At Odds with Assessment

Being a Critical Educator within the Academy

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ARE CRITICAL ASSESSMENT PRACTICES possible? Is the role of assessment fundamentally at odds with critical library pedagogy? Assessment can be applied in multiple ways as a part of classroom pedagogy, but it is also a term that can be applied to larger institutional concerns such as program effectiveness, budget priorities, and accreditation. Assessing both instructor performance and student learning can justify academic programs or services, help refine learning outcomes, measure teacher performance accountability, or provide feedback on the efficacy of instruction. In this chapter, we are focusing on assessment as a classroom practice, in tandem with a discussion of institutional concerns that embody the more commodified aspects of higher education.[1] We offer a summary of assessment criticism and an analysis of common classroom-based assessment practices that can be critically focused.

Critical educators often focus on one of two issues with assessment: the underlying philosophical implications of assessing student learning, or the typical means of assessment, which oversimplify the learning process(es). On the former point, the primary criticism seems to stem from the neoliberal approach to higher education, which turns education and student learning into a product to be marketed, consumed, and assessed.[2] Neoliberalism is a political and economic framework that favors free market and laissez-faire governmen-

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tal policies and is characterized by "fiscal austerity, privatization, and market liberalization."[3] This paradigm frames education as a mode to perpetuate capitalist economic systems by preparing students to be productive workers. Because this model understands students as "employable subjects,"[4] neoliberal education is largely performance- and assessment-driven.[5] Assessment outcomes like grade point averages (GPAs) and standardized test scores serve, in some professions, as metrics for the employability of the student[6] and speak to how well the student can perform in a capitalist marketplace. Indeed, in some cases, simply having a degree serves as a metric for the ability to perform in such a marketplace.[7] When higher education is used as a primarily economic tool, it becomes commodified.

Commodification of student learning is readily apparent through accreditation bodies, which standardize curricula, require evidence for various learning outcomes, and "reward conformity" to those standards.[8] In order for assessment to be meaningful among departments, institutions, and accrediting bodies, these entities must collectively assume that student learning can be quantified into agreed-upon goals and measures. The goals and measures themselves often foster an agenda geared towards a return on investment and reproduce systems of power.[9]

Likewise, assessing student performance and learning obscures the social and political inequalities inherent in the higher education system. As Maura Seale explores, traditional assessment tools—like standardized testing, pre- and post-lesson measurement scales, and aggregated markers such as GPAs—do not "theorize learning as a complex, recursive, and unpredictable system of processes," but rather as an activity that can be easily defined, measured, and evaluated.[10] By "framing education as a standardized and measurable product…economic, political, and social inequities are erased."[11] Because assessment tools so rarely capture the complexities of learning and meaning making, they can be deeply at odds with critical and social justice–oriented instructional theories.

For libraries in particular, the context in which we typically use assessment often wrongly conflates assessment of learning with value.[12] In these contexts, *value* is rarely defined, but it generally refers to the impact a library has on various learning, retention, or other university-sanctioned metrics. Too often, instead of collecting meaningful assessment data on how and what students learn, librarians collect data that is meaningful to administrators and accreditors like correlations between library usage and GPAs, circulation statistics, and proof students are meeting university-set learning outcomes. One of the most visible projects to conflate assessment with value—thereby reducing the assessment of student learning and teaching to numbers and graphs—is Megan Oakleaf's *Value of Academic Libraries*.[13] This report has received criticism for framing "education as a commodity, students and parents as customers."[14]

The report also stresses that when making decisions based on assessments, librarians should consider what skills employers value,[15] which is a neoliberal approach to analyzing assessment data. Finally, the report justifies the existence of libraries as a good return on investment instead of as an integral part of higher education.[16]

Similarly, the ACRL's Assessment in Action (AiA) program, part of its "Value of Academic Libraries" initiative, conflates assessment with value both in practice and in name. Indeed, one of the goals of the AiA project is to "develop the professional competencies of librarians to document and communicate the value of their academic libraries primarily in relation to their institution's goals for student learning and success."[17] The underlying assumption of these types of projects is that the kind of learning that happens through librarian instruction is valuable only insofar as it promotes institutionally agreed-upon definitions of student learning. Not all AiA projects are focused on instruction within libraries, however. While institutional goals and actual student learning aren't mutually exclusive, librarians should be mindful of who benefits as institutional goals are pursued.

Keeping in mind the criticism of traditional assessment tools, the practice of assessment can still be very useful to help libraries and librarians make important strategic decisions about which services and resources to offer, to whom, and how. Indeed, one such project using assessment tools was Rubric Assessment for Information Literacy Skills (RAILS). In this project, nine institutions developed assignment-based rubrics to use in information literacy instruction that reflected their local campus contexts. In this instance the rubrics were developed for a local context; this mitigates the tendency of rubrics to reduce complexity of student learning on a large scale. Rubrics can be meaningful assessment tools for critical pedagogues because they can be used collaboratively with students and other instructional partners, provide meaningful feedback to students, and be used reflectively as a tool to assess the assessment instrument itself.[18] As we discuss below, these components of assessment lend themselves to a critically oriented practice.

