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Educational Assessment Grows Up: Looking Toward the Future

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THE assessment movement was born in the middle 1970s, and many people thought it would be simply another one of those passing educational fads. In fact, some people still think so! But communication assessment has developed and matured over the past two decades and become institutionalized at virtually every level of education. State legislatures mandate it, accrediting bodies require it, professional educational associations support it, and teachers have begun to think it is a good idea for their students.

According to the National Communication Association, the purpose of the assessment process is to develop a tool or measurement device which, when applied, evaluates what we are intending to assess. This basic definition provides a clue as to why assessment has become institutionalized: assessment is the process by which we know if we are actually doing what we intend to do in the classroom and in our educational programs. Readers can readily see the appeal of assessment to members of state legislatures.

Assessment has become institutionalized, and that raises questions as to the development and future of assessment in the communication discipline. This article explores the history, the present, and the future of educational assessment to enable readers working with communication assessment issues to make more informed decisions. The time frame illustrates the evolving narrative of education. This narrative not only presents assessment as part of our educational life-story (Countryman, 1995), it also functions to continually create our educational reality—a reality that includes assessment. As educators, we have an obligation to participate in the ongoing development of this narrative to shape the future of education (Arnett & Arneson, 1997).

THE PAST

The National Context

The choice-based curriculum of the 1960s led to the undergraduate curriculum reform of the 1980s. During this time, many students were not adequately prepared for college and students graduating from college lacked skills necessary for workplace success. The Reagan administration viewed education as key to once again renewing confidence in America, yet

state governments were sensitive to ever-increasing expenses associated with funding postsecondary education. Three major themes emerge from the debate about curriculum reform that resonate in the call for educational accountability: high standards, active student involvement in the learning process, and explicit feedback on performance (National Institute of Education, 1984). This section offers a chronology of key policy developments that inspired educational reform to include assessment.

The landmark report, A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), offered a broad analysis of problems in the American educational system. At an educational summit in 1989, the nation's 50 governors agreed that ambitious educational goals were needed for moving into the next millennium. Six National Education Goals were established and the governors agreed that by the year 2000, American students would demonstrate competency in challenging subjects. Subsequently, the National Education Goals Panel was created to monitor progress toward these goals (US Dept. of Education, 1992).

In 1990, the National Governor's Association asserted that doing a good job of assessment requires that what students need to know must be defined, it must be determined whether they know it, and measurements must be accurate, comparable, appropriate, and constructive (Chesebro, 1990). In 1991, Bush announced the AMERICA 2000 strategy as a way to reach educational goals. This initiative called for the development of high standards and a national system of examinations. A few months later, Congress established the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. This bipartisan panel recommended creating voluntary national standards and a voluntary national system of student assessments (US Dept. of Education, 1992). In response to this call, members of The New Standards Project, a coalition of 17 states and nearly a half-dozen school districts that enroll nearly half the public-school students in the United States, began to develop content standards and field-test assessments.

In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. This act codified into law the original six National Education Goals developed in 1989 and added two goals to encourage parental participation and the professional development of teachers. These goals, especially the fifth national goal on literacy and lifelong learning, are integral to communication education. Objective five states, "The proportion of college graduates who demonstrate an advanced ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems will increase substantially" (Lieb, 1994, p. 1). This bill also established in law the National Education Goals Panel, which will continue to report on national progress toward meeting the education goals. To oversee the reporting process, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council was created to examine and certify voluntary national and state standards for content, student performance, opportunity-to-learn, and assessment systems. In addition, a National Skills Standards Board was created to stimulate the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of occupational skill standards and certification. The act also supports a grants program directed toward sustaining and accelerating state and local efforts aimed at helping all students reach challenging academic standards (Goals 2000, 1994; Lieb, 1994). Clinton's goal is to spearhead educational reform and to restructure education so that its main mission is performance (Clinton, 1993, p. A1).

