

Closing the Loop: Using Assessment Data

Overview

Learning outcomes are written, data has been collected, the findings have been analysed... Now what? Once the data collection process is complete, it can feel like the bulk of the work for the assessment of learning outcomes is complete. However, in a mature assessment process, you would only be getting started.

Closing the Loop

Using assessment data to improve programs is the last step in the assessment cycle, and so is affectionately referred to as “closing the loop.” It can be the hardest step to achieve. After the time and effort that goes into articulating learning outcomes, designing an assessment strategy, collecting data and analyzing results, it can seem as though the hard work of assessment is over. Little did you know it was just beginning! Many assessment experts argue that more time should be spent on using assessment data than is spent collecting it. A great thought, for sure, but how realistic is that really? Designing and implementing a learning outcomes assessment strategy can be taxing and time consuming, but it is important to budget time and energy for the dissemination and use of the information collected. Discussions about how the assessment results will be used during the planning and implementation stages can keep the purpose of assessment at the forefront of everyone’s mind. A use-focused approach can also make the planning and implementation tasks more interesting and meaningful.

Turning Data into Answers... Evaluating Assessment Data

Just because you have collected data on student learning outcomes does not mean you have good evidence of their achievement. Assessments that are based on faulty data can lead to faulty decisions about your program. To make sure the data collected is providing useful information, consider the following...

- In what ways could the data be biased? Are certain populations of students, or student abilities, over or under represented?
- Was the evidence used a good demonstration of the learning outcome?
- Were students motivated to perform to the best of their ability?
- Was the assessment tool (e.g., scoring rubric) used correctly, and consistently across all students measured?
- Were the right questions asked? Do we need to revisit and rearticulate our program learning outcomes?

The strength and utility of your data collected can be increased by implementing the following techniques:

- Sampling across students
- Embedding assessments into course material and assignments

- Using different assessments and assessment techniques for the same learning outcome
 - Convergence among different types of evidence strengthens the validity of your findings
 - Divergence suggests student ability is not being accurately measured

If you find there are flaws in your assessments, do not be discouraged. Make corrections and re-measure, knowing your data will be better the next time. Remember that learning from your mistakes is also part of the process!

Believe it or not, you are already using the results of the assessment process

Often the degree to which a program “closes the loop” or makes use of learning outcomes assessment data is measure by the amount of instrumental changes to the program. Changes to course curriculums, acquisition or redistribution of resources, and new targeted recruitment strategies are all ways in which data can be used instrumentally to improve program quality. These are the types of change that require time effort, and perhaps even money. But there are other ways to look at use that cost very little and can still have big impact. The exercise of articulating learning outcomes can lead to a better understanding of your program. The discussions and meetings that take place can encourage faculty engagement and foster relationships that extend beyond the assessment process.

Going even further, Mark and Henry (2003) have highlighted six different ways in which individuals use assessment data without even trying...

Attitude Change: Seeing the program and its component in a new light. Gaining a new appreciation for alternative points of view

Salience: Issues within the program are given new importance, awareness of success and failures grows

Elaboration: More time and consideration is given program, its components, and how student learning may be best achieved.

Priming: The concept of assessment is less strange and more noticeable. Opportunities for assessment and evidence-based decision-making are more easily recognized.

Skill Acquisition: New abilities are gained such as conducting surveys, designing and using rubrics, and evidence-based decision making.

Behaviour Change: Small changes in individual behaviour as a result of the assessment process. For example, rubrics may be used for all written assignments.

Putting It Out There: Disseminating Assessment Findings for Maximum Impact

We can only act on what we know. Assessment results that stay hidden among only small number of committee members, or that are buried in a report no one will read are unlikely to result in significant program improvement. Potential audiences for findings should be considered throughout the assessment process.

Reports and memos traditional ways in which assessment results are circulated, but these formats are not particularly attention grabbing. Consider the interests (and attention span) of your audiences and create informative communications that will grab their attention. See below for some ideas

Presentations to departmental planning committees

Newsletters

Display Boards

Published on the departmental website

Don't be afraid to brag a little!

We often think of assessment for program improvement we think of uncovering program gaps or highlighting areas of student underachievement. It's true, finding out what is not working so well in the program is very useful information to have. But equally important to ongoing program improvement is the knowledge of what is working well. Taking an appreciative approach ([Coghlan, Preskill, & Catsambas, 2003](#)) that communicates the strengths of your program can lead to bigger impacts than focusing on program shortcomings alone. It is easier for your audience to engage with positive results. Knowing that there are things that are working well can alleviate fears and resistance to assessments, making them more receptive to hearing more unflattering information.

An appreciative approach puts program aspirations and goals at the forefront. Learning outcomes are what is wished for students in the program, and use of assessment data a way of getting closer to an idealized version of the program.

Communicating the strengths of the program can also tell you what is working well. Perhaps the same strategy can be applied where shortcomings are noted? In time of fiscal restraint where programs are asked to do more with less, it is also important to know where a programs limited resources are being well spent.