While it is no doubt necessary for libraries to be seen as part of the academic learning community—done, in part, by participating in assessment—our usual methods and metrics of assessment do not completely capture the library's role in supporting learning and teaching on our campuses. Reporting on measures like GPAs, retention, and standardized information literacy indicators does not reflect the complexities of student learning, nor does it demonstrate the value of libraries as places for learning and investigation.

We take the position outlined by Maria Accardi that although we cannot "secede" from the institution and its power structure, we can "in our own ways, however small, clear out space for creating disruption, for thoughtful experimentation, and for subtle but satisfying interruption of the structures

that govern us,"[19] all with the purpose of contributing to learning and inquiry. Given the fraught history and purposes of assessment in higher education, what would critical assessment look like in practice? What current assessment practices can we attempt to mediate or negotiate as critical educators? Because assessment is as much about quantifying as it is in using that measurement to then modify practices, context is key to determining whether various assessment practices can align with the goals of critical pedagogy. Methods in and of themselves are not inherently critical, though there are certainly some methods that we find hard to imagine having a critical perspective, such as standardized testing. We propose that as part of a critical praxis, assessment be designed using the following values and practices:

- a learner-centered approach to teaching that acknowledges and values prior experiences and knowledge students bring to the classroom[20]
- an attempt to shift and interrogate power relationships and dominant ideologies
- teaching that resists regurgitating deposited content, described by Freire as the "banking" model[21]
- inclusion of reflective components[22]
- results that are used in a way to reflect on student learning and teaching[23]

The values and practices described stem from other critical practices and can be applied in the various ways we are asked to assess learning.

Outcomes have traditionally formed the basis of assessment for student learning. They are designed in advance of the learning opportunity and include "observable and measurable" changes in the learner's behavior, skills, or attitude as a result of the instruction.[24] While Linda Keesing-Styles and other critical educators have advocated for disregarding learning outcomes entirely, they do concede that using learning outcomes for assessment is more compassionate than the prior practice of norming students against each other—which is what happens in a standardized testing environment.[25] Outcome-based teaching posits that all learning is measurable. We recognize there is a certain intangibility to learning. But if we're being asked to assess by our institutions, we have to know what we are measuring. Can outcomes be written in a way that is mindful of critical pedagogy? If these outcomes allow for nuance, flatten hierarchies, encourage students to pose problems, and accurately reflect the messy processes that are critical thinking, we believe they can be useful. Indeed, outcomes themselves can be part of the "hidden curriculum,"[26] or tacit knowledge that reinforces cultural norms of the academy.[27] By making critically aligned learning outcomes more transparent to our students, we encourage them to understand and critique the outcomes presented to them in other classes and instructional settings. Critical outcomes would not focus exclusively on measurable behavior but would also include measurable affective,

or emotional, components of learning.[28] Acknowledging our students (and by proxy, ourselves) as entire human beings in the learning process values the emotional energy we are all bringing into the classroom, whether it's anxiety or confidence, and how that may influence the learning process.

The ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy* provides a more flexible starting place for developing critical learning outcomes within local communities compared to the previous information literacy standards.[29] Students can and should participate in determining their own learning outcomes. In a one-shot session, a flipped classroom approach can assist with involving students in learning outcome creation. For example, you can ask students to fill out an online form prior to the class where this question is posed: "What do you want to be able to learn, or do after this session?" This shifts the conversation away from exclusively what the instructor wants or needs to cover. To be included in the outcome-writing process in a semester-long course, students can take an existing syllabus structure and write a personal outcome plan, which may culminate with a reflective component on how they met the outcomes at the end of the course. Finally, in the larger educational context, however, we should invite students to participate at the institutional level by being members of committees where curriculum is proposed and decided. At institutions where this is not an option, programs can run focus groups and otherwise gather student input when designing new courses or programs. As we'll discuss further, participatory assessment (including outcome creation) can have problematic elements as well.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment, or assessment done in the midst of instruction, is a great way to engage with students and see what is working or where pain points are. These practices cover everything from worksheets to seminar discussions. Not all formative assessment practices can be recorded and analyzed for grades or other institutional requirements (nor should they be). This fact gives these measures limited use in supporting an instructional program from the neoliberal perspective, despite their having immediate significance in the day-to-day labor of teaching. In surveying the existing scholarly work on critical pedagogy in library instruction for formative assessment practices, we found lesson plans that provide examples of questions asked during dialogue and small-group discussion.[30] One other practice that is easier to record is having students complete a shared Google spreadsheet on their search strategies, building up a class-wide knowledge base and collection of resources.[31]

