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Adapting Assessment for the Field of Communication

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Abstract

It has now become a universal mandate that communication programs conduct assessment of whether students attain selected learning outcomes. However, approaches to assessment unique to communication beyond the basic public speaking course are rare in the literature. This paper defends a "meta-assessment" approach to communication assessment as a key to negotiating the unique attributes of the field of communication, especially in heterogeneous academic departments and programs. It further argues that this approach can benefit assessment of similar, interdisciplinary academic programs.

***Keywords**: assessment, field of communication, metatheory, learning outcomes, disciplinary identity.*

The assessment movement has become one of the more controversial facets of higher education in recent decades. There is no accredited institution that is not affected by the now ubiquitous mandate to measure whether students learn. Administrators and faculty, staff and students, in all corners of the academy are currently developing and refining assessment plans. It is uncharted territory for many disciplines, especially those in the liberal arts.

Transforming assessment from an administrative mandate into a concrete plan at the program level presents different challenges for different disciplines. This is especially true for communication. Since it combines pedagogical practice, academic insights into communication as an object of study and the challenges of successful program administration, assessment warrants the attention of communication scholars and administrators. The "scholarship of teaching" is increasingly recognized as an important focus of academic work (Boyer, 1990). Assessment as well, with its focus on defining and measuring what students should learn, deserves our scholarly attention (Litterst & Tompkins, 2001).

Communication skills are certainly common features of assessment plans, making experts in communication an invaluable asset to those tasked with implementing assessment. Perhaps more importantly, faculty housed in discrete communication programs, we believe, will find that assessing their students is a more difficult enterprise than at first appears. Communication is a special field, nascent, and at times chaotic. "Communication" is hard to define amongst ourselves, let alone to outsiders within and beyond the academy. These ambiguities play out when we determine what it is, exactly, that communication students should be learning. To do assessment right, it is imperative that communication faculty and administrators adapt to the peculiar nature of the field. And yet, approaches to assessment that speak directly to communication are rare in the literature.

Calling assessment difficult may strike many as overstating the case. After all, thousands of assessment regimes currently work quite well in communication programs throughout higher education. If we take a step back, we may find expeditiously implementing assessment wastes an opportunity to fully plumb the possibilities of this new requirement on faculty. In our experience, once a department begins to deeply interrogate how the requirements of assessment interact with

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our own expertise in communication studies, rifts between sub-disciplines are revealed that illuminate our field and our object of study. We are a case in point; one a humanistically oriented rhetoric scholar, the other trained in social scientific approaches to mass communication, it was not until we found ourselves together on a department assessment committee that we were forced to reckon with our opposite views on the field and pedagogy. Requiring programs to isolate *who* they are and *what* they want students to take away from their courses of study opens a prime space to revisit our relationship with one another as communication faculty. Doing so serves a bigger purpose than implementing assessment; it helps us better understand ourselves. At times we are deeply connected, at times indifferent to each other, and at times hostile and fractious. Truly thinking through assessment brings these differences to the fore among a faculty ready to seriously consider the process. While some programs can easily bridge these gaps, analyzing the underlying tensions in the field at large remains a task as yet unfulfilled.

Our approach to assessment in communication privileges reflexive dialogue between faculty at all phases of designing and implementing an assessment plan, intended less to reach quick agreement on learning outcomes and more to productively expose differences in perspectives on communication pedagogy. Those discussions should not be seen merely as a means to an end, but as an integral aspect of assessment itself. This "meta-assessment" could help heterogeneous fields such as communication, along with other similarly structured institutions of higher education, fully realize the benefits of ideal assessment. In the end, we argue that rigorously assessing communication requires vigorously conducting communication.

To make this case, we first describe the prospects of assessment done well and highlight several barriers to this ideal assessment. We next turn to the field of communication to describe how it uniquely resists techniques of traditional assessment. We then offer our corrective, inspired by Robert Craig's vision of metatheoretical coherence within communication theory (1999), of "meta-assessment" dialogue. Finally, we apply this approach to the broader university assessment community. In all, we hope that meta-assessment will help translate vision into action to the benefit of our students and our programs.

