This may require the assistance of an instructional technology consultant who can set up the process in an electronic system like Qualtrics.

Once the electronic form is submitted, it should be directed to a database that includes, aggregates, and saves the information. This system also ensures that no items are forgotten and allows consultation among the constituents. For those who do not have a means of using electronic methods, even printing paper ballots and tabulating the results by calculation can be just as effective in the process. Establishing a target, likewise, can be based on experience but should not be arbitrary. Then, when the data is compared to the expectations (target), a decision is made about student learning in terms of findings, and depending on the level of success, an action plan can be implemented

Conclusion

Although the steps towards a process of assessment may appear to be complex, setting up the initial components, the SLO and measure are already embedded in coursework. Determining the levels of quality should be specific and descriptive. Integrating assessment into coursework can be facilitated by a mentor who can help identify and familiarize evaluators with how to submit rubrics. More than one evaluator, preferably three, tends to enable the process to be more valid; Solutions, however, can be imagined. This study has been based on assessment in graduate-level classes, and often, graduate students themselves can be mentored to serve as trained evaluators while learning the process. The instructor must determine if this process can be accomplished in undergraduate work.

Certainly, this ABC-type approach to mentoring assessment will not be applicable to every instructional situation, nor is it immune to change. This approach is intended to be an initial step for mentors to help faculty members adopt assessment practices. Further study into how assessments affect and enhance student learning, as well as how mentors can facilitate implementation, is warranted.

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