

All the Fish in the River: An Essay on Assessment

By Matthew Miltich

During the spring quarter of 1996, immediately after the death of my son Andrew, who suffered cardiac arrest while playing basketball at the University of California at Davis, I found that when I was alone in my office on campus or at home, I could not read student papers from my learners at Itasca Community College, where I teach English.

Andrew did not die on the basketball court; medical first responders restarted his heart and got him to the hospital, and the emergency room physician who cared for him there called from California to report to us what had happened. I traveled immediately to Davis, and I stayed for 13 days by Andrew's side in the ICU of the Davis hospital while he lay in a coma.

I took in, as those slow days passed, the facts of his condition, his damaged heart, the daily deterioration of his brain, starved of oxygen for too long after his heart stopped, and finally, his failure to breathe, my beautiful boy, looking in every regard the athlete in per-

fect health, dead, utterly lost to me, the unthinkable real before my eyes and under my hands.

Afterward, came my journey home to tell my younger children that their brother had died, another flight to California for a memorial service on campus, a final journey back to northern Minnesota with Andrew in his casket, and the funeral and burial.

My dean at the college kindly offered me an extended leave for the upcoming spring quarter, but I thought it best to try to teach—in spite of my shock and grief—but as I've said, I discovered I could not read student writing. I couldn't focus on it, couldn't concentrate my thoughts on my learners' words on paper, or even make myself believe in the importance of grades or other prescriptive measures of their learning.

Sometimes, my vision blurred by grief, I couldn't even see the words of my students on paper. I could, however, see the students. I saw each as infinitely precious, like my lost son, and as vulnerable to

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harm, and because each one of them seemed to me as dear as my own child, I had no trouble being with them, or reading their work and talking with them about their reading and other scholarship when they were with me.

In my composition classes, I worked with one person at a time. I offered only individual help with the students' writing, and I read it only when they sat with me, where we could discuss the writing together. I explained to each, as I read her or his assigned paper, every judgment I made about the writing.

By necessity, I abandoned written examinations for my literature class and instead questioned each learner individually, each examination becoming a private conversation about what we'd read, each conscientious learner telling me more about her or his learning than I'd ever discovered in written exams, and we arrived together at judgments about grades.

My experience with my learners that quarter taught me even more deeply the lesson I'd been learning one class day at a time for more than 20 years: Teaching and learning are personal, individual, and unique, and also inseparable from who we are and from our lives away from the classroom.

Years have passed since the death of my boy, and I can read stu-

dent writing again and grade exams, both of which I consider honorable activities. But my conviction has deepened that every experience of learning, like each learner, is singular, and thus I've concluded that for me and my learners, standard measurements of learning are inadequate or worse.

Now, I find myself—in light of what I've just suggested—in direct conflict with the movement in public higher education that calls itself "assessment." I find that I disagree with the fundamental assumptions of this movement, and I'm suspicious of its advocates.

I'm so far from being in agreement with the assumptions of the assessment movement that I'm unwilling even to grant them the proprietorship they've assumed by their use of the word.

Assessment is a word that existed in English before the advent of the movement that uses it so freely to promote its agenda. Its use by the advocates of the movement seems to imply that—before its theorists began to promote their views—assessment as practice was nonexistent or used only sporadically or ignorantly.

This seems to me patently absurd, belied by my own professional experience and that of the many colleagues who've shared

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with me, over the years, their stories about teaching and learning.

I most seriously disagree that assessment should assume a priority role in higher education. The evangelists in the movement offer it as a kind of panacea; I see it as a substitute for what we need most, a distraction diverting our attention when more critical, more primary issues need that attention.

First and foremost, our learners must be provided for. Consider the New England farmer's truism: "You can't fatten the lamb by weighing it." Measurement is no substitute for nourishment. The assessment movement's spokespeople like to talk about nurturance and about learning communities, but they end by focusing on measurement, data gathering, and quantification, rather than what nurturance requires of us: Provision.

Assessment programs absorb resources that might provide our learners with truly enriched and enriching college experiences. Perhaps worst of all, assessment theorists have given to those who would starve our colleges or eliminate public higher education altogether a language to justify their failure to provide adequately for public colleges.

Secondly, community college learners need good instruction and good instructors. The assessment movement promises to improve

instruction; their literature assumes its leadership will be the driving force to improve instruction and learning in higher education.

But assessment has failed to capture the imagination of most who teach in our colleges because the promise of improved instruction can't come true if assessment is the means for making it happen.

Instruction will improve in our colleges when careers in community college instruction are so attractive that more of the best and brightest people in their fields are attracted by its rewards, and when administration in charge of hiring brings such people to our campuses.

Instruction will improve when professional development is better supported, better rewarded, more available to our instructors—and when our colleges become true communities of scholars where serious intellection about learning is nurtured and respected.

More effective assessment can be, perhaps must be, part of such improvement, but assessment will never drive it, and in the absence of provision for our more primary needs, can never deliver on its promise to improve instruction.

The assessment movement is a weak substitute for real learning communities. In real learning communities, teachers, learners, and

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administrators join together in a passionate, ongoing conversation about learning. Real differences are valued, controversy is encouraged, flexibility and diversity rewarded, and adequate or better than adequate resources are available and easy to get.

As a substitute for such communities, the assessment movement offers a prescription: Conversion to the belief that assessment is the key to improved learning, and immersion in the practices and tools of assessment.

The promise of improved learning offered by assessment advocates may be attractive to instructors who hold to no strong core academic values, but among independent, critically thinking faculty who value their professional judgments and their rights to judge freely, the prescription is most likely to create separation, revolt, disaffection, and alienation.

I've attended a number of administration-assigned duty days led by evangelists of assessment, and I might be more favorably impressed if any of them really assessed their own failure to persuade me they offered something useful.