Barriers to Ideal Assessment

It can be fashionable to criticize the assessment movement, and there is plenty of room to do so. Yet, at its best, well designed and student learning centered assessment has much to offer higher education. There is no shortage of scholarly literature describing what assessment is generically, or how to implement it. We will focus in this first section on the consensus of what *assessment at its best* would look like, and the commonly noted barriers to that ideal. Mary Huba and Jann Freed (2000) offer the following definition:

> Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their education experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning. (p. 8, emphasis removed from original)

Outcomes

There are three important elements to this approach. One is that faculty isolate *measurable learning outcomes* that students are expected to attain. Focusing assessment on learning outcomes puts the pupil at the center of the pedagogical project, crystallizing instructor focus on the impact the material presented has on the student herself (Driscoll & Wood, 2007). Given the diversity of material taught in higher education, there are a number of possible learning outcomes that a program may select within several broad categories. For

communication, the National Communication Association [NCA] follows a pattern generally accepted throughout higher education for classifying the types of learning outcomes that can be assessed: cognitive, affective and behavioral (Morreale & Backlund, 1998).

Cognitive outcomes deal with the knowledge content that students are expected to develop during the program. They range from simple absorption of material to higher level cognitive tasks of knowledge analysis and synthesis. The still dominant approach to classifying this continuum of cognitive outcomes is Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Hill, Furst, & Krathwohl, 1956). On the low end of that schema is *knowledge*, where a student can recall previously learned material; on the higher end is *evaluation*, where judgments about that material are made and *synthesis*, where new knowledge is created by combining facts and ideas the student has previously learned. An assessment plan may seek to measure whether students attain lower level cognitive outcomes, such as remembering the basic elements of a particular theory, or higher level cognitive outcomes, such as critically evaluating a theory or crafting new theory, or some combination of the two.

Affective outcomes speak to the attitudes, beliefs, and values that students will develop during their studies. Common affective outcomes include an appreciation of diversity, a reflexive attitude toward the student's own thoughts, and the student's belief in her own efficacy. Certain disciplines may lean more on these sorts of outcomes than others. For example, the importance of affective outcomes may increase for disciplines like creative writing, that hold as a central tenet cultivating a certain attitude toward the world in their students as opposed to mathematics, which may lean more on cognitive outcomes. . Finally, behavioral outcomes deal with student skills and patterns of conduct. Writing and critical thinking are two classic examples. In communication, we often look to oral communication competency as an important behavioral outcome for students to develop. To date, much of NCA's guidance for programs devising assessment plans has focused here (Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998).

This range of possible learning outcomes presents an individual program with the task of selecting particular ones to assess. In some disciplines, this may be more or less easy, as consensus exists on the content, attitudes, and skills that their students are expected to master. But for a field lacking this core consensus, as describes communication, finding the right blend of outcomes is the first hurdle an assessment plan must traverse. Different faculty views on relevant content knowledge, proper attitudes, and what defines effective behavior must at some level homogenize for assessment to be successful.

Measurement

The second important element to Huba and Freed's (2000) approach to assessment is that faculty must develop an appropriate method to measure whether the specified outcomes have been attained. What types of data will be collected and how they will be analyzed varies by the type of outcome and the methods appropriate to the object of study. Standardized tests, rubrics, survey data, portfolios of student work, and exit interviews, among many other methods, are all used to gather data. While all of these instruments are theoretically acceptable, in practice many assessment observers note a decided preference for *quantified* data. This focus on quantification has led some to criticize assessment for being reductionist (Axelson & Flick, 2009). Especially in humanistic or artistic fields, there is resistance to boiling down the pedagogical experience to numbers on a scale. The result of this quantification could be a gravitational pull towards the types of lower level cognitive outcomes that lend themselves to binary measurement, or the requirement that more subjective learning outcomes be shoehorned into quantitative measurement techniques. In either case, different kinds of measurement raise significant

questions of academic freedom, as the pressure to quantify seems to prescribe a certain approach to course content (Axelson & Flick, 2009).

Of course, there is tremendous utility and explanatory power in these quantitative measurements, and they lend themselves well to many of the learning outcomes that any program would expect to build into its assessment plan. Yet, the explanatory power of numerical data combined with a desire for more subjective learning outcomes, creates an obstacle for assessment. When a program offers a strongly diverse curriculum that resists quantification, measurement of student learning becomes a contested issue. Furthermore, a program that houses different faculty who adhere to both quantitative and qualitative methods in their own teaching and research presents a challenge of compromise and mediation. Where the ground of method is contested, ideal assessment requires deliberation to be realized.

