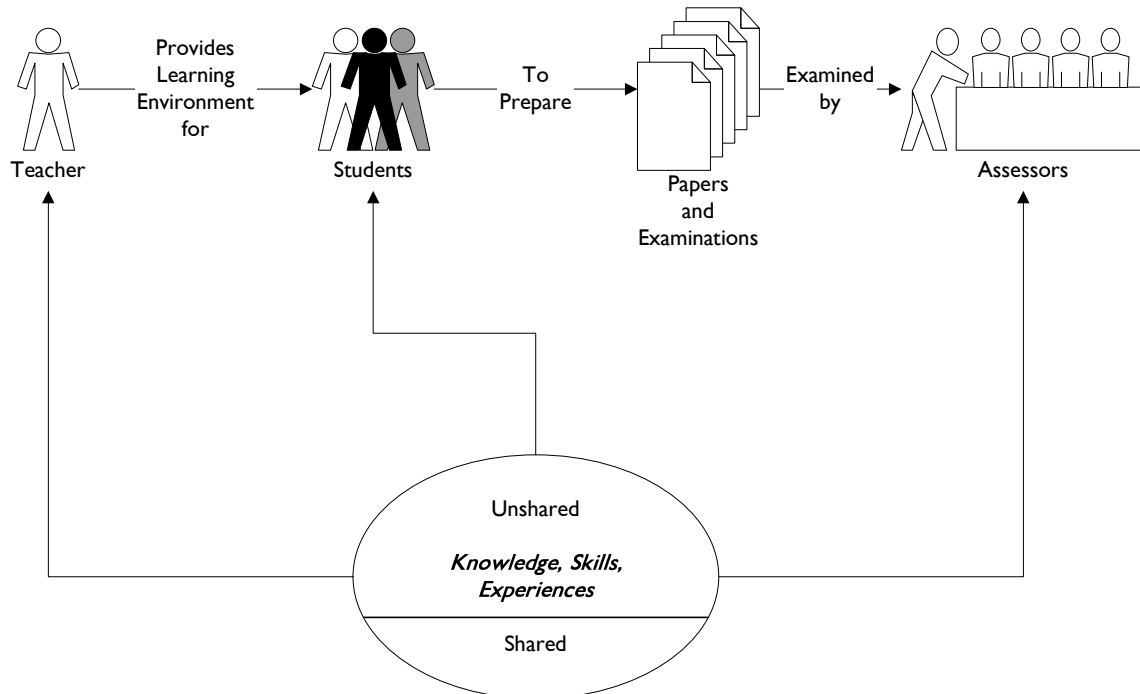


Some Comments on Academic Assessment

I've been involved in this process for the last year at two four year colleges granting undergraduate and graduate business degrees. By academic assessment I mean that work done by the college to satisfy state educational departments, accreditation bureaus, or other institutions to which the college is responsible.

It occurred to me in the work I have most recently done that there is the potential for the assessment process to fail to deliver the hoped-for value because of the difference in contexts.



The work of the principals in this diagram is informed by their individual sets of knowledge, skills, and experiences. A portion of the sets is shared (below the horizontal line in the oval) and remainder is unshared. The placement of the horizontal line is purely arbitrary and intended only to make the point regarding differentiation.

In general, I would expect that the shared knowledge, skills, and experience is greater when one looks at teacher-students pair, and may be less when one brings in the assessors.

I am writing this from an assessor's point of view.

Student Achievement

In one of my most recently completed assessments¹ (global awareness) there were three levels of assessment; exceeded expectations (3), met expectations (2), failed to meet expectations (1).

These levels were applied against three areas; identification of global business issues, analysis of global business factors, application of key international business principles.

¹ Graduate business course

Here is the average of the 170 one-page papers I assessed.

