Evaluating Learning: Doing it Better

A Message From the Editors

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Peter Beidler pointed out a few years ago that most people who become faculty were good at being evaluated in school, but did not become faculty because they particularly wanted to evaluate anyone else. In fact, he noted, some of the very characteristics that make some people good at getting high grades (such as ambition, competitiveness, and outstanding ability in the field) mitigate against their being interested in, or able to, grade others. As a result, many faculty find the evaluation of their students’ learning (usually grading) the most onerous task of academic life.

The ability and interest in assessing student learning is heavily influenced by personal development and is limited, in part, by the cultures in which the assessment takes place: the institution, the department, the discipline, and the greater society. An influential part of that greater society, one which has influenced the turning of evaluation into grades, is the consumers who demand ranking and ratings of students to help sort out those whom they would hire into their businesses or admit into their graduate and professional programs. Since World War II, the strongest local influences on evaluation have been the disciplines, implemented by the departments. Yet, institutions and consumers continue to determine overall grading schemes.

Since the education reform reports of the early and mid-1980s, legislatures and citizens groups have begun to exert greater influence on the institutions themselves to find more and more specific ways to evaluate whether taxpayers and parents are receiving their money’s worth of education. From A Nation at Risk to ProfScam, the call has been to measure precisely how much students are learning, in order to hire and keep teachers who are “productive” and rid the system of those who are not.

Several states have implemented testing systems for students and teachers for the precollegiate sectors. Although this has not happened yet in postsecondary education, some researchers are working on ways to measure what Sandy Astin calls value added to a student’s knowledge.
during a college education. Third-year (“rising junior”) tests are being used by some institutions to determine student writing and mathematical abilities. Other institutions have changed the A, B, C, D, F method of assigning results to include pluses and minuses. To obtain an even finer scale, some use the final percentage of a student’s grades throughout a course (that is, if the student “earns” an 87.6 in a course on tests and other assignments, the student transcript reads 87.6, not B or B+). On the other hand, some smaller colleges have done away completely with assigning any kind of grades, and professors write detailed assessments of what the student attempted and accomplished in each class.

The question remains for all educational sectors: How do we know whether we are accomplishing what we have set out to do? And, for those who are striving for excellence in college teaching, the question becomes: How do we develop into better evaluators of our students’ learning?

As with most cognitive skills, developing the understanding and ability to assess student learning begins (in Perry-like fashion [Perry, 1970]) from a simplistic dualistic stage (“this is how my teachers did it” or “this is how it’s always been done in my discipline”); moves through a testing of alternatives stage (“this term I’m using group tests, essay exams, take-home final, etc.”); and eventually evolves into a commitment to a set of assessment practices based on the objectives of the course, the content, the types of students, and the abilities and experiences of the professor. And, as with most other cognitive abilities, a good practitioner stays alive, continuously looks at the results, makes modifications, and keeps trying to match the method with the goals.

Disequilibria that can create movement for faculty along the Perry positions can vary from traumatic “grading events” in a particular course or involving a particular student, to more general life-changing forces in a career. Institutions that have year-long teaching effectiveness programs for faculty can provide support during periods of individual transition—opportunities and protection to try new evaluation methods, and colleagues who can provide encouragement and helpful suggestions.

Of course, one’s personal commitment to an ideal evaluation scheme is often painfully constrained by the various cultures mentioned earlier. As always, transforming a culture is a glacial process. Institutional teaching development programs may provide an awareness and interest to individuals who can then contribute to change in their departments, institution-wide committees, and disciplinary organizations.

Three articles in this volume of the *journal on Excellence in College Teaching* deal with issues around grading. Milton urges us to *Think Anew*; McClymer and Knoles warn that *Inauthentic Testing* will result in *Ersatz Learning*; and Hammons and Barnsley give us *Everything You Need to Know About Developing a Grading Plan for Your Course (Well, Almost).* These
articles continue the discussion about how the good students who go on to become professors can grow into better evaluators of learning.

This issue begins with a clarion call from Clark to reassess the college curriculum to bring it in line with the pressing needs of both people and the planet. Clark, the first CASE Professor of the Year, is a biologist who now holds a chair in conflict resolution.

Two articles in this issue deal with the ever-more-present need to find methods for embracing the diversity in our classrooms. Poplin finds the problem in our self-concept and proposes transforming the academy. Simcock and Lokon report on a successful program for cross-cultural awareness.

In their article, Linn and Jako describe a model in which terms of classroom study are alternated with terms of work for an integrated undergraduate curriculum. Thomas shows how connected teaching, first discussed in Women’s Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), has affected her classroom. Jacobs describes the transition from practitioner with specialized skills to the professor who is able to communicate those skills to students. Smith details the new use of computerized spreadsheets for helping students at many levels learn mathematics.

The concluding article, by Cronin, highlights and celebrates the lessons learned from years in the classroom.

Once again, we hope you will read and use the articles in the journal and join in the dialogue on Excellence in College Teaching.

References