These first two elements of Huba and Freed's (2000) definition of assessment are difficult to meet for an intellectually diverse faculty, even more so given the often observed lack of a "culture of assessment" in higher education. Overall, there is a broad lack of institutional buy-in for assessment in many universities. A common refrain in the assessment literature is the need for a cultural shift, where the university weaves assessment into its fabric (Ndoye & Parker, 2010). Even if certain programs embrace assessment, islands of robust assessment amidst a sea of neglect raise a barrier to the holistic adoption of assessment's best features. It is only through a university-wide approach that the full prospects of ideal assessment can find purchase. For example, well developed assessment plans over the course of a student's entire academic career could lead to life-long learning skills (Maki, 2004). Institutionalized assessment, where pedagogy has been refined in the interests of ensuring students attain a broad suite of learning outcomes throughout the entire curriculum, presents the best chances of achieving such longitudinal goals of ideal assessment.

This lack of enculturation, with its attendant delegitimization of assessment as an approach for designing a curriculum and structuring a program, makes the task of bridging methodological pluralism or incongruent views on cognitive outcomes quite difficult. The academic freedom that was vital to creating a robust landscape of scholarly ideas and methods now presents a challenge when faculty are forced to achieve consensus on those issues through developing an assessment plan. Part of a cultural shift requires rethinking expectations of faculty activity from a research context to an assessment context. This enculturation is further hampered when administrators give short shrift to assessment institutionally. This commonly includes a dearth of resources and administrative support (Bers, 2008). But most important is faculty leadership (Chaplot, 2010). Absent a mechanism to win faculty support within a culture of assessment, it remains a distant goal.

Outcome Application

Finally, and in many ways the most elusive aspect of assessment, Huba and Freed's definition calls for faculty to use the data accumulated once an assessment plan has been designed and implemented to make improvements in their pedagogy (2000). This is often called "closing the loop" and is seen as a key sticking point as assessment moves forward (Banta & Blaich, 2011). It is far easier to require faculty to design an assessment plan than it is to ensure they apply its lessons to change their teaching. For example, a study by Banta, Jones, and Black (2009) found that 94% of 146 programs across the country did not have adequate evidence that they had used their assessment results to improve teaching and learning on their campus. Should this trend remain unchecked, assessment will fail to improve learning and become mere paperwork.

To prevent this, we should be honest about the several reasons why faculty can be hostile to assessment's implications for their personal pedagogy. First, hostility may arise from the external origins of the assessment movement. Learning outcome-based assessment was developed during an accountability push in primary and secondary education in the 1990s. State legislatures sought empirical proof that public schools were using funds efficiently, driven in part by a skepticism of the education bureaucracy and teachers' unions. Concomitant with this accountability push was an increased reliance on standardized testing, most widely embodied by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, as a means to provide the hard data that could drive decisions about where to allocate resources, and even whether certain schools should exist at all.

While assessment and standardized testing are now entrenched in secondary education, recent pushback has led to federal actions designed to weaken the universality of this approach (Layton, 2011). Even so, the requirement that similar approaches of outcome measurement be adopted in higher education continues to gain strength. This was not an organic choice. Assessment came to higher education when accrediting bodies sought to foreclose government intervention in college administration. "In part to curtail the direct involvement of state legislatures in higher education, regional accreditation agencies . . . . declared that they would require member institutions to conduct outcomes assessment in order to maintain their status as accredited institutions" (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 17). The fact that assessment was imposed from outside higher education, rather than being the product of an indigenous decision by programs themselves seeking to improve their pedagogy, feeds the individual hostility to assessment and makes it more challenging to encourage faculty to use it to alter their teaching.

Second, further barriers arise from confusion over the role of assessment in evaluating faculty performance. In primary and secondary education, teacher evaluation is often directly tied to student achievement. Such links are highly controversial in academe. Since the differences between assessment (data used to improve learning and teaching) and evaluation (data used to judge the worth of a program) can be easily conflated (Stowe & Eder, 2002), it can be difficult to tell whether the imposed requirements of assessment bring with them a new approach to faculty review. The evaluation of faculty performance in the classroom is a highly contested one, invoking politics of tenure and promotion, the role of adjunct faculty, academic freedom, and the question of where subject matter expertise should be housed in the university structure. The extra layer of measurement that assessment implies threatens to destabilize an already tenuous consensus on how faculty should be evaluated. When closing the loop becomes an evaluative criterion, it encounters resistance.

And, third, the issue is further complicated by wrapping assessment within a push toward program review, which clearly falls into the evaluation model of using data of student learning. The utility of assessment data in making decisions about the allocation of resources or even the existence of programs has not been lost on communication administrators (Backlund et al., 2011). Assuring faculty that assessment will not be used to evaluate their individual performance while simultaneously using that data to evaluate program performance can be perplexing. All of this confusion and external imposition makes closing the loop difficult.

