



Commentary: Learning from the Evaluation of Assessment: How Faculty and Staff Can Use Results to Inform Practice¹

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Key Insight:

An ongoing evaluation of assessment results and practices can be useful to inform the development of effective programme approaches.

There are various reasons why those of us in higher education assess student learning. It may be done as assessment *for* or *of* learning, or other such distinctions, but a shared impetus for the work is that students advance their individual learning. Yet, students are not the only participants in assessment that can learn from the process or results. Through assessing student learning, a wide range of data and evidence on students and their learning are collected that can inform faculty and staff practices and processes such as teaching, learning, and curriculum design.

When thought of as a re-occurring cycle that promotes the use of evidence to inform practice, one might move through the following, cyclical steps:

- Plan and identify outcomes
- Collect data
- Analyze data
- Share results
- Identify and implement changes
- Evaluate impact of changes

On first review of the evaluation cycle, one might notice a close alignment to scholarship or inquiry in the process of engagement with evidence. The first two stages of planning and collecting data are completed mainly through the act of assessment activities: for example, collecting data on:

- programme assignment and examination grades;
- diversity, sequence and amount of assessment in a programme;
- common errors highlighted in feedback comments;
- opportunity for students to self-assessment and/or peer review in a programme; and
- number of failed questions within an assignment.

The following stages occur through discussion, deliberation, careful analysis and interpretation of results - and are ongoing. The last step before beginning the cycle of use again is acting on the evidence - implementing changes to learning design or teaching and examining the impact of the changes.

¹ This commentary was adapted from Kinzie, Hutchings & Jankowski (2015).



To focus upon a cyclical process of using evidence to inform learning design, assessment must provide actionable evidence on student learning and address faculty and staff questions of interest around student learning.

Undertaking assessment with a clear focus from the onset on how results will be utilized or the connections that can be made between evidence and advancing improvements in students' learning will better position assessment as a mechanism that can drive meaningful practices in teaching and learning. Asking of ourselves, 'how will we act on the evidence we collect?' can be a useful first step in using assessment results to improve learning.

Key Question:
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In our work at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) based in the United States, we have found that providing faculty and staff space for reflection on evidence gathered from examining student learning reinforces connections between assessment and improvements in teaching and learning as well as fosters evidence-based conversations and scholarship of teaching and learning. Providing space and time for faculty and staff for evidence-focused discussions and intentional consideration of the impact of action taken can help to move teaching and learning discussions through the full evaluation cycle presented above.

To inform the work of using evidence to improve teaching and learning, we offer several principles for consideration including:

1. The value of assessment of student learning should be based on the extent to which evidence is used (for example, the extent to which examinations and assignments are improved in the following year). Are questions of practice driving the application of results? Is potential use considered from the onset?
2. Clear targets for the use of evidence of student learning should be part of the design of evaluating assessment efforts and the process of sharing results. Who are the different faculty and staff members that should be part of the discussions around the results? How is evidence used and what was the impact on student learning and success? What is the practical value of the evidence of student learning for faculty and staff?
3. Begin assessment of student learning processes and activities with an end use in mind. What are the questions of greatest interest to faculty and staff? What do faculty and staff expect to find? What might be changed based on conversations (i.e. increase in diversity of assessment; developing some choice of assessment; design of more authentic assessments)?
4. Remember that the process is a continuous one, where making decisions based on evidence of student learning is important, but is the beginning of a new cycle. What was the impact of the change? Did it lead to improvement in student learning (for example, the extent to which the changes improve student assessment success rates, reduced student anxiety, etc.)?

Fostering a culture of evidence-based change requires follow-through and time. Through conversations informed by evidence of student learning, faculty and staff are better positioned to implement meaningful changes in teaching and learning and assessment of student learning that lead to higher levels of student accomplishment.

Reference

Kinzie, J., Hutchings, P., & Jankowski, N. (2015). Fostering greater use of assessment results: Principles for effective practice. In G. D. Kuh, S. O. Ikenberry, N. A. Jankowski, T. R. Cain, P. T. Ewell, P. Hutchings, & J. Kinzie, *Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education* (pp. 51-72). Indianapolis: Josey-Bass.