One way to make formative assessment practices more critical is to include students in the assessment process by having them assess their own work

and their classmates' work. However, it is important to be mindful that participatory assessment still involves unequal power relationships. Michael Reynolds and Kiran Trehan discuss this struggle after asking students to assess each other's work. They point out that students are not a monolithic group; students competed and self-censored in a way related to which students had more privilege and power than others. These power dynamics then played a role in their group assessment. There is the fear of retaliation from other students to consider, and while the instructor has relinquished power in the classroom, it was the instructor's to relinquish.[32] This is not to say that participatory assessment isn't an important critical assessment method, just that it is messy and fraught with the power relationships we see elsewhere within society; using it doesn't substitute for thinking critically.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment occurs at the end of a structured learning sequence, whether it's a course, program, or degree path. This kind of assessment often needs to be scalable across large programs, so it is not uncommon to see analytic rubrics applied as a way to reliably standardize across many artifacts. As Heidi Jacobs reminds us, "Rubrics generally ask summative questions such as 'does this assignment teach a particular information literacy skill: yes or no?' or 'does this assignment teach this particular outcome: yes or no?' The more open and thus helpful questions are formative questions that cannot be answered with a yes or a no."[33] Likewise, we should be cautious using rubrics that reduce complex information literacy processes to an overly simple scale. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) *Information Literacy VALUE Rubric* is one example of a rubric that, when applied as written, may reduce an array of work over an academic program to a four-point scale.[34] One way critical educators can mitigate the negative effects of reductionist rubrics is to focus on the concepts, skills, or behavior the rubric seeks to measure and resist the need to reduce students to scores. Rubrics may be applied to many different types of learning artifacts, but portfolios are a great option for critical educators. Because students may choose the work they feel best represents their learning experience, portfolios provide a holistic picture of intellectual growth over time. Likewise, because portfolios may include reflective components, they capture many values and practices that correspond to a critical approach.[35] Other summative assessment practices that could include a critical assessment praxis include citation analysis, research logs, and focus groups. The challenge in retaining the critical educator's perspective is how these summative assessment artifacts are designed and analyzed.

Self-Assessment of Teaching

Finally, any discussion of assessment would be remiss if it did not discuss our role as educators. Reflective teaching practices require vulnerability, honesty, and an openness to change. Every time we reflect on an educational interaction, from a tutorial, to a one-shot session, to a semester-long class, we put ourselves in the learner's position, solve problems, and grow as teachers. Char Booth describes reflective practices from her own teaching that include inviting feedback, learning from your mistakes, and learning in the moment.[36] Likewise, in many instructional design models, include Booth's USER, reflective practice is built into the core design principles. A teaching journal is a practical way to reflect that is built in to your usual practice.

Conclusion

None of the methods outlined here is inherently critical. Nor is this is an exhaustive list of assessment methods. Ultimately, whether assessment embodies a critical perspective comes down to context in how these methods (and others) are employed by educators and used by administration. What is the purpose of this assessment? How will we determine measures of student learning? How can we ensure that individual students' experiences are valued and reflected in this process? Why this method and not another? These guiding questions can help direct the design of formative and summative assessments in ways that do the least harm to students. While we may critique the current assessment focus on value in higher education as a product of a neoliberal university structure, we do agree with Oakleaf when she urges us to use assessment. If we, as librarians and as critical educators, are not engaging in any research that demonstrates "value," our administrations and universities will have those conversations for us (and without us).[37] Assessment cannot be ignored; it is up to us to work at making it as ethical a practice as possible, to acknowledge when it is not, and to navigate the continuum between.

Notes

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4. Jankowski and Provezis, "Neoliberal Ideologies," 476.

5. David W. Hicks, "Neoliberal Education," Teaching for a Better World: Learning for Sustainability, last modified January 2015, http://www.teaching4abetterworld.co.uk/docs/Neoliberal_education.pdf.

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7. Tom Wood, "The Sheepskin Effect," National Association of Scholars, July 30, 2009, https://www.nas.org/articles/The_Sheepskin_Effect.

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12. Meredith G. Farkas, "Accountability vs. Improvement: Seeking Balance in the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative," *OLA Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 4–7, http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/9598.

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15. Oakleaf, *Value of Academic Libraries*, 27.

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20. Linda Keesing-Styles, "The Relationship between Critical Pedagogy and Assessment in Teacher Education," *Radical Pedagogy* 5, no. 1 (Summer 2003), http://130.217.226.8/handle/10652/1931.

21. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 72.

22. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 76.

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25. Keesing-Styles, "Relationship between Critical Pedagogy and Assessment."

26. Rashné Rustom Jehangir, *Higher Education and First-Generation Students* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61–64.

27. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.

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