We have argued in this section that there are a number of barriers to ideal assessment. The diversity of subject matters in many university programs makes isolating learning outcomes tricky. A trend toward quantitative measurement preferences shortchanges several approaches to pedagogy. The inorganic development of assessment in higher education, including resistance to its external imposition, causes confusion about the role of assessment in faculty evaluation and leads to a lack of faculty leadership and enculturation throughout the university. A robust

assessment plan requires a strategy to overcome these barriers. We offer such an approach later in this essay for communication departments and schools.

But first, we will have to investigate the idiosyncrasies of that field to find a way forward. It is a mistake to assume that general insights from education researchers will apply to any one discipline, especially one as amorphous as communication. "Given the nature of communication, then, we know that we cannot just rely on the insights from generic educational research; we must carefully test their applicability to teaching and learning about communication in specific contexts" (Morreale, Applegate, Wulff, & Sprague, 2002, p. 116). The next section unpacks that context, and one prominent theorist's attempt to navigate it.

Incommensurability in the Field of Communication

As most readers of this essay will recognize, trying to define what the study of communication is, and how it differs from other disciplines, is tough (Adler, 1997; Korn, Morreale, & Boileau, 2000). Part of that is no doubt a lack of curiosity from our colleagues. Another reason is an admittedly messy and confusing origin, one that has led to perhaps the most diverse conglomeration of academics in one broad disciplinary home in higher education. Communication was a place where any number of scholars could come together, often for different reasons, bringing with them a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The various subdisciplines in communication are literally too numerous to list here. But even the broad camps of post-positivistism, humanism, critical/cultural studies, applied organizational studies, performance studies, broadcasting and media production, as well as journalism and public relations make for a dizzying assortment of scholars.

A recent surge in history of communication scholarship has confirmed that this merger was largely arbitrary and *ad hoc*. Pulling apart the strands of speech, journalism, and communication is difficult (Eadie, 2011). Even if we could isolate an agreed upon set of foundational texts or assumptions, there is instability even among the subdisciplines. Rhetoricians explore their connections with composition studies (Mailloux, 2000) and social scientists struggle with the increasing diversity within empirical studies of communication (Donsbach, 2006).

The implications of this historical complexity are most forcefully outlined by John Durham Peters (1986). To him, the helter-skelter birth of communication belies most attempts to find strong commonalities. At best, we are a series of academic programs, not a unified scholarly discipline. "'Communication' has come to be administratively, not conceptually, defined. Each department, school, or university creates the field anew in its own image. Theory fails as a principle of definition, as does the attempt to define communication as a distinct subject matter. No normative checks exist against localized definitions of the field" (Peters, 1986, p. 528). So much so that, for Peters, "the idea of communication as a field is the only thing that holds this variegated collection together" (p. 548). Nonetheless, communication remains for him an essential zone of inquiry, even as his brilliant history of communication as a concept casts further doubt on a unified definition (Peters, 1999).

For others, this diversity is a positive in a world of higher education increasingly enamored with breaking down disciplinary walls. Susan Herbst (2008) argues that communication has implicitly been in the vanguard of the move to postdisciplinarity. Free at the beginning from disciplinary fences, Herbst encourages communication scholars to roam. The key for her is visibility. "More metalevel articulation of what we were doing—with regard to disciplinarity—would have secured our place as leaders in the disruption of academic business as

usual" (p. 608). Even among this confusion, be it productive or disruptive (or both), there are calls to find a core for communication in its pedagogical function. William M. Keith's (2011) bold proclamation that "we are the speech teachers" certainly gives an incentive to orient disciplinary identity around communication's pedagogical function. If that is the case, then assessment stands as an important vehicle for discovering what communication *is*. It is through isolating and measuring student outcomes that our colleagues will come to know us. In order to accomplish this, communication faculty need to find a way of talking to one another, despite the incommensurate landscape described above. We take guidance in that search from another, similar attempt at disciplinary unity.

Craig's Metatheoretical Solution

In his seminal essay "Communication Theory as Field," Robert T. Craig (1999) outlines an ambitious project to unite the disparate threads of communication theory. He notes a silo approach to the field where "communication theorists apparently neither agree or disagree about much of anything. There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer. There are no common goals that unite them, no contentious issues that divide them. For the most part, they simply ignore each other" (pp. 119-120). This is confusing both for students and for researchers. Cross-fertilization seems warranted.

