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Philip I. Kramer

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, pkramer@csbsju.edu

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The Art of Making Assessment Anti-Venom:
Injecting Assessment in Small Doses to Create a Faculty Culture of Assessment

By

Philip I Kramer
Director for Academic Assessment and Assistant Professor
College of Saint Benedict, Saint Joseph, MN and
Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN

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Contact Information:

Dr. Philip I Kramer

(320) 363-5289

pkramer@csbsju.edu

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

37 College Avenue South, HAB 125

Saint Joseph, MN 56374

Introduction

This Table Topic discussion examines faculty resistance to student outcomes assessment in higher education and offers Forum participants a lively discussion on a technique that has proved useful in decreasing faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance to assessment. Many college faculty react to student outcomes assessment the way most of us react when we see a rattlesnake within striking distance--a threat is perceived and then a reaction to the threat occurs. Common faculty reactions to the perceived threat of assessment include metaphorically running away or throwing rocks or sticks at assessment and its messengers. The author suggests one way to address faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance to assessment is to create an antidote to adverse faculty reactions. The process of creating an antidote is analogous to the process used to create an antidote for venomous bites or stings, i.e., by receiving small doses of assessment over time, faculty may be able to build up their assessment immunity. Put another way, when assessment work is introduced to faculty in a way that is both collegial and collaborative, and “dosed” out in small, manageable amounts, all the while emphasizing the positive effects of assessment, faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance may be significantly reduced.

Some Reasons Why Faculty Resist Assessment

- Assessment is often perceived as a threat to academic integrity. Faculty may believe their academic integrity is being challenged, for example, when asked to provide evidence of student learning.
- Faculty may assume assessment is a threat to their autonomy as scholars and teachers. Assessment is often seen encroaching upon the sacrosanctity of faculty independence.
- Assessment often leads to an increase of institutional transparency. However, the move toward greater transparency (via assessment) is often perceived as conflicting with the belief held by some faculty that teaching, like research, is a semi-private activity.
- Faculty are extremely well trained in their respective disciplines. They are not, however, usually well trained in academic areas related to students outcomes assessment (e.g., evaluation, higher education policy and politics, quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, pedagogical and curricular design); consequently, faculty can feel inadequate or incapable of designing and conducting assessment, analyzing or understanding its results, or knowing how to make changes to pedagogy and curriculum.
- Most faculty fear they could be punished for the poor assessment results of their students.
- Faculty see assessment activities as uncompensated add-on responsibilities.
- Many faculty think assessment is part of an externally driven and mandated accountability movement (i.e., driven by parents, employers, the administration, the board, state government, federal government) and that those driving the accountability movement are really not interested in or do not understand how to improve educational quality. Indeed, the assessment-accountability movement in higher education is seen by many faculty as the higher education version of No Child Left Behind Act, that while a perhaps well-intentioned effort, has nonetheless devolved into setting minimum threshold requirements for students instead of agreeing upon and creating inspirational goals for college teaching and student learning.

Creating Faculty Immune Responses (Or, Finding Solutions for Faculty Resistance to Assessment)

The author has found that helping change resistant and hostile faculty attitudes toward assessment is best accomplished when assessment professionals meet with faculty, in an individual, departmental, or large group setting and attempt to find solutions to assessment related problems that are most meaningful to faculty. The challenge of the assessment professional is to demonstrate to faculty that assessment work is important work and will have a direct, positive affect on the teaching and learning process. This is the key--faculty must clearly understand the intrinsic value potential of assessment related activities. Furthermore, conversations between assessment professionals and faculty must be non-threatening, collegial, and collaborative and must respect the very busy lives of faculty members. The author's experience suggests that these small doses of assessment conversation, repeated over time, slowly build faculty members' immune response and to reduce faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance to assessment. Specifically, building faculty immune responses includes the following:

- Talk face-to-face with faculty who are confused by or concerned with assessment methodologies, scary idiomatic assessment-speak, and the thought of changing their pedagogy and curriculum, or the fear of being punished for the poor results of their students. Talk about the purposes of and the well-intentioned consequences for assessment.
- Speak to the strength of the faculty by emphasizing that one of the main purposes of assessment is the improvement of teaching and learning (i.e., improving pedagogy and curricula). This does not mean emphasizing accountability is unimportant. On the contrary, we all know accountability is important and that assessment and accountability are intertwined. But faculty know what they can and cannot do and knowing what their students learn is far easier to appreciate and to determine than it is to demonstrate that faculty are being accountable to institutional stakeholders. This simply boils down to emphasizing what is most meaningful to faculty; namely, demonstrating that our professors are teaching and that our students are learning.
- Get faculty involved in creating their own assessment instruments or selecting off-the-shelf, standardized assessment instruments. More than any other stakeholder group, faculty know the curriculum, curricular goals, course content, and how to appropriately measure student learning. Faculty are the best stakeholders to decide what is to be measured, to determine how it should be measured, and to appreciate what the results mean for their teaching and their students' learning.
- Use senior faculty in the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of assessment results; this adds legitimacy to the assessment process and the perception of the worth of conducting assessment on campus.
- Socialize brand-new and all tenure-track faculty in assessment policies and practices. Younger, tenure-track faculty obviously tend to be more motivated when asked to participate in assessment.
- Ask faculty to share their assessment challenges and successes with their colleagues. This is the very best kind of assessment related faculty development. Seeing a former recalcitrant faculty member explain to her colleagues how she not only negotiated

through the difficulties of implementing assessment but how she embraced its tangible rewards is a powerful antidote to faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance.

