

I

Introduction

Assessment as an Integral Part of Educational Change: Assessment in and of Learning Community Programs

William S. Moore,
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

As Peter Ewell (1991) observed some time ago, assessment in higher education has been both driven and constrained by internal and external change agendas—internal reform around undergraduate education and external calls for greater state accountability for public educational institutions. These agendas have at times worked to reinforce and support each other, but for the most part have competed for increasingly scarce financial and human resources. At the least there is a constant tension between the two agendas, one focused primarily on *improving* the quality of higher education, the other more concerned with *proving* that quality to a skeptical public policy audience (i.e., legislators and legislative staff, lay boards, etc.).

This macro tension is also evident in the campus-level issues involved in establishing and sustaining an innovation like learning communities *and* at the same time doing the assessment work that makes the case that the innovation is worth the time and money invested in it. What should the role of assessment be in the process of innovative programs trying to take root in an institutional culture, and how might we use assessment to help us think about that change process in some way new?

This monograph contains a series of case studies that provides some insights into the kind of powerful learning that can take place for students and for faculty within learning communities, but that also offer a number of broader and compelling lessons about the role of assessment in the context of educational innovations like learning communities. These stories provide clear evidence that developing and sustaining learning communities on a given campus demands and promotes significant organizational and cultural change within the institution. What is less clear on the surface but equally fundamental is that assessment needs to—and can—play a role in facilitating and promoting that change, not just “measuring” it. Two key ways of thinking about assessment’s role in this process of cultural change come through in these stories:

- *Assessment as learning*—the ways in which people interpret assessment data to derive deeper understandings of student learning and the conditions that influence that learning, to provide meaningful feedback, and to act on the data
- *Assessment as conversation*—the ways in which people own assessment data and treat it as a *starting point* for ongoing substantive discussions about meaning and implications, while in the process building trust and *social capital* in terms of communication networks and norms

*What is less clear on the surface
but equally fundamental
is that assessment needs to—
and can—play a role in
facilitating and promoting
that change, not just
“measuring” it.*

The relative “success” of the efforts to date seems to rely on the extent to which these two notions of assessment play a role—implicitly or explicitly—in the work. Beyond these broad perspectives, though, specific lessons about assessment practice, particularly in the context of learning communities, can be gleaned from the case studies included here.

*Early on, gathering
assessment evidence aimed at
understanding what works well—
and what doesn’t—and why,
is more significant than
gathering preliminary data
purporting to show whether
the program “works.”*

Use multiple outcomes, multiple modes, and multiple measures. The approach one takes to assessment should at least be consistent with, and if possible reinforce, the kind of outcomes and interventions being assessed. Done well, learning communities are rich, complex learning environments for students, faculty and the institution as a whole; thus the range of potential outcomes calls for a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches that go well beyond the usual retention and grade point average data. Those indicators meet basic needs for certain audiences, but as Barbara Leigh Smith and her colleagues argue, provide no evidence for the more complex outcomes that are generally part of the agenda of learning communities (Smith, et al. forthcoming). In these case studies, Portland State’s experience, in particular, testifies to the way in which the use of multiple perspectives and a variety of quantitative and qualitative modes can generate richer judgments and offer a system of “checks and balances” with respect to interpreting the data.

Incorporate assessment into reform efforts from the beginning of the initiative. Too often learning communities are created to respond to a nebulous institutional agenda—“improve retention of first-year students”—or are designed by faculty to link specific courses—“we need Biology 101 and Composition in a link”—with the bulk of the early planning focused on how to connect the content of the existing courses. What’s often missing is an assessment perspective, what some call “beginning with the end in mind.” Clear and explicit conversations about goals and outcomes—what the student should know and be able to do at the end of the experience—is an integral part of the assessment process. At the University of South Florida (USF), such assessment questions were not part of the initial planning and early stages of the innovation, and their experiences suggest why designing assessment into the process after the fact is challenging at best.