However, Craig doubts a grand unification is on the horizon. Instead, he argues for coherence between communication theories rooted not in common assumptions, but in a set of common points of disagreement over the practice of communication. Communication theory, as a result, becomes a *metatheoretical discussion* about these points of disagreement. This discourse thickens our tacit understanding of communication as practiced in everyday life. To spark this dialogue, Craig defines seven traditions from which rival theories emerge, based on the assumptions they make about how communication is practiced and also the assumptions that they upend. By mapping where they converge and diverge, Craig hoped to facilitate productive debate among currently isolated families of communication theories.

His approach implies, then, a realm of theorization prior to the formation of discrete theories themselves. This "metamodel" of communication gives direction to "theoretical metadiscourse," where particular models of communicative activity can interact with one another. Craig's placement of communication theory in this meta-level, second order space of theories about theories is a recognition of the incommensurability of the field. Common vocabulary on the first order level of particular theories is lacking, so we must find congruity instead on the second order, meta-level. So entrenched is this incommensurability that Craig is uninterested in forcing harmony. Instead, he embraces the fact that a subject matter as ubiquitous as communication is inherently likely to produce intractable divisions. So long as these different views engage one another, they do important work to refine our understanding of communication in practice.

He sees productive fragmentation within the incommensurability of the field, and finds the contribution of communication scholarship most directly in developing discourse along these points of disagreement. The simple proliferation of theories themselves does not compose a field of communication theory. His call for metatheoretical discourse provides some type of coherence for this field, a way to explore what happens when we juxtapose otherwise disengaged theoretical camps. Much of the benefit of Craig's (1999) approach is attitudinal, with rival theorists recognizing the potential in disagreement with each other. "The goal should not be a state in which we have nothing to argue about, but one in which we better understand that we all have something very important to argue about" (p. 124). The product is a "dialogical-dialectical

coherence," a recognition that rival theories must speak with each other at some level to address the common issues of human communication.

While the metatheoretical approach is intriguing, there is little evidence that it has directly influenced scholarly approaches to communication theory. Craig (2007) himself notes that his approach has not taken root among communication theorists. However, his "seven traditions" have been adopted by a number of undergraduate communication theory textbooks as a powerful pedagogical heuristic (Griffin, 2011; Littlejohn & Foss, 2007). Craig (1999) noted the potential value of his architectonic of the field for instilling in undergraduates an appreciation of the value of theory for understanding the practical experiences of communication. Focusing on dialogical-dialectical coherence "invites a pedagogy that treats the entire field as a resource for reflecting on practical problems" (p. 153). The incommensurability of communication theory coheres as a set of divergent answers to a common set of communication problems.

If allowing theories to explore points of disagreement works to teach communication theory, might it also work to assess it? Furthermore, could such discussions overcome the barriers to ideal assessment noted earlier, including disagreement over cognitive outcomes, measurement, lack of enculturation, and closing the loop back to pedagogy? We argue that this is the case.

But first, let us address what we anticipate to be a likely objection to our approach. Why not avoid the issue and adopt a path of least resistance to assessment? There are several ways in which individual communication programs might elude the issues in assessment we have raised. One is to focus the entire assessment program on behavioral outcomes, bracketing off the disagreements over theoretical content or cognitive outcomes and focusing wholly on oral and written communication performance. This approach, though, threatens to undercut the strides that the field has made over the past century in defining itself as a source of scholarly knowledge, enhancing our *understanding* of communication, not merely its practice. Since assessment will be an important vehicle for communicating to the university what our discipline does, collapsing to pure skills to make assessment easier sends the wrong message.

Second, a heterogeneous faculty may sidestep the problems of incommensurability through collegiality. Rather than have the deep discussions about points of disagreement that Craig (1999) and ourselves counsel, faculty may instead speedily compromise. As mentioned in our introduction, the ability to compromise does not obviate the structural issues of assessing communication as a general matter. Furthermore, we can attest that those deep discussions about assessment can still be done in a spirit of camaraderie. In fact, the process may unite a program even further by enabling increased understanding of each other.

