

The Way to a Faculty Member's Head is Through the Discipline

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Assessment gatherings have multiplied exponentially over the past 15 years, and the amount of guidance now available through conferences, workshops, and other kinds of events is truly impressive. From the level of national organizations through accrediting agencies and statewide consortia to campus-level meetings and on-line resources, there are rich opportunities for postsecondary educators to learn about virtually all aspects of assessment: theory, practice, policy, methods, trends, costs, benefits, and so on.

Yet there is one aspect of assessment that has been neglected. Current offerings are overwhelmingly generic. That is, they do not speak specifically to the interests of a faculty member in sociology or geology, in art history or business. And yet the discipline is where a faculty member lives, literally and metaphorically. It is the discipline to which faculty members devote a lifetime of scholarship. It is love for and expertise in the discipline that they hope to cultivate in their students.

For years, when policy makers or administrators or others have complained that faculty are the chief obstacle to the implementation of assessment, I've wondered silently whether the complainers ever took the assessment conversation to those faculty members' home turf and spoke to them in their own language. I've always suspected that the assessment message would get through more readily if faculty were approached through their discipline, and in April 2004 my colleagues and I at the New England Educational Assessment Network (NEEAN) had an opportunity to test that theory.

Sponsoring Dialogues in the Disciplines

NEEAN was founded in 1995 by postsecondary educators in New England who wanted to provide their membership with opportunities to find out about best practices in assessment of student learning. As the assessment movement unfolded, NEEAN wanted to ensure that the energy devoted to assessment would actually improve student learning and strengthen institutional effectiveness.

Since its founding, NEEAN's signature event has been the Fall Forum. This one-day conference now offers nationally known keynoters and over a dozen sessions; it regularly attracts over 300 participants from around the region. The Fall Forum has gotten excellent reviews over the years, but it too is a "generic" assessment event.

In fall 2003, the NEEAN Advisory Board decided to try something different and reach out to faculty who may not have been involved in assessment up until that time by offering them a discipline-specific development opportunity. Thus began planning for a half-day spring workshop called "Dialogues in the Disciplines." Thanks to the cooperation of the University of Massachusetts Office of Assessment, we were able to hold the workshop in a central location, the Amherst campus. Our regional accrediting

body, the New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC), also supported this experiment. NEASC has a keen interest in extending awareness of assessment from the administrative to the faculty level; their collaboration was essential in getting the word of our workshop out to campuses and lending the event additional legitimacy.

Planning Considerations

The first and most obvious decision to be made was that regarding disciplines. Which would they be? We settled on a cluster of social sciences – psychology, sociology, and political science – for several reasons. First, these three represent popular disciplines involving large numbers of faculty and students. In other words, we would have a significant pool of potential registrants – important, since for this first-time event we needed enough participation to break even financially – and a large pool of students who could eventually benefit from the use of assessment findings to improve learning and strengthen programs.

Second, we wanted the workshop and its three disciplinary tracks to have scholarly legitimacy with the social scientists we hoped to serve. That meant looking to the learned societies, following their recommendations, and incorporating their materials into the three tracks. The American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Political Science Association had all taken up the issue of assessment, had articulated positions on what constitutes good practice, and had posted discipline-specific materials on the web. The ASA's efforts had a particularly long history, and the APA had recently posted the efforts of an assessment taskforce, including suggested goals for psychology majors and information on the suitability of various assessment methods for assessing specific goals.

Third, we wanted the tracks to be led by faculty members in the three disciplines – psychology, sociology, and political science – who had hands-on experience with assessment and could speak with authority about defining learning goals, selecting methods, using findings, avoiding pitfalls, and the like specifically in terms of psychology, sociology, or political science. With the help of the learned societies and colleagues, we were fortunate enough to locate three excellent workshop leaders: Catherine Berheide of Skidmore College, NY (sociology); Margaret Launius of Mansfield University, PA; and John Ishiyama of Truman State University, MO (political science).

Fourth, it was important to us to put a local face on the workshop, so we paired our lead presenters with New England partners – faculty in the region who had assessment experience and would also bring some knowledge of our regional accrediting body's expectations, the local policy environment, economic constraints, etc.. Steven Adair of Central Connecticut State University joined the sociology track; Donna Killian Duffy of Middlesex Community College, MA, contributed to the psychology track; and Scott Erb of University of Maine-Farmington rounded out the roster in the political science track. The lead presenters and New England partners were asked to plan their

tracks together, and the collaborations worked very well. (Their handouts can be found at [link].)