Emphasize assessing the things that matter most in terms of understanding and improving the particular program or curriculum. Oddly enough, the assessment effort that *does* exist early in the life-cycle of an innovation often focuses on summative judgments rather than on formative assessments aimed at improvements. Early on, gathering assessment evidence aimed at understanding what works well—and what doesn’t—and why, is more significant than gathering preliminary data purporting to show whether the program “works.” Moreover, these summative assessments often involve the minimal amount of data needed to satisfy the funding agency that assessment has been done, or at best show some relatively indirect and simplistic proof to justify the innovation—learning communities, in this case (of course, the question

“compared to what standard and on what basis?” is rarely asked). While this focus is often ostensibly driven by external expectations (grant requirements, institutional administrators), it also reflects the natural tendency to measure what’s easiest to measure rather than assess what matters the most in terms of significant program outcomes. What these cases suggest is that people often learn this lesson in the process. For Temple, the assessment emphasis evolved naturally from a minimalist approach to a program evaluation focus and finally to an emphasis on improvement. In USF’s case, after the initial “external, administration-directed” emphasis failed to make any real inroad with faculty, the program leadership had the wisdom to switch to an “internal, participatory, collaborative” effort that has engaged the learning community faculty, staff, and teaching assistants in much more meaningful assessment discussions.

Use patience and persistence in building broad ownership of and leadership for assessment work among the faculty most directly involved in the innovation—and across the institution as a whole. Learning communities involve a great deal of time and energy on the part of the faculty involved, so from one perspective it is understandable for institutions to not want to “burden” faculty with additional expectations around assessment. Defining narrowly the evidence gathered and the assessment methods used, relieves the faculty of this responsibility, but also virtually guarantees that they won’t feel an ownership of or be engaged by the results. Such an approach also reinforces the notion that “assessment” is something fundamentally distinct from, and external to, the teaching/learning process, a perspective particularly problematic for learning community programs. If at all possible, this process of active engagement with gathering and interpreting assessment data that matters should also extend beyond the core group of people involved in the learning communities; otherwise there is a risk of the program becoming isolated or marginalized, what Richard Elmore has called the “Balkanization” of reformers and educational reform efforts (1996).

As with the lesson around assessing what matters, these case studies suggest that these insights emerge in learning community programs sustained over a sufficient period of time. The Skagit Valley story depicts a series of assessment iterations, multiple struggles to have faculty define the outcomes that matter most and to develop the assessment leadership needed over time from the ranks of the faculty involved in the work. At Portland State, the growing faculty ownership in decision-making was both reflected in and built by the move to develop a common portfolio assignment and a commitment to reading and evaluating selected student portfolios with carefully calibrated rubrics. This process takes time and patience so that the work can take root long-term.

Study and reflect the campus culture, which shapes, for better or worse, the approach taken to assessment. For better or worse, there is a wide range of educational interventions that fall under the general category of “learning communities,” and as one would expect, the nature of the curricular approach taken reflects to some extent the institutional context and culture in which it is

. . . this process of active engagement with gathering and interpreting assessment data that matters should also extend beyond the core group of people involved in the learning communities . . .

*The central lesson is that
a thoughtful assessment process
is critical to the survival and
success of innovative programs
like learning communities.*

grounded, as do key elements of its implementation: Who gets involved? What gets them engaged in the work? Similarly, the assessment evidence and methodologies seen as most important, how the evidence is disseminated, and what evidence is most persuasive varies across campus cultures. Given their research institution orientations, the Iowa State and Temple cases reflect, as the ISU authors describe it, “the type of rigorous and methodologically sound investigation that our campus research culture requires for credibility.” And particularly in the case of Iowa State, this culture also dictated taking a “grassroots” approach to developing the work, given the complexities of forging a formal and comprehensive institutional commitment to the effort. While an over-emphasis on the credibility of the evidence gathered can interfere at times with gathering the kind of “messy” data that might be more useful in terms of improvement, if the work can be sustained long enough, the assessment focus can shift to include a complementary range of approaches meeting the needs of multiple audiences.

The case studies in this monograph reflect stories from a variety of institutional types and sizes as well as a variety of contexts and core rationales for implementing learning communities. These efforts have at least two key themes in common, however: (1) they are all eight to ten years or more into a sustained reform effort involving learning communities, and (2) they all share a sense of the inevitability—and value—of the assessment work evolving over time. Every story reflects fits and starts in the process, trying blind alleys on occasion to be sure, but learning from them and moving on. There are powerful lessons to be learned here about the need for perseverance, internal champions, and both external and internal support sustained over time. The central lesson is that a thoughtful assessment process is critical to the survival and success of innovative programs like learning communities. The questions and issues at the heart of such assessment are essential to both making the case for and improving the quality of learning community programs, and beyond that provide lessons applicable to the broader efforts in institutional assessment.

References

- Elmore, Richard. “Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice.” *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), (Spring 1996): 1-26.
- Ewell, Peter. “Understanding the Ineffable: New Forms of Assessment in Higher Education.” *Review of Research in Education*, 17 (1991): 75-125.
- Smith, Barbara Leigh, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick. Forthcoming. *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.