Finally, a program may choose to ignore the incommensurability of the field overall and instead specialize in one area or approach to communication. Hiring faculty that all specialize in one method or subdiscipline would produce a homogeneity that gets around communication's disciplinary incommensurability when installing an assessment plan. This is exactly the program level definition of communication that Peters (1999) highlights. We admit that our approach may not be necessary for these departments. Yet, there are several reasons why this homogeneous approach cannot be the final word of communication assessment. Many communication departments, schools, and colleges are expressly heterogeneous, consciously reproducing the diversity of the field among their faculty. Furthermore, if a professional organization such as the NCA is to ever give guidance on assessment beyond behavioral outcomes, it will have to reckon with the field's incommensurability. An approach to assessment that accounts for heterogeneity

is necessary for many programs, and the field at-large. It is to these heterogeneous considerations that we direct the following section.

Meta-Assessment as Assessment

Incommensurability in communication led Craig (1999) to posit a metatheoretical space where salient disagreements between communication theories address pragmatic dynamics of everyday communicative activity. His approach requires a willingness to engage in discussions with members of the field who hold fundamentally different views over basic epistemological and methodological assumptions of communication. The reward is a sharpened understanding of communication itself, as clashes between approaches yields new insights. It stands to reason that applying this ethos to the development and implementation of a communication assessment plan holds similar prospects for *productive* fragmentation.

We define "meta-assessment" as a sphere of discourse about learning outcomes and methods of measurement where incommensurate views on pedagogy in heterogeneous programs clash in the interest of improving student learning. Meta-assessment discussions between faculty differ from traditional assessment activities by not presupposing that stable and universally shared learning outcomes are the appropriate end point, or that any blend of measurement techniques is more legitimate than another. Meta-assessment discourse recognizes that there are likely to be a number of issues where faculty cannot reach agreement given the incommensurability of the field of communication or that such a compromise would choke off the clash of viewpoints that yields new insights. Coming to grips with plurality and juxtaposing divergent views of communication unites us as a field, and it can also be a building block of assessment.

Principles

Discussions about assessment have been urged before, especially between faculty and external stakeholders (Arnett & Arneson, 1997). Using discussions in general as a tool for doing assessment has obvious benefits. Chaplot (2010) cited a study participant who said communication opportunities aid the process of enculturation. But meta-assessment discussions differ from merely talking to one another by incorporating two principles. One is that the *discussions are rooted in student learning*. Craig's (1999) metatheoretical discussions occur within the scholarly infrastructure of the field. Journals and divisions and scholarly organizations all are faculty centered. These become student-centered questions once we orient them around learning outcomes for pupils within the classroom and across the program. Meta-assessment discussions supplement disciplinary debates over the content we teach by adding attention to the ways students learn that material. This adds elements to communication ignored in faculty-centered discussions. To what ends (e.g., appropriate employability, graduate education, public service) should students put their knowledge of communication? The answer depends on the nature of the program, the makeup of the students, and the mission of the institution. Meta-assessment discussions marry scholarly content with these and other pedagogical issues.

The second principle is that *meta-assessment discussions should eschew hierarchy amongst the faculty*. After all, in many programs, the majority of assessable classes are taught by adjunct or non-tenure track faculty. These faculty should be brought in the discussions not only because they are largely responsible for implementing the assessment plan itself, but also because their commitment to the classroom is an important element to the pedagogical application of theoretical material that an assessment plan is designed to measure. Student centeredness would imply surrendering some of the prerogatives that flow from institutional

power. While it is true that the responsibility for conducting assessment will rest ultimately with faculty who are expected to perform service duties, it is still important to incorporate as many voices as feasible in the meta-assessment approach.

With those principles in mind, we can map out a plan for conducting meta-assessment discussions. They would mirror Craig's (1999) metatheoretical approach in the first steps. Participants would begin by isolating salient points of disagreement, in this case over potential cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes for students completing communication degrees. The key for these early meta-assessment discussions is to avoid quick compromise. Instead, laying out points of divergence would get the relevant issues on the table, productively fragmenting individual assumptions about what students should know, believe, and be able to do after graduating. Discovering this fragmentation may be most illuminating in common classes that are taught by different faculty, either in multiple sections or as the class rotates semester to semester. Faculty are likely to find disagreements not only over course content, but throughout the entire spectrum of student expectations such as writing style and the blend of cognitive, behavioral, and affective outcomes within subdisciplines. Meta-assessment brings these differences to the attention of the faculty. This lays the groundwork for best representing the diversity of perspectives across the entire field of communication. This first step in the meta-assessment approach is as far as Craig's suggestions take us. In the open landscape of the scholarly literature it is acceptable to welcome this divergence of views as the best an incommensurate field can produce; disagreement is the point.