Identification of Global Business Issues	Analysis of Global Business Factors	Application of Key International Business Principles	Total
1.38	1.05	1.01	3.44

The results do not present, from my point of view, an acceptable picture of student mastery of the three areas. I have no idea of the objectives of the college for this particular course, but I imagine that they expected the numbers to be, at a minimum, much closer to a 2 (Met Expectations). That is, there is a gap.

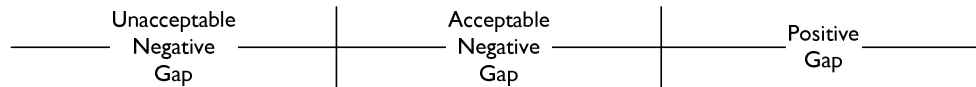
The obvious question is whether this assessment makes any contribution to the overall goal of the assessment process.

The answer to this would seem to lie in the development of a set of hypotheses that could explain the gap, gather and analyze the data to prove or disprove the hypotheses, draw conclusions then develop recommendations that will improve the assessment process.

What, then, do I mean by improving the assessment process?

The answer to this, of course, depends on the intent of the assessment process. I've summarized this in this first paragraph of this note.

Three results are possible.



By gap I essentially mean the assessment (e.g. 1.38) less the objective (e.g., 2).

An unacceptable negative gap results in direction from whomsoever is requesting the assessment that improvements need to be made if the college is receive approval.

An acceptable negative gap is within the boundaries of uncertainty allowed by the approval process.

A positive gap may mean that the approval process goes smoothly.

The assessment, of course, has other meaningful uses. For example, it could be used within the college to improve the quality of the learning experience.

The assessment described above focused on student achievement.

Instructor Intent

Another approach in which I am involved uses instructor intent.²

The department establishes two sets of objectives; qualitative and quantitative.

Qualitative	Quantitative
Critical Thinking	Measures of Central Tendency, Range
Good Business Writing	Standard Deviation
Good Public Speaking	Graphing and Regression Line
Primary Research	Compound and Simple Interest
Inductive Approach	Budgeting and Forecasting

² Undergraduate business program.

Computer Literacy	Accounting Cycle
Cultural Literacy	Computing and Linear Programming
Budgeting	Future Value and Present Value
Ethics	Probability and Frequency Distribution
Leadership	Cash Flow Analysis and Depreciation

Each instructor for a course than indicates the level at which the course outcomes are intended to meet these objectives using the following scorings:

Major (4): Topics are fully introduced, developed, and reinforced throughout the course in course lectures, labs, homework assignments, tests, exams, projects; an “application knowledge”

Moderate (2): Topics are introduced and further developed and reinforced in course lectures, labs, assignments, tests, etc; a “working” knowledge

Minor (1): Topics introduced in course lectures, labs, homework, assignments, etc; a “talking knowledge” or “awareness”

(0): Does not relate

This approach to assessment here is to meet the requests of a higher level educational organization to indicate conformance to general education requirements. The department and college are further interested in the alignment to specific missions and objectives. That is, there is a deliberate intent to use this assessment internally to improve the quality of the learning experience.

For example, the instructors of two different sections of the same course realized that they emphasized different points in there two sections. Some of this, of course, is to be expected, but the two instructors realized that some differences were large enough that reconciliation was required.

Further opportunities arise to use this assessment of intent in a positive manner.

1. The intended outcomes for prerequisite courses should be established, in part, by those who teach the follow-on courses.
2. Beyond the notion of prerequisites is the idea that the preferred sequence in which courses are taken should, to the extent possible, reflect an intent in preceding courses that prepares the student for the intent in subsequent courses.
3. The organizations offering our students employment should have some level of input into qualitative and quantitative objectives.
4. Student achievement should be evaluated in the light of instructor intent.
5. Student achievement should clearly relate to instructor intent.