In the best instances they were boring; in the worst they were insulting. Not one trusted her or his proposed methods enough to

use them as a way to assess the success or failure of the duty day.

At such sessions I heard shotgun condemnations of the lecture as an appropriate teaching method, but always this pronouncement was delivered by lecture.

These presentations assumed a four-part pattern:

The confession—I've left the classroom; I no longer teach.

The insult—you don't assess; the methods you use in the classroom are outmoded and ineffective. After all, they didn't work for me.

The threat—this is coming, and you'd better get on board because we're holding you accountable.

The bribe—those of you willing to take on assessment on your campus will get release time to do it and/or a stipend.

One such presenter spoke glowingly of high technology for teaching and learning but had forgotten her "power book" and so could not present her "PowerPoint" demonstration—a fancy word for a slide show with subtitles.

Not one assessment presenter at any duty day I've attended has seemed to me truly scholarly or to balance a passion for her or his academic discipline with dispassion around the issue of how we evaluate learning.

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and faculty driven.” But, in my experience, the drive has come only from the administration’s appointment of faculty, frequently part-time instructors, to assignments as “assessment coordinators.” Most faculty participate only when the faculty at-large can be corralled at duty days and given assignments to complete as part of the duty day’s planned activity.

The most absurd assumption of the assessment movement is its supposition that higher education has functioned for decades in a kind of vacuum, aloof from the real world, accountable to no one, and that assessment practices will at last bring us into alignment with the realities faced by business, industry, and engineering—the real world.

We do ourselves and our learners the greatest possible disservice when we promote the idea that intellection, theorizing, exploring ideas, attending to the arts, humanities, and sciences—in general, the pursuit of the kind of learning experiences possible in higher education—are not as real as for-profit ventures.

People in other fields of endeavor know this even if they don’t admit they know it. Those most successful in achieving money and power most frequently choose for their own children the most costly,

most traditional, and most reputable liberal arts colleges and universities to which their children can gain admittance.

The truth is, assessment issues aside, higher education has been, is now, and shows every sign of continuing to be the gateway to power, to money and comfort, to influence, to creativity and invention.

Business, law, medicine, the sciences, the arts, government, foundations, industry, communication technology, engineering, and on and on, all have relied on higher education to provide their people the theoretical foundations and the variety of human and technical skills necessary to succeed in their fields.

Far from functioning in a vacuum, institutions of higher learning have knelt continuously at the feet of their alumni, state and federal legislative bodies, government departments, foundations, and corporations.

The assessment movement has promised to make us more accountable to these entities by providing tools for reporting measurable outcomes, a way to prove our worth and for those entities to hold us responsible for the learning of our students. Standardized tests, charts, scoring grids, rubrics, and assessment tools are promoted as the means by which we can quantify and report this learning.

What this promise fails to

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account for is that, for good or ill, no matter how well we teach, learning rests finally with the learner—and this is as it should be.

No more important moment comes for a learner than that in which she is struck, forcefully and clearly, by the notion that she and only she is responsible for her learning.

From this moment, she becomes master of her own learning. No quantification can account for this revelation, but learners know it when it occurs, and afterward they value worthy instructors as guides and allies in their learning experiences. Such an immeasurable outcome is worth more than any portfolio of objective data.

Our colleges must be accredited, and accreditors have accepted many of the assumptions of the assessment movement. But, if accreditors focus on measurement and not on the substance of what our colleges offer to learners, we can expect our colleges to, in turn, focus more and more on preparing students to perform well at tasks which are created to be measured.

No doubt we can teach to the tests; after all, we are very good at what we do, but we and our learners will be poorer for it.

How should we communicate to those outside our colleges what we do and what our results are? How do we encourage others to under-

stand and value the education of our learners? Just as I have the story of my teaching life, every learner's experience in college is a story. This story is more informative than any assessment tool, and the best way to account for a student's learning, I believe, is to get the story truly.

Stories have plots, morals, characters, humanity, and theme. You can understand a story and talk about its meaning. You can measure, you can quantify certain kinds of learning, but you'd better be careful of saying what the measurements mean or assigning causes for the results. Stories are different; they communicate our humanity. Maybe, instead of adopting assessment to solve our communication problems, we just need to tell our stories about learning.

No "assessment program" can take the place on college campuses of energized, passionate faculty who love their disciplines and their learners and learning itself, who assess, minute by minute, day by day, year after year, the humanity, the learning, the condition of their learners by seeing them truly and listening to each one's story.

While objective evaluation of learning is important, learning can go on without it. It's the last issue of concern; provision must come first, including provision for faculty,

curriculum, and facilities for learning. Assessment is limited to the quantifiable, and, while this might have its place, assessment cannot make us accountable for what we have no control over.

More than a quarter century of experience in the classroom has taught me not to be too sure of where I'm going and that often the best way to measure learning won't occur to me until my students and I are in the midst of the learning itself.

I've come to think of myself as like a fishing guide on a wonderful wild river, where the current is swift and difficult to negotiate, into which I wade with my learners to teach them how to navigate the stream and how to cast a fly to the bright fish, invisible to their eyes at first, swimming in the river.

The river is the flow of knowl-

edge, undimmed and undammed since the beginning of time, and the trout the thoughts my learners might hook, if they learn how.

I rejoice with them when they succeed. If they choose not to fish or to ignore my instruction, they have every right to make their choices. Whatever the case, my instruction must be both competent and patient and serve my learners, not myself.

I've caught my share of good fish; now it's their turn. It can be a wonderful experience, and I refuse to reduce its wonder to a sober accounting of how many fish were caught and the length and weight of each fish. It's a catch and release thing. Learners don't get to keep the thoughts to themselves, but they learn how to hook them, and they have the experience of the river. ■