For assessment purposes, though, these productively fragmented learning outcomes must be put back together to provide something *measureable*. Here, meta-assessment discussions diverge from Craig's (1999) approach by forcing some sort of coherence on the faculty. The meta-assessment discussions, though, have exposed the multiplicity of perspectives on communication knowledge and behaviors embedded within the field. The newly adopted learning outcomes should instantiate that fragmentation by being open, contingent, potentially contradictory, or otherwise malleable so as to represent the actual disagreements between communication scholars. Faculty will determine what the most important lines of analysis are that cut through their various research and pedagogical agendas and determine how students should encounter those traditions. Meta-assessment, by taking learning outcomes to second order discussions about those outcomes, sparks at the program level the field-wide debates that Craig hoped would result from his approach to communication theory. The meta-assessment approach, as a result, has the potential to rectify the first barrier to ideal assessment highlighted earlier in this essay. Faculty will be more likely to agree upon outcomes if they fully represent the diversity of the field as it is instantiated within that given program. This approach is not agreeing to disagree, but recognizing that disagreement enables a more healthy and sustainable compromise over the long term.

Once communication faculty have agreed on these fragmented learning outcomes, the final step in meta-assessment discussions is to adopt appropriate measurement instruments. We suspect this will require circumventing the strict application of quantitative measures at first, as there may be a heavier reliance on affective or higher level cognitive outcomes that are harder to quantify given the contingency of the second order learning outcomes produced by communication's incommensurability. Since students will be asked to appreciate the diversity of the field, that same diversity will have to be represented in the measurement approach. Such contingency, though, is completely at home with ideal assessment; we should be bringing multiple perspectives to measurement anyway. In part as a means of providing meaningful

outcome data that appropriately represents learning, but also as a way to increase confidence in results by showing that various methods, qualitative and quantitative, lead to the same learning outcomes. As the process occurs, the qualitative measurements may become more quantifiable as conversations between faculty continue over time and diversity can be recognized across faculty. At the initial stages though, true multiplicity should reign.

This approach not only helps faculty overcome the barrier of achieving agreement on learning outcomes and disputes over measurement techniques, it can also rectify the other barriers to ideal assessment noted earlier. One was the lack of enculturation. Since meta-assessment discussions will begin with examinations of the field, and then work their way toward concrete assessment, it is our experience that faculty will be more engaged with the process than traditional assessment. Seeing assessment as a way to understand colleagues, and work through at the program level aspects of the field that impact us beyond our roles as teachers, gives more meaning to the assessment process. Since long term assessment runs the risk of report fatigue, or else the belief that once an assessment plan is in place it can run on auto-pilot (Musun, 2007), these continued discussions implied by the meta-assessment approach can keep faculty engaged in the process longer. Ideal assessment implies continued refinement of learning objectives and course content. Extended meta-assessment aligns nicely with this continual change.

The final barrier that meta-assessment can overcome is "closing the loop." Since these assessment mechanisms are derived organically from within the field and by indigenous faculty members, there is less resistance than would come from an external imposition of a mandate for assessment. The reason to conduct assessment becomes self-reflection, not artificial inducement. The questions of faculty evaluation itself may also be ameliorated because the faculty are internally exploring communication pedagogies that apply to their specific program. If we are to be evaluated by assessment, at least the tools will be of our own making.

However, faculty typically report their assessment plans and progress to a college or university wide assessment committee. It is here that the meta-assessment discussion approach may encounter the most resistance, especially if these committees are staffed by faculty who come from more stable, traditional disciplines. We believe that conducting the fragmenting discussions of meta-assessment is itself assessment. Or, at least, that these discussions are a vital prerequisite for an assessment plan in a heterogeneous communication department that realizes the full potential of the technique. Rather than ask for quick resolution of the question of learning outcomes, university administration should give fields like communication the space to explore their own subject matter as it applies to measuring student learning. To do so with less depth and appreciation for divergences in communication shortchanges the potential for meta-assessment to refine both communication pedagogy and theory.

Overall, it would be wrong to think of these meta-assessment discussions amongst faculty as preliminary or wasteful. The urge to "get to it," to produce data first and foremost assumes that the data produced will be representative of the pedagogy that occurs within any given program. We believe, instead, that the process of communication that leads to an assessment program is in many ways as worthwhile as the assessment itself. Not only is this communication a precondition for doing assessment, but it is a means of ensuring student learning. Just as Craig (1999) sought to unite theories around shared discussions on points of practical communication, an individual communication program can unite around shared discussions about learning outcomes and pedagogical techniques. These discussions become the stuff of assessment itself, a

meta-assessment that fulfills the goals of assessment even if in practice it looks different than a more stable disciplinary approach might imply.