By the end of the 1980s, faculty members in higher education were aware of the significance of assessment issues to accreditation efforts. Campuses are receiving pressure from several directions, cautioning them to look carefully at student learning, articulate learning objectives, set high standards for accomplishment, and assess whether students have met those standards (Palomba & Banta, 1999). The six regional accrediting associations (Southern Association of College and Schools, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Middle States Association of

Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges) have moved from voluntary compliance to exhibited compliance of these initiatives (Chesebro, 1990). In addition, there is increasing momentum to assess student outcomes related both undergraduate and graduate degree accomplishment. The climate for implementation is still relatively permissive and allows individuals institutions to identify an assessment plan best suited for their local educational objectives. Regardless of the type of assessment selected, the assessment process itself has become an important element in our educational narrative.

National Communication Association Assessment Initiatives

The National Communication Association (NCA) has been actively developing a national assessment agenda since 1970. The Speech Communication Association Task Force on Assessment and Testing was formed in 1978 and charged with gathering, analyzing and disseminating information about the testing of speech communication skills (Backlund & Morreale, 1994, p. 11). This task force became the Committee on Assessment and Testing (CAT) in 1980. Their work includes activities such as defining communication skills and competency, publishing summaries of assessment procedures and instruments, publishing standards for effective oral communication programs, and developing guidelines for program review (Backlund & Morreale, 1994).

NCA has supported faculty efforts in this area by making oral assessment instruments available and publishing materials including Assessing Functional Communication (1978), Standards for Effective Oral Communication Programs (1979), Large Scale Assessment of Oral Communication Skills: Kindergarten through Grade 12 (1984, 1997), Communication is Life: Essential College Sophomore Speaking and Listening Competencies (1990), and the NCA Summer Conference on Assessing College Student Competence in Speech Communication (1994). A web site has also been designed to support educators in their ongoing assessment initiatives (http://www.natcom.org/InstrResour/assessment/AssessMenu.htm) and an e-mail list of colleagues interested in this area is available (a query can be sent to: assessment@natcom.org). NCA efforts were evoked by and serve to drive additional scholarship in two key areas: program assessment and communication assessment.

Program Assessment

The purpose of program assessment should be continuous improvement through self-evaluation. Program assessment requires departmental members to examine curriculum, educational experiences, and the amount of student learning that occurs. Evaluation may be part of a campus-wide effort (Backlund, Hay, Harper, & Williams, 1990) and/or focus around departmental initiatives (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Clark, 1980; Hay, 1992; Makay, 1997; Shelton, Lane, & Waldhart, 1999; Smith, 1990; Smith & Hunt, 1990). Regardless, work in this area is increasingly associated with mandates from state agencies and accreditation boards (Allison, 1994; Backlund, Hay, Harper & Williams, 1990; Hay, 1992). Program assessment demands a close relationship between program goals, measurement of the progress toward these goals, analysis of these measurements, and a feedback mechanism for communicating the results back to the goal setters (Graham, Bourland-Davis, & Fulmer, 1997, p. 198). Program assessment provides an opportunity for departmental members to exhibit to their administrators the unique contribution of their departments and to fend off threats of budget cuts or program elimination. Student learning is an important part of program assessment and may be examined using various approaches.

Communication Assessment

Communication competence can be evaluated by examining a communicator's affect

toward communication, cognitive development, and skill development (Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2000). The affective domain of learning examines an individual's attitudes and feelings regarding their cognition and skills in a content area. Two aspects of affect toward communication have been examined: communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970, 1977, 1984) and willingness to communicate (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). Cognitive assessment examines an individual's knowledge and understanding of the content under consideration (Neer & Aitken, 1997; Rubin, 1994a). Skills assessment focuses on an individual's behavioral development in a content area (Lane, 1998). Cognitive and skills development are related—students need knowledge (theory) to undergird a skilled, appropriate performance.

Several volumes discuss various approaches to examining communication competence (Christ, 1994; Morreale & Backlund, 1996; Morreale, Brooks, Berko, & Cooke, 1994; Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2000). The literature includes information related to the areas noted above as well as competencies in the areas of public speaking, interpersonal communication, listening, intercultural communication, group communication, organizational communication, mediated communication competence, and general communication competence.

