

## SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENT

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*Editor's note: The following lecture was presented to the College of Language and Letters on 27 August 2003.*

I attended the American Association for Higher Education's Assessment Conference in June. I left those meetings with two central impressions.

First, I was impressed by the emphasis given to the idea that assessment is an ongoing process oriented around curricular change and undertaken to improve student learning. I take this to mean that both our general approach to assessment and our specific plans for doing it should evolve as we learn more about and better understand the teaching and learning process.

Second, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the two sessions that prompted my most copious note taking were on topics that might at first seem tangential to assessment. One of these sessions dealt with a survey of faculty attitudes regarding the scholarship of learning and teaching at Syracuse University. The other detailed a program designed to foster the scholarship of learning and teaching at Portland State University. The inclusion of these two sessions in an assessment conference reinforced for me a conclusion I had come to previously—that assessment is very much a part of the scholarship of learning and teaching. Thomas Angelo joins the terms when he asks, “Why not a Scholarship of Teaching, Assessment, and Learning?” (200)

We have been charged to lead out in the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching here at BYU-Idaho. An apostle of the Lord has prophesied that we will do so. Learning about this scholarship and making tentative steps toward participating in it have been some of the most rewarding experiences that I have had here. I am still inspired by the way President Bednar described our work two years ago. I'm sure that we are all familiar with his words:

[We] should be excellent scholars, and our scholarship should be focused on the processes of learning and teaching. We will not be a recognized and highly regarded research institution in the traditional sense of that term. We will, however, emphasize a wide range of scholarly endeavors and excel in and play a pioneering role in understanding learning and teaching processes with faith and hard work, and in the process of time. (quoted in Eyring, 9)

Elder Eyring endorsed and expanded on that vision when he spoke to us on September 18, 2001. He testified as follows:

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That pioneering role as a leader in understanding learning and teaching will come to pass. I, as a servant of Jesus Christ, testify to you that I know that will happen. Even with these apparently humble and even paradoxical standards of what we will be and who we will be, that miracle will occur and this institution, in the world, will become a place that people know of because of the insights that will come as we come to understand the teaching and learning process here. I so testify. (9)

I quote President Bednar and Elder Eyring because as I see it, scholarly assessment is a tool to help us to understand the teaching and learning process. We are here to teach philosophy, composition, the humanities, Chinese literature, or whatever the case may be. That is always primary. We teach in these fields not only because they interest us but also because we have been trained in their methods and subject matter. But, I dare say that very few of us were trained in how students learn the various subjects that we teach. That is where the scholarship of learning and teaching, and more to the point, the scholarship of assessment, comes in. As Pat Hutchings notes, “the scholarship of teaching and learning is deeply embedded in the discipline; its questions arise from the character of the field and what it means to know it deeply” (7).

So, what does it mean to know and understand the novels of John Steinbeck *deeply*? What does it mean to know and understand religious art *deeply*? What does it mean to know and understand the poetry of Vicente Huidobro *deeply*? How would you recognize a student who had reached that point? Does anything change if we think about assessment as scholarly inquiry into such questions instead of thinking of it as one more thing to do to keep the administration happy? I believe that everything changes, and in ways that have been personally exciting.

John Barr and Robert Tagg suggest the scale of those changes. “To say that the purpose of colleges is to provide instruction,” they observe, “is like saying that General Motors’ business is to operate assembly lines or that the purpose of medical care is to fill hospital beds. We now see that our mission is not instruction but rather that of producing *learning* with every student by *whatever* means work best” (13). The process of discovering and understanding which means work best is—you guessed it—assessment. Barr and Tagg posit the idea of “the institution itself as a learner—over time, it continuously learns how to produce more learning with each graduating class, each entering student” (14). Now maybe I’m an oddball, but that strikes me as an inspiring and very worthy goal for each of us individually, as departments, as a college, and as a university. Again, assessment isn’t the end, it is a means. The end is increased and improved student learning. Scholarly assessment is a means by which we can learn what is working, and where we might do well to approach things differently.

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So then, what lines of inquiry might we follow if we were to do scholarly assessment? Whatever specific shape it takes, doing scholarly assessment implies that our work will meet accepted standards of scholarship. Marcia Mentkowski and Georgine Loacker suggest the following six standards: “1. The activity requires a high level of discipline-related expertise. 2. The activity breaks new ground, is innovative. 3. The activity can be replicated or elaborated. 4. The work and its results can be documented. 5. The work and its results can be peer-reviewed. 6. The activity has significance or impact” (83). With those criteria in mind, consider the following questions.

What if the three departments of this college were to collaboratively explore the assessment of learning outcomes that don’t lend themselves to quantification? I’m thinking of developmental outcomes like increased literary sensibility, rigorous critical thinking, or an enriched and expanded worldview. Wouldn’t that require a “high level of discipline-related expertise”?

What if the three departments were to draw on the common issues and concerns that unite us in the continuing and potentially collaborative process of refining our assessment efforts? Aren’t there rich conversations on teaching and assessing the understanding of literature, language, and ideas to be had between the three? Wouldn’t such conversations promote a more scholarly assessment of these outcomes? Would that activity not have “significance or impact” within and even beyond the context of the CES system?

Can we assess results as we search for the correct principles that students need to act on in composition, in the humanities, or in language learning? How does learning by the Spirit in these fields transfer to other settings and contexts? How can we encourage students to exercise agency in our classrooms? Is the resulting learning more durable than other learning? Even provisional answers to these questions would break new ground.

What might focusing on the issues of retention and transfer of learning contribute to our thinking about assessment? Consider the following passage from a recent article in *Change* magazine.

The underlying rationale for any kind of formal instruction is the assumption that knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned in this setting will be recalled accurately, and will be used in some other context at some other time in the future. We only care about student performance in school because we believe that it predicts what students will remember and do when they are somewhere else at some other time. Yet we often teach and test as though the underlying rationale for education were to improve student performance *in school*. As a consequence, we rarely assess student learning in the context or at the time for which we are teaching.

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The authors summarize by saying, “We need to always remember that we are teaching toward some time in the future when we will not be present—and preparing students for unpredictable real world ‘tests’ that we will not be giving—instead of preparing them for traditional midterm and final exams” (38).

Well, what about transfer as part of assessment? Do we agree with the basic premise that our purpose is not to prepare students to take exams, but to perform accurately and well in future (and very different) contexts? If so, how are we doing? Would assessing how well classroom learning transfers to the workplace and the home tell us anything useful about our work? What, for example, if our assessment of writing were to include employer evaluations of alumni writing? What if we were to gauge our success in Philosophy 110 as much by the transfer of skills and habits of mind to other coursework and to life decisions generally as by the successful completion of class assignments? What if success in an entry-level language class meant that the student had used and was ready to keep using the language in real, meaningful, and authentic ways? Wouldn’t the inclusion of transfer of learning in an assessment program be a significant innovation? Could we not seek peer-review of such work? Wouldn’t this be all about student learning of the most significant kind?

I began with two central impressions. I conclude with two central convictions. First, assessment is a powerful tool that can help us to make the timely and effective curricular changes that will improve student learning. Second, assessment is implicit in the vision of who we are and what we do articulated by President Bednar and endorsed by Elder Eyring. Assessment is a way of turning a scholarly eye to the painful gap between what we say and what they hear, between what we teach and what they learn. Assessment is all about learning. ☺

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