Formative Assessment and Student Feedback to Support Quality Improvement:
The Devil is in the Details

Judy R. Wilkerson, Ph.D.
Professor, Research and Assessment
Florida Gulf Coast University
Ft. Myers, Florida USA

Accreditation is a crucial educational quality control process worldwide and is equally focused on its dual role of assuring quality while advancing improvement. The first standard of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), *Academic Quality and Student Achievement*, is "at the core of accreditation" (CHEA, 2021) and calls for the implementation of innovative practices (Standard 1D), thereby providing CHEA with the opportunity to provide global leadership in the development and dissemination of innovative and meaningful assessment of student learning.

As in any educational process, the literature of the field can provide guidance on how to accomplish that charge, and a small portion of that literature will be summarized herein. In accreditation, that literature comes from the assessment and evaluation profession, which is placing increasing emphasis on the role of formative assessment and feedback – considered crucial aspects of the student learning process. They have the potential to frame improvements at all levels – individual student learning, individual course and program improvement, and institutional quality improvement in a progressive fashion. Brookhart and Oakley (2021) suggested that effective feedback provides the next steps for students to progress toward the learning goal, which then continues with decisions about the next instructional moves, followed by improved professional development and instructional improvement at all levels.

I have written previously about the conflicting paradigms of quality assurance (QA)/quality improvement (QI) and formative/summative assessment, and I have suggested that accreditation agencies implement policies resolving these conflicts (Wilkerson, 2019). I continue that discussion here. In my previous work, I suggested an alternative rubric design that celebrates overall success while focusing on specific areas for improvement (AFIs). Here, I note that the illustrative format I presented is secondary to the concept that student success is achieved one student at a time and one concept or skill at a time. As faculty improve their practice, one-by-one, the quality of the institution's graduates improves.

I posit here that the accumulation of curricular based improvements may be even more meaningful than a one-point gain on the institutional average on a standardized test. That is not meant to say that the standardized test result is unimportant, it is only meant to say that we need more information and an expanded focus. Assessment and evaluation specialists have learned the value of formative and summative assessment, so here, I suggest here that the time is ripe for accreditation to embrace that transformation in how assessment should work. It is a 21st century transition that needs to take place.

The Literature: Student Success Driven by Formative Assessment and Feedback

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Black and Wiliam (1998) published their seminal article on *Assessment and Classroom Learning*, reviewing the literature on this topic and providing evidentiary support for their claim that frequent feedback about learning yields substantial learning gains. The perceptions of students and their role in self-assessment were well supported with a theoretical analysis of the nature of feedback and the prospects for the improvement of practice, including the processes of self-and peer-assessment. As a matter of public policy, they concluded that "the gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable, and… amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions (p. 61).

About a decade later, the next seminal article appeared. Hattie (2009) extended the Black and Wiliam arguments to the realm of higher education (tertiary assessment in New Zealand), predicting an "impending revolution" that would use assessment to improve and change what and how we teach. He concluded that: "Of all the factors that make a difference to student outcomes, the power of feedback is paramount in any list (p. 13). He described the "black box of assessment" as follows:

> We have, in large part, a black box of assessment in tertiary assessment – it has worked for us for many years. We implicitly trust our academics to know what they value in their subjects, to set examinations and assignments, to mark reliably and validly, and then to record these marks…, and the students move on, upwards, and/or out. We look at pass marks, we "red flag" courses in which students' satisfaction is not high, and we run the occasional course in teaching or assessment… The most exciting, however, is the move to include formative assessment notions in the all-so-often summative black box of tertiary assessment (259-260).

Hattie (2009) proposed that there are three major feedback questions that need to guide assessment: (1) Where am I going? (2) How am I doing? And (3) Where to next? Hattie concluded that his major message was that the feedback from assessments to the instructor, including the gaps, is what is most critical in terms of aligning intentions with success.

> Over the next decade we will witness the greatest revolution in the role of assessment in tertiary education – it will move from a device to sum up what we think students need to know, to providing feedback into the teaching and learning cycle (275).

At about the same, and in the USA, Murray (2009) wrote about "flawed measures" and the tension between accountability and improvement in accreditation. He discussed the problem with measures of accomplishment in higher education (grades, licensure and other standardized tests, surveys, and rates of accomplishments), expressing the typical hope that more will be better. Soon after, The *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran an article advocating that accreditation should focus on learning, improvement, and "direct measures" (Pryor, 2010). But what might those measures be?

The 21st Century Challenge to Accreditation

More recently, Phillips and Kinser (2018) suggested that accreditation is on the cutting edge of change, noting the many instances in which quality assurance processes have worked well, screening out inadequate education while also improving the quality of the education provided. These authors acknowledge that accreditation agency standards have also impacted innovative higher education models but that there is more to do. They cited five critical issues, with the fifth addressing innovation, calling for accreditors to foster (rather than impede) new educational models and institutional directions. Accreditation agencies must be open to change as they define what quality improvement is all about:

> …identifying what can be better and figuring out how to do better. With a valued tradition of helping institutions improve— through doing things differently— -accreditors may be proud of their success in facilitating change in one area while at the same time be guilty of creating a barrier to change in another. (p. 265)

Phillips and Kenser (2018) concluded that accreditation is on the cutting edge of the transformation of higher education, with never a greater potential for re-envisioning a mission to shape a high quality 21st century educational system.

Professional Modelling: NCME's New Role

In 2017, the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the professional association of measurement scientists and practitioners who work to advance theory and applications of educational measurement, initiated a series of classroom assessment conferences to expand their predominant focus on