Instruments for measuring communication competence have been developed for use in K-12 education as well as higher education. In 1996, NCA published the pamphlet—Speaking, Listening, and Media Literacy Standards for K through 12 Education. This work initiated the effort to articulate developmentally appropriate competencies for each of NCA's 23 Standards (Berko, Morreale, Cooper, & Perry, 1998). National performance standards for oral communication K-12 have been published (Rubin & Hamptons, 1998) as well as criteria for performance-based assessment of high school speech instruction (Rubin, 1994b; Rubin, Welch, & Buerkel, 1995).

Attention has been given to specific arrays of communication knowledge and skill. Moore (1994) noted that historically, public speaking has received more attention that other forms of communication performance. Public speaking assessment generally focuses on the dimensions of content, organization, language, and delivery. Instruments to evaluate public speaking competencies are widely available (Backlund, 1983; Backlund, Brown, Gurry, & Jandt, 1982; Bock & Bock, 1981; Brown, Backlund, Gurry, & Jandt, 1979; Morreale, Moore, Taylor, Surges-Tatum, & Hulbert-Johnson, 1993; Rubin, 1982, 1985, 1990). Several instruments are available to assess interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg, 1994, 1995; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989, 1994; Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987). Instruments to assess listening skills have also been developed (Bostrom, 1990; Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980; Brown & Carlsen, 1955; Watson & Barker, 1983; Willmington & Steinbrecher, 1994; Wolvin & Coakley, 1993). Several instruments to assess intercultural communication competence are available (Gomez, Ricillo, Flores, Cooper, & Starosta, 1994; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Olebe & Koester, 1989; Spitzberg, 1984). In the area of group communication competence, several instruments have been developed (Beebe, Barge & McCormick, 1994; Greenbaum, Kaplan, & Damiano, 1991; Kaplan & Greenbaum, 1989; McCroskey & Wright, 1971). Organization communication competence has been examined in two ways. Some scholars focus on assessing factors of organizational competence (Goodall, 1982; Hulbert-Johnson, 1999; Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1982). Other scholars consider elements of organizational life such as organization-wide assessment, teamwork/group processes (Greenbaum, Kaplan, & Damiano, 1991), managerial and supervisor assessment (Lamude & Daniels, 1990), organizational climate/culture, organizational conflict, organizational stress and coping (see Shockley-Zalabak & Hulbert-Johnson, 1994). In addition to instruments designed to assess development of specific behaviors, instruments for assessing one's general communication competence are also available (Duran, 1983; Ellis, Duran & Kelly, 1994; Spitzberg, 1988; Wiemann,

1977). Assessment of computer mediated communication competence is an emerging area for communication scholars (Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2000).

Over the last 20 years, scholars have contributed to shaping the narrative of educational assessment by developing numerous approaches and multiple instruments for examining the development of communication competence. Much work has been done. As we turn to a discussion of the present, we ask: "Has this work been worth the effort?"

THE PRESENT

Assessment has become institutionalized as an integral part of education. This has occurred for a wide variety of reasons. The primary force has been the desire for more accountability in education. Legislatures, accrediting bodies, state boards of education, and internal review processes all want to know if the education our students are receiving is having the desired effect. While the form of the questions and requirements posed by these groups may vary, they seem to come down to six fundamental questions (Morreale & Backlund, 1998):

1. Who are you and why do you exist (Mission)?
2. What do you want to accomplish (Goals and Objectives)?
3. What procedures will you use to determine if the goals/objectives have been met (Assessment)?
4. What are the results of your assessment (Analysis)?
5. What changes will you make to your goals/objectives/outcomes/processes based on these results (Application of Results)?
6. What evidence do you have that this is a continuous cycle (Continuous Improvement)?

These questions form the basis for virtually all accountability efforts and posing these questions provides a useful starting point in developing an effective assessment program.

As can be seen from this list of questions, assessment has developed into part of an overall process of educational program definition and review. Agencies responsible for educational accountability are interested in this process. However, the processes also make good academic sense. Effectively answering these questions provides a number of advantages for both students and teachers.

