

Assessment:

What is it? Why do we need it? How do we use it?

Assessment is one of those concepts that sounds simple until it is time to design and use an assessment instrument. In order to discuss it, we might ask of the process: What is it? Why do we need it? And how do we use it?

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What Is It?

It is the purpose of the assessment process to develop a tool or measurement device which, when applied, evaluates what we are intending to assess. This circular-sounding description can be reduced to: a test tests what the test intends to test. Or, assessment assesses what the assessment procedure intends to assess. Therein lies the problem with the assessment process. Many schools, departments, and instructors don't know what they want to assess.

A survey by Ellen Hay, reported in "A National Survey of Assessment Trends in Communication Departments," July, 1992, *Communication Education*, indicated that only a third of these departments defined goals and objectives for themselves. This means they have no clear goal attainment to assess. In addition, many instructors develop courses with no clear specific learning and expectancy goals. Many of those same instructors lack any test and measurement courses or experiences, and so do not have the slightest idea of how to develop assessment tools.

So, we have a problem. Many of our colleagues start with an unclear purpose and then find themselves unable to work toward accomplishing that unclear purpose. Even when they have a clear purpose and the will to accomplish it, they may not know how to set up a procedure to assess that purpose.

In our field, we are expected to add the burden of evaluating skills and concepts which, in many instances, we cannot prove work. In public communication, for example, why is it that student evaluation of "the best" or an "A" speech often does not correlate with ours? Why is there no absolute winner in speech contests? And why couldn't Bob Dole's speech advisors for the 1996 Presidential campaign "make" his speeches work?

Group discussion is another example. How is it that a group refusing to follow an agenda we have made them develop is still able to complete the task? And, finally, we need to consider the ethical dimensions in the evaluation of communication. Can we accurately evaluate human acts? Perhaps

it is worth considering that the human tendency toward subjectivity rather than objectivity might get in the way of evaluating communication behaviors. Even more profound, how does one determine the benchmarks for the evaluation? Do we use grading forms that may judge the skills that students brought with them rather than those skills learned in class?

Two students in gym class are required to shoot seven out of ten baskets to pass the class. One student has played basketball for many years and consistently "hits" seven or more baskets from the first day of class. The other student has never played the game and shoots only one or two baskets on an infrequent basis at the beginning of the basketball unit. But this student became more consistent and accurate by the time the coach was ready to grade their performance. The more proficient young man hit his usual seven baskets and earned his passing grade. The less proficient young man made five of his ten baskets and failed the class. Now, if you were grading on improvement or mastery based on what was taught, how would you rate the second young man?

Can grading forms used this way be an accurate tool? What will it take to come up with inter-rater reliability? Are the questions on the grading form the essence of the real display of effectiveness of learning?

Why Do We Need It?

One of the obvious reasons for needing assessment is that teachers have to give grades. Coupled with the semester-end assessment in the classroom is the pressure for performance testing at all academic levels from state legislatures and Departments of Education. Many institutions are moving toward individual exit competencies for their majors including capstone courses, testing, and portfolios.

Additional pressure comes for outcomes-oriented teaching assessment at the collegiate level brought by accreditation agencies. For example, southern collegiate institutions must graduate communicatively competent students, though no

definition is included as to what that means.

Beyond assessing the individual student is the move toward assessing whether our departments, schools, and programs are fulfilling their missions, a particularly tough assignment for those schools without mission statements. Then there are the "housekeeping" roles of assessment, such as proficiency testing for waiver credit and placement testing for communication courses.

How Do We Use It?

Our greatest need is to prove that our courses are accomplishing their objectives. The Hay study, "A National Survey of Assessment Trends in Communication Departments," indicated that 66% of the institutions in the survey included "communication skills" in their general education requirements, and assessment was used to prove that learning had taken place. How? 83% indicated that by passing the communication requirement, a course or courses, the students had proven that they were competent. The other 17% required their students to pass a specific performance or test.

Some schools like Radford and Hamline University are more specific, requiring that students demonstrate their communication proficiency in a variety of contexts over an extended period of time. Other institutions, such as Golden West College, go further by having laboratories where students are required to prove their skills and knowledge through a series of performance activities.

We also need to prove to accrediting agencies that the school/program is reaching its required goals and to certify that their majors have learned the necessary materials and have developed the required skills in the completed courses. The Hay study also indicated that constituents from other fields have an interest in the development of oral communication assessment. It was found that 49% of the states require teacher education programs to include an oral communication com-

ponent. It is interesting to note that one of the highest levels of communication apprehension within occupational groups is that found among elementary teachers, the very people we expect to teach communication skills to young children. Additionally, organization such as ASTD (Association for Training and Development) is looking to our field of communication for teaching and assessment models.

We need to work on answers to these questions. While this is only one side of the dialogue both within, and without, the field of oral communication, it is a dialogue that is both timely and pressing.

The work done by Donna Surges Tatum and her colleagues at the University of Chicago provides many of the answers for our vexing questions. We need to listen with care and implement the scientific principals developed for performance assessment. By doing so we enhance the credibility of Communication Studies as a discipline of both the Arts and Science.

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There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions, and merely lukewarm defenders in those who should gain by the new ones.

Machiavelli