

The Insight

“Past assessment efforts have had little impact due to poor methods of data collection and analysis. These are fixable limitations.”

Implications

“Given enough consistent data, meaningful conclusions can be made about student learning using classroom assignments.”

“Despite more than 30 years of effort ... very little progress has been made in improving either student learning or its assessment”

Why Aren't We Further Along?

The modern movement for the assessment of student learning in Higher Education has its roots in the later part of the twentieth century. It was at this time that the benefits of higher education, once assumed to be intrinsically ensured, were beginning to be called into question. In response to growing internal and external pressures, the National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education was first convened in 1985. This meeting is recognized by many people as the birth of the modern assessment movement, and served to initiate a flurry of activities within academia. Despite more than 30 years of effort by many university faculty members and committees, accrediting agencies, and state and federal legislators, however, very little progress has been made in improving either student learning or its assessment.

In a recent article, Dave Eubanks suggests that this lack of effect is “because the methods of gathering and analyzing data are very poor.” To summarize his position, Dr. Eubanks states that most assessment studies lack sufficient validity and reliability to be effectively used to improve student learning. For those less versed in these terms, the validity of a measure is the degree to which it corresponds with the actual object being observed. Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency or reproducibility of the measure. Over the past three decades, innumerable very small, poorly designed, meagerly funded, and inadequately analyzed studies have been carried out across the country. Each of these studies attempted to measure some aspect of student learning. However, the lack of statistical power, reliability, and validity prevent us from creating meaningful generalizations. Furthermore, these limitations also preclude us from aggregating the studies to draw broader conclusions across different programs, colleges, or institutions. In the face of this revelation, some have thrown up their hands in defeat, claiming that “assessment does not (and cannot) work”. But is that really so? I think not.

Student learning is a complex latent variable (something that cannot be directly observed). Our measures of “student learning” are actually affected by many things (e.g. the students’ learning, motivation, and raw abilities, our curriculum, instruction, and support, and the strength and appropriateness of the measure itself). Given enough consistent data, these various factors can be teased apart and studied. Our General Education assessment plan is designed to do just that.

Last semester, we initiated a comprehensive assessment effort in General Education. Several thousand students in over 130 courses were evaluated by about 100 faculty. Despite these impressive numbers, we will not be able to say too much about student learning yet. The validity of the data is fairly good (the data were collected using actual course assignments), but our reliability is likely to be rather poor (we do not yet all agree upon our rubrics and their interpretations). All is not lost, though. Our findings will soon be disseminated as online reports. These reports will allow us to explore and improve our measures and our curriculum; even imperfect data can be used to make effectual adjustments. As we slowly improve our measures and increase our sample size (number of semesters reported), we will eventually reach the point where meaningful conclusions can be made about student learning in our program. This is the true heart of assessment (continuous improvement using imperfect data). It may be some time before our efforts reach the levels of rigor envisioned by Dr. Eubanks. But in the meantime, we will must resist the despair of Dr. Gilbert and press on our efforts to provide an even greater opportunity for our students to learn and grow at Ferris.

¹ Ewell, P. (2002). *An Emerging Scholarship: A Brief History of Assessment*. Jossey-Bass.

² Eubanks, D (2017). *A Guide for the Perplexed*. *Intersection*, pp 4-13.

³ Gilbert, E. (2018). *An Insider's Take on Assessment: It May Be Worse Than You Thought*. Chronicle of Higher Education, January 2018.