First, answering the questions results in a better education for students. When teachers have a clear idea of their school's or institution's mission (and you may be surprised how many different conceptions of "why we exist" are present on the average college campus), teachers are more able to act in concert with each other to meet the mission of the school. When schools, departments, and teachers clearly describe their educational outcomes, students, the public, and the teachers themselves have a much better sense of what students are to learn. This leads to more effectively designed educational programs and strategies.

Second, answering the questions results in a better informed faculty. One clear but unintended effect of the assessment movement has been increased conversations and coordination between teachers and their colleagues. In the past (and this is still true for some colleagues), faculty members taught their classes with little or even no regular conversation with teachers in the same department or faculty members teaching next door. The assessment movement has spawned a great number of conversations between previously separate individuals. To develop answers to the six questions identified above, conversations were needed and held—resulting in greater shared awareness and communication. Some of these conversations were uncomfortable as differences between faculty were uncovered. But at least the differences were brought out in the open for discussion. Where these questions have been answered, faculty feel a greater sense of community and shared purpose that has resulted in better education for students.

Third, answering the questions results in a better school or college. All of us in education are involved in a process that is explainable and defensible. Educational institutions that have answered these questions are far better prepared to meet the demands of accrediting bodies and legislatures. The old adage of "if you can't manage yourself, someone will do the job for you" is very true in education. A great many agencies are more than willing to manage our affairs. The way to combat this take-over is to be prepared to meet the concerns most commonly expressed by the public and these agencies. Answering the questions above will go far in accomplishing this purpose.

Focusing more specifically on assessment, a variety of communication assessment techniques are available for use in higher education. Faculty members at individual schools have the best information for determining what their students should know and be able to do given the mission of their institution. Faculty should therefore select the assessment method most appropriate for their local standard (Backlund, 1997; Graham, Bourland-Davis, & Fulmer, 1997). Faculty may examine communication competence in individual courses using strategies such as student portfolios, scoring rubrics, and personal interviews (Arneson, 1994; Jensen & Harris, 1999), narrative assessment (Arneson & Arnett, 1998), exit exams (Crocker, 1958; Sayer & Chase, 1978; Sayer, Chase, & Mills, 1975), and/or instruments designed to test communication development in a specific domain of communication (see instruments identified in previous section). Evaluation efforts may also center on a cumulative learning experience, such as an internship (Graham, Bourland-Davis, & Fulmer, 1997; Hanson, 1984; Konsky, 1977; Powers & Klingel, 1990; Watson, 1992) or a capstone course (Decker & Lont, 1990; Litterst, 1990).

THE FUTURE

Assessment is here to stay. Assessment is here to stay not because state legislatures and accrediting bodies require it, but because it is educationally effective. The point of any assessment program is student learning. Effective assessment improves student learning. For those convinced of the value of assessment to students and programs that teach students, we take the unusual step of giving prescriptive advice regarding the future of assessment within the communication discipline. The advice can be summarized in a few simple statements. Engage in conversation with whoever does not understand and appreciate the value of assessment. In this conversation, the argument for developing an effective assessment program centers around four points: (1) Create clear objectives; (2) Focus on oral communication; (3) Create an effective program and do the research; and (4) Redesign the plan as needed.

Create Clear Objectives

When students are engaged in a program of instruction, whether it is television production or public speaking, teachers need to know a number of things about the effect of instruction. Teachers need to know: (a) whether the instruction has had any effect, (b) how the skills and knowledge levels of their students compare with predetermined optimum levels, (c) whether their students are learning some aspects of the curriculum faster than they are learning others, and (d) how their students compare in ability to other students in similar classes. Teachers need to be able to provide answers to these questions in a systematic fashion with confidence that the answers are both reliable and valid. These questions have formed the basis of an effective program assessment in the past, and are still the focus for the future. The ultimate goal of any assessment program is still better instruction.