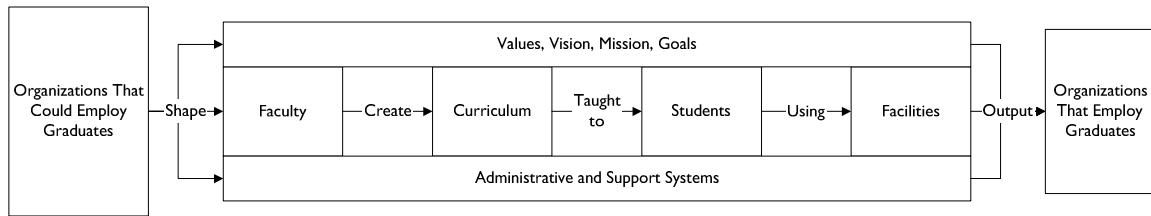
Closing Comments

I should, by no means, be considered more than a novice when it comes to assessment “...to satisfy state educational departments, accreditation bureaus, or other institutions to which the college is responsible.”

On the other hand, a long career in business and some seven years of involvement in teaching and governance in higher education has left me with a substantial amount of general (and sometimes quite specific) experience on the subject of assessment.

That is to say I am much less interested in assessment for, say, accreditation purposes, and much more interested in assessment for improving the preparation of our graduates to survive, thrive, and make a difference in a world of growing complexity and increasingly rapid rates of change.

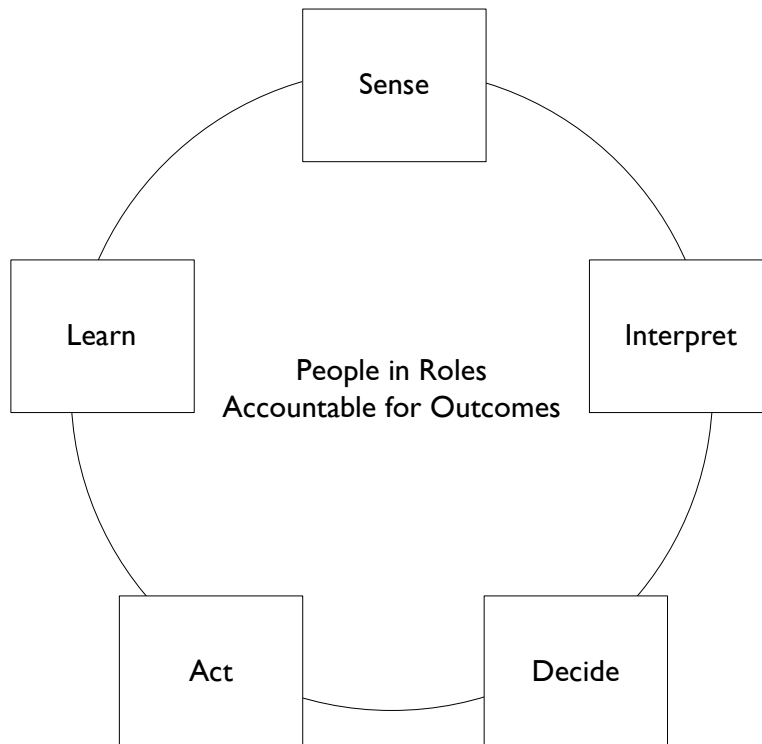
Higher education serves two very important customers, our graduates and those by whom they are employed.



As a consequence I argue that our assessment criteria and approach should be predominantly influenced by the wants and needs of these two sets of customers.

I had earlier raised the issue of shared and unshared knowledge, skills, and experiences amongst the three principals in higher education.³ I think this deserves additional attention. The opportunity for false signals arises from this issue. We need to get assessment correct.

The value in assessment is not gained without a subsequent ability to change.



Assessment, at best, provides input to Sense. We need to be able to complete the above cycle if assessment is to deliver meaningful value. That is, assessment should mean more than just checking a box complete.

James Drogan
January 4, 2009

³ As an assessor I was asked to assume the role of a potential employer in the first case I described herein and did assume the role of a potential employer in the second case.