Creating Institutional Immune Responses (Or, What Institutions Can Do to Create a Healthy Assessment Culture)

While making anti-venom is critical should a victim receive a venomous bite or sting, it is also important, when venturing out in territory where one may encounter venomous animals, to create as safe an environment as possible to avoid being bitten in the first place. The point is to be perceptive enough and safe enough so that one is not bitten. Having institutions make decisions that effectively create a safe environment for faculty (as well as for other assessment stakeholders) where assessment may flourish is akin to taking individual precautions as a hiker in snake country. Institutions can substantially reduce or even avoid faculty fear of and avoidance and resistance toward assessment by taking some basic common sense precautions to protect faculty, thereby setting the stage for stockpiling healthy immune responses. Specifically, building institutional immune responses includes the following:

- Assessment should not be an exclusively or a mostly top-down directive. As previously mentioned, the faculty are the best purveyors of the curriculum. They are naturally positioned to take a significant leadership role in campus assessment activities. Conversely, neither should assessment be only or mostly a bottom-up approach. Assessment works best when faculty, staff, students, and administrators work collegially and collaboratively. Share control with the various stakeholders and make sure to give faculty more control over planning, designing, and implementing assessment and, concomitantly, improving teaching and learning.
- There should be no punitive consequences for assessment results; consider only celebrating and rewarding assessment activities and successes. Similarly, if there is strong resistance to assessment, contemplate disaggregating and disseminating assessment results only after faculty fear is mitigated. If your campus is new to assessment, give your campus some time to reflect on aggregated (i.e., less threatening) assessment results. Then, after faculty see assessment results are used to make improvements rather than to dole out punishments, they will be much more open to using disaggregated results at the individual course, department, and college or divisional levels.
- If assessment activities are new to a campus, do not immediately scale up assessment activities across the institution at once. Implementing assessment activities and institutionalizing a culture of assessment are best done in graduated steps. Consider, for example, whether conducting a few pilot assessment projects would first allow faculty to begin participating in assessment activities. The goal here is to alleviate faculty fear of assessment before scaling assessment up to the institutional level.
- Do not become too attached to using only off-the-shelf, norm-referenced, standardized assessment instruments. Use both standardized and homegrown assessment instruments (see next bullet). Assessment in many ways is similar to action research--the primary goal should not be to use (or create) methodologically perfect measures to determine whether student learning happens. Rather, the main goal should be to use assessment instruments to determine what students have learned. The point is to use this knowledge of student

learning to improve teaching and learning. Designing, conducting, and implementing assessment comes with certain compromises. One of those compromises may be that we need to live with assessment instruments and processes that are not methodologically perfect. This sacrifice (for the moment, at least) seems worth taking. Yes, it is a possible slippery slope; we are all aware of the current debate regarding evidence-based research. Nevertheless, demanding methodological perfection or near-perfection seems shortsighted and serves only to further alienate assessment stakeholders, particularly the faculty. At the possible expense of giving up some reliability, validity, or even causality, it seems reasonable to use an assessment instrument that is as methodologically defensible as possible, yet remains as related to measuring the course content being taught as possible. We may give up far more than we get if we rely too much on the current medical-model influenced trend in research design (appealing though it is) to use experimentally designed instruments.

- Use a mix of homegrown assessment instruments and standardized, off-the-shelf national assessment measures--many national tests measure only a portion of the curricula taught at a given institution. One efficient way to mix national and homegrown assessment is to customize the homegrown instruments and measure what national instruments do not assess. Use purchased off-the-shelf instruments and homegrown instruments complementarily.
- Consider using both criterion-referenced and norm-referenced assessment instruments in a complementary way, as well. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Used separately, they can lead to distorted perceptions about not only results but also the intent to evaluate student learning achievements. Used together, they can complement each other because criterion-referenced instruments tell a faculty what is happening within the walls of its own institution while norm-referenced instruments tell a faculty how their students compare to students at other institutions.
- Above all else, respect and reward the independence, integrity, and autonomy of faculty members by creating an intellectual atmosphere that encourages a positive assessment environment where faculty may participate, share, and grow as creators and consumers of student outcomes assessment.

Conclusion

During the past two years, the author has worked to strengthen the assessment immune system of faculty (and the institutions), primarily through helping faculty appreciate how assessment can be used as the primary tool to improve teaching and learning. The author has found that helping faculty plan, design, and implement assessment, helping them understand analyzed assessment data, and helping them reflect upon the results are activities that have been instrumental in mitigating faculty fear, avoidance, or resistance to assessment and laying the foundations for building a campus-wide culture of assessment. Similarly, the institutions have begun to realize the importance of providing faculty a safe, non-threatening, and supportive environment where assessment activities can flourish. The institutions are doing what they can to remove obvious assessment barriers, obstacles, and hazards, thereby reducing the faculty's fear of and resistance toward student outcomes assessment.

Philip I Kramer is the Director of Academic Assessment at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, two Catholic, undergraduate, residential liberal arts colleges in central Minnesota. His additional responsibilities include leading campus efforts in disciplinary program review and institutional accreditation. He is a native of the Southwest and has had (too) many close encounters with rattlesnakes, Gila Monsters, and other venomous animals.