Workshop Organization

The workshop was scheduled for a Friday morning and opened with a 30-minute plenary; then the group split up into the three discipline-based tracks for the next 2 hours, and finally the full group convened for another half hour at the end. The beginning and closing plenaries were conceived as a chance to frame the questions and issues participants might have in common.

The 2-hour discipline-based portion of the morning was designed to be hands-on, interactive, and practical. In addition, the time with like-minded colleagues was intended to give participants the chance to talk in discipline-specific terms about issues such as appropriate learning goals, model assessment programs, traditions of the discipline, theoretical assumptions, the methods that flow from theory or tradition, and recommended resources.

It was important to NEEAN organizers that the tracks focus on more than just course-level assessment. We acknowledge the value of course-level assessment and its usefulness in many cases as an entry point for getting faculty interested in assessment. But at the same time we wanted to challenge faculty to think *beyond* the limits of the individual courses they teach or their particular specializations. We wanted participants to ask questions about what their major *as a whole* adds up to, and to consider co-curricular or off-campus experiences, as well.

Along with cognitive knowledge, we stressed that the tracks should address complex skills (for example, advanced writing or research or information literacy skills) as well as values and dispositions. We felt strongly that if assessment does not include more ambitious outcomes, the movement leaves itself open to the charge that assessment is reductionist and trivializes higher learning. That does not mean that any discipline has developed fail-safe ways of assessing these more ineffable goals, but we need to at least keep them on the table and keep trying to develop ways to promote and documents them. By presenting more qualitative approaches such as portfolios, capstone projects, or performances, we hoped to give participants both some tools and some encouragement in tackling these most important but also most challenging learning outcomes.

Finally, we promised participants that they would hear about the possibilities for turning their work in assessment into conference presentations and publications, and for connecting it with the scholarship of teaching and learning. We wanted participants to know, if they didn't realize it already, that assessment *can* be scholarly work and that it can be respected and rewarded like other scholarly work. As it happened, each of our tracks had a presenter with direct connections to the scholarship of teaching and learning, either through the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching or through a campus-level initiative.

What Worked?

The response to Dialogues in the Disciplines was very strong on two levels: first in terms of registration and overall level of interest in the workshop, and second in terms of evaluation results.

Advertising for the April event began in late January and was carried out almost exclusively via e-mail. We eventually registered over 150 participants and actually had to turn faculty away from the most heavily enrolled track, psychology.

The role of the learned societies proved to be critical. They not only lent our enterprise legitimacy, provided high-quality materials, and helped us locate excellent presenters; they also provided practical assistance, posting the workshop on their websites and assisting us with advertising. Two of them – the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Association – even awarded us small faculty development grants to help defray expenses.

Judging from the evaluations, participants greatly enjoyed their time in the disciplinary tracks, talking about the specifics and making contacts with like-minded colleagues across campus boundaries. Most participants said what they learned was useful; only a handful felt that their programs were too advanced in assessment to benefit from the workshop. And the small number who came to argue against doing assessment at all seemed to enjoy that opportunity, as well. Workshop participants were less enthusiastic about the plenary sessions, perhaps because these were generic and seemed less relevant compared to the discipline tracks.

What Next?

Flushed with the success of this first round of Dialogues in the Disciplines, NEEAN has decided to tackle assessment in the humanities. Next spring, we'll offer a second round of Dialogues, this time with tracks for literature/culture studies, history, and philosophy/ethics. We anticipate that we'll be able to build on the things that worked, but we also recognize that the humanities present something of a challenge. Useful materials are not as readily available, and we may not find the same level of commitment to assessment in the learned societies. But the next round presents a unique opportunity to shape discussion, stimulate new efforts, and advance assessment of student learning on a very important front. We look forward to dialogues with our humanities colleagues.

Appendix: I

New England Educational Assessment Network ***Mission***

The mission of the New England Educational Assessment Network is to promote quality assessment of student learning and development and thus to enhance the effectiveness of institutions of higher education. NEEAN works toward this mission by

- * Offering its membership opportunities to learn about best practices in assessment through conferences, workshops, institutes, publications, and other means;
- * Reaching out to professionals in higher education as well as to a wide range of associations and policy-making bodies with an interest in higher education;
- * Promoting the scholarship of assessment through networking, the open exchange of ideas, and grant-funded projects;
- * Communicating with the wider public about the complexities of higher education and its value to a democratic society; and
- * Striving to become New England's resource of choice for consulting, referrals, and other assessment-related services.

assessment movement.