Conclusion

Meta-assessment is a way for a heterogeneous and incommensurate field such as communication to overcome both unique and generic barriers to ideal assessment. Doing so requires a true cultural commitment to embracing assessment, and designing it around those differences. This approach may also speak to other programs that face the challenge of integrating disparate groups. As interdisciplinarity continues to develop in higher education, assessment questions will be increasingly asked by other faculty. Given the sometimes improvisational nature of the development of interdisciplinary programs, there is rarely a stable set of common, lower level cognitive outcomes that can be easily identified. There is also not necessarily an overlapping theoretical base that motivates the marriage. Overtime, well developed interdisciplinary programs such as bioethics or informatics may yield such fruit, but these specialized knowledge systems must emerge slowly and from constant dialogue. Indeed, it is this long process of cross-fertilization that one hopes for from an interdisciplinary program. The development of higher level cognitive outcomes like knowledge synthesis is one of the very reasons why interdisciplinarity has become so popular.

One issue that has plagued interdisciplinary thinking is the question of quality. Determining strong from weak scholarship from within a stable discipline with established traditions can be governed by consensus. But the clash of cultures that interdisciplinary programs are designed to produce bring no such ready-made agreement. Some have argued that quality should not be measured by how much overlap emerges between the bedfellows, but in how productive the relationship is in creating friction (Mansilla & Duraising, 2007). If this is the case, then emerging interdisciplinary programs may learn from the much longer period of time that communication scholars have been working together. The ability to synthesize knowledge from disparate disciplinary backgrounds may be one of the key markers of quality interdisciplinary work (Mansilla, Feller, & Gardener, 2006). Just as communication reconciles disciplinary pluralism with the expectations of continuity embedded in traditional assessment, interdisciplinary programs may apply meta-assessment principles to their own questions of how to measure faculty and student work.

Measurement, just as in communication, is also an issue for interdisciplinary programs (Field & Lee, 1992). The same issues of over-quantification and pluralism dog their assessment programs. The meta-assessment approach supports the view that interdisciplinary program assessment works best when instruments are both locally designed and reflect the kinds of affective outcomes that these programs tend to be designed around (Field, Lee, & Field, 1994). Doing so may help interdisciplinary programs address their problems with assessment enculturation. Interdisciplinary faculty approach assessment from their home disciplines, even as synthesis is the purpose of their enterprise. Given the often conflicting standards of judgment placed on interdisciplinary work, “the process is defined by epistemic compromises” (Mansilla, 2005, p. 20). Failure to embrace the aspects of meta-assessment that encourage consensus, if not agreement around pluralistic measurement techniques, may stymie these compromises. Closing the loop is also a critical issue. Today, there is a lack of evidentiary support that interdisciplinary courses actually accomplish their goals (Lattuca, Voight, & Fath, 2004). Taking assessment seriously, and working toward student centered yet contingent assessment plans, is a task not only asked of communication programs.

Even less well understood than interdisciplinary assessment is the role that assessment will play in general education (Marinara, Vajravelu, & Young, 2004). Just as with determining learning outcomes and appropriate measurement in communication, general education assessment may also depend on careful dialogue between disparate faculties to arrive at learning outcomes. "These discussions are difficult and time-consuming, but the results can be truly transformative" (Whelburg, 2010, p. 91). We believe that meta-assessment principles may be quite valuable in the most interdisciplinary and heterogeneous of all higher education programs.

Still, even as assessing communication may serve as a model for other non-traditional assessment plans, it is in our interests to consider the consequences of the institutionalization of assessment for the structure of our own communication programs. Some have warned that overemphasizing our sometimes chaotic tendencies and too fully embracing interdisciplinarity threatens the position of communication within the power structures of the academy (Peterson, 2008). Heterogeneous programs, however, may not have a choice; pasting over differences undercuts the prospects of ideal assessment. The key is to turn what many believe is an onerous chore into an opportunity to improve our programs and our reputations. "Program assessment provides an opportunity for departmental members to exhibit to their administrations the unique contribution of their departments and to fend off threats of budget cuts or program elimination" (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, p. 90). Our meta-assessment approach offers something more than an existential benefit. Finding unity continues to elude our field. At least at the program level, assessment forces us to find that unity, a fragmented unity to be sure, with our colleagues. If done in a spirit of comity and student centeredness, assessment can produce insights into communication, both the field and the activity.

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