For any testing program to work, it must be based on a clear set of educational objectives. One cannot decide to test speaking and listening skills and begin by looking for a test. There are simply too many available. If a decision is made to test oral communication

skills (or any academic learning), the most critical step is to pinpoint the objectives and skills that you wish students to possess. Clear objectives are the first step in developing a successful testing program. If the objectives are not clear, nothing else will make sense.

One excellent example in speech communication demonstrates this point. Listening is an important skill, yet researchers have disagreed about virtually every aspect of the listening process including its definition, dimensions, methods of assessment, and methods of improving listening ability. Thus, validity is one of the greatest difficulties posed by listening tests. Since there is no agreement about what listening is, researchers cannot be certain that listening tests actually measure listening. For example, definitions of listening have ranged from the ability to respond appropriately when "Fire!" is shouted in a school to the ability to accurately gauge the internal emotional state of the speaker. That covers quite a range. The problem of assessing listening ability is compounded by the fact that most tests depend on the expressive abilities of those tested. This is not to say that tests of listening are not valuable—they are highly valuable. The key is the match between the objectives and the test. If the listening objectives are clearly defined, then a listening test can be selected that taps those objectives. Creating clear objectives is a critical first step to developing an effective assessment program.

Focus on Oral Communication

This may be a controversial claim. Our discipline has paid a great deal of attention to aspects of the communication process peripheral to the spoken word. Yet for most of the educational community, skill in the use of the spoken word (with attendant nonverbal behaviors and response-ability) is the primary goal for students. An argument for this goal needs to include the separation of oral communication from communication-related abilities because in many ways, assessment of oral communication is unique in higher education. Methods of assessment used in other academic areas cannot easily be adapted to oral communication. To understand the impact of this, we must consider three points.

First, in comparing oral communication skill assessment with assessment in other academic areas, Mead (1982) made the following distinction:

> For many academic areas traditional testing methods made a lot of sense. A great deal of the educational experience involves acquiring knowledge for some unknown application later in life. For instance, most students who take science in school do not intend to become scientists. It is probably not necessary to measure these students to see how well they handle laboratory equipment. It does make sense to see how well these students grasp the basic vocabulary, concepts, and process of science. There are, however, certain academic areas that should he assessed using methods that tap competence directly, rather than indirectly. Oral communication is one of these areas. Like reading and writing, speaking and listening are used to accomplish a host of purposes. They are process skills. It does not make as much sense to assess students' knowledge about how they should communicate as it does to assess students' communication performance in real situations. Thus, oral communication skills have generally been assessed with performance measures. Students typically have been asked to present a speech or to listen to material, not to answer knowledge questions about oral communication. (p. 2)

The process for examining oral communication is unique among academic areas. Features of oral communication are addressed in NCA's Criteria for the Assessment of Oral Communication: A National Context (NCA, 1993), a document that describes the national

context for assessment and provides general guidelines for assessing communication. While these features create some problems affecting the purpose and type of test selected to assess students' oral communication skills, the problems are not insurmountable. We can define in clear, behavioral terms both nonverbal and verbal aspects of communication (such as the amount of eye contact and desired language patterns needed in a given situation). Criteria of competence that take cultural and situational differences into account can also be identified, since a communication behavior may be "right" in one situation and not in another. If developed effectively, assessment methods can work in a variety of situations with a variety of raters.

Second, if an assessment program is undertaken, what purposes can it be expected to serve? Again, the goal of all testing programs is to improve the education of students. To this end, oral communication skills can be assessed in a number of different places for a number of different purposes. Student assessment can take place prior to entering college, during instruction to chart progress, and upon graduation to determine whether a student has acquired the desired learning outcomes. In addition to student centered assessment, testing of oral communication also can serve the needs of program assessment.

Third, an effective integrated assessment program incorporates and aligns classroom educational objectives together with general instructional program objectives. By considering classroom and program goals, an assessment process can be developed that gives feedback not only about the student, but the educational program as well.

Create an Effective Program

Given that assessment is a reality of our academic institutions, how do we best engage in assessment? The National Communication Association has developed a large number of resources available to anyone needing to develop an assessment plan. Some of that material is adapted here to provide the reader with illustrative samples. The process for developing a departmental assessment plan involves departmental or program assessment, not individual or course assessment. Of course, the results of assessing individual student achievement and course-based assessment activities can be part of the departmental process.

- Assessment programs must focus on all academic programs, both undergraduate and graduate programs and provide separate plans for each program.
- Review/development of goals should include all faculty members. The Unit should decide if goals are appropriate and measurable and use this time to make any changes.
- Use a conceptual framework for assessment: cognition (knowledge), affect (attitude), behavior (skill). Program assessment ultimately should include all three components of the framework.
- Every goal must have an assessment technique (although one technique can address several goals). Every assessment technique must generate information that are interpreted and put to use in some way.
- Multiple measures should be used to address the three domains of the conceptual framework. Some examples of multiple measures include pre- and post-tests, student surveys (e.g., graduating seniors, alumni surveys), portfolios, academic program reviews, and external reviews of program success (e.g., community, alumni, employer).
- Based upon assessment findings, units then determine changes to be made in teaching, learning, and curriculum. Department must follow up changes and report this follow up to indicate if improvement has occurred, will continue, etc.

There is one other very powerful need in the discipline regarding assessment: do the research and publish it. There is a dearth of articles that catalog the results of assessment programs. While a great deal of anecdotal evidence exists, that in and of itself does not prove the case. As assessment programs are developed and refined, we encourage you to publish the particulars of the program and its effect on students.

Redesigning the Plan. A model of continuous development underlies implementation of an educational assessment program. After collecting data, analysis will reveal if adjustments are needed to meet the established goals or if the goals themselves need to be adjusted. The following process outlines steps for redesigning an assessment plan.

- Unit's faculty should review its mission and goals and discuss any changes they may want to make. Goals are the foundation for student achievement assessment. They must be operationalized and measurable. Unit must indicate any goal changes in the unit's plan.
- Unit's faculty should review the department's assessment infrastructure and ensure that it emerges from a conceptual framework that includes assessment of all three learning domains: cognition (knowledge), affect (attitude), and behavior (skills).
- Unit's faculty should review "how" they are currently doing student achievement assessment; e.g., assessment techniques, data collection, etc., and who is responsible for coordinating the assessment activities for the department. During this process faculty will explore whether assessment activities address the three components of the conceptual framework above; e.g., what is being done and what needs to be done in the future.
- Unit's faculty should look at the results that have been generated by assessment and how these results are interpreted: Do the results redirect curriculum, teaching, and learning? Are the results timely and user-friendly? Are the results interpreted in such a way as to provide valuable feedback to faculty, students, and administrators? Are the results shared on a regular basis with faculty, students, and administrators?
- Unit's faculty should examine how assessment results have been used in the past. This is the time to revise the assessment process to create a feedback loop to students, faculty, and administration if such a loop does not already exist. Assessment should be used to redirect curriculum, teaching, and learning.
- Unit's faculty should determine an incremental process by which assessment changes will occur. For example, they may decide to change one piece of the assessment process every semester until they accomplish all the changes they want to make. Or they may decide to make one change every academic year so they can concentrate their efforts on an important piece of assessment. However, a definite redesign timeline should be completed and subsequently reviewed to ensure that it is followed.

Implementing an assessment program requires being responsive to the needs of various stakeholders in the education process. Articulating a position for assessment that illustrates this sensitivity includes: creating clear objectives, focusing on oral communication, creating an effective program and doing the research, and redesigning the plan as needed.

CONCLUSION

Assessment has come a long way—and we believe the narrative of education is enhanced by its presence. Assessment is not the answer to all of our educational problems, but assessment can have great positive benefit when it is put into the overall educational

context. The danger is attempting to implement an assessment program without putting it into an effective context. Without context, assessment becomes an empty exercise: one that many teachers and faculty rightly criticize. Done well, assessment provides a means to improve communication between people and enhance our collective well-being.

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