

The Insight

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Implications

FCTL will provide opportunities for faculty that we hope will assist in collecting and using evidence of student learning to make, as needed and appropriate, continuous improvements in curricula, teaching, and student learning.

Randy Bass argues that, in creative and scholarly work in research and teaching, “having a ‘problem’ is at the heart of the investigative process; it is the compound of the generative questions around which all creative and productive activity revolves” (Bass, 1999).

A Systematic Approach to Understanding a “Problem”

We offer this short essay as a kind of assessment case study, one in which we started with an end in mind, and then worked backwards to design a process that we believed would help us reach the end.

Our goal was two-fold. On the one hand, we wanted to understand people’s perceptions about how well efforts to collect and use evidence of student learning were going. On the other hand, we wanted to know how the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning could make positive contributes to this work. This goal was inspired by both curiosity and a desire to understand possible nuances. It’s easy, sometimes, to ignore the curiosities we have about our teaching, and our students and how and what they learn. Sometimes, the lure of a quick fix to a teaching “problem” overwhelms our sense of wonder.

Here in the FCTL, we try to give space and time to nurturing a sense of wonder. We often think about our curiosities as “problems” in the way that Randy Bass, Vice Provost for Education and Professor of English at Georgetown University, describes them – as something “to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated” (Bass, 1999). And so, as we continued to think about the “problem” we sought to understand, we considered both the kinds and sources of evidence that we believed would offer us insights to it. We considered, for example, conducting an online survey comprising Likert-type questions that would be completed by faculty. We also considered using focus groups to obtain qualitative data from faculty and department chairs, heads, and school directors. While each method and source of data would have given us valuable and meaningful insights, in the end, we chose to collect feedback from members of FSU’s Academic Leadership Council (ALC) using the following open-ended prompts:

- With what efforts in your school, department, or program to measure and use data on student learning at the course and program levels are you pleased or happy?
- What challenges do you face with regard to measuring and using data on student learning at the course and program levels? We posed these questions to ALC members at an October meeting where each member present shared her or his responses on a handout.

After compiling the responses, we independently worked to identify themes among the responses. We then met to share, critically analyze, and reconcile our independent reviews into a single analysis that we hoped (and believed) accurately reflected the ideas conveyed in the feedback. And finally, we gave close attention to the implications of the data, and the meaning and insights they offered us.

With each step in the critical analysis, we found we were making the data increasingly more shareable with ALC. While we knew we had an obligation to share what we learned, we also had a deep desire to allow the ALC members an opportunity to review our methodology and findings. We believe this “peer review” step is critical and indispensable to the inquiry process.

Our analysis revealed that there are a great many reasons to feel proud about the ways that evidence of student learning is used to improve courses and programs at FSU. Naturally, there are opportunities to do more, and to do better. FCTL will, in 2017-2018, offer you opportunities that we hope will assist in doing both. Hold onto your curiosity about these opportunities, as we’ll share more in August 2017!

Bass, R. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: What’s the problem? *Inventio: Creative Thinking about Learning and Teaching*, 1(1). Retrieved April 28, 2017, from <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/sotl/files/2013/08/Bass-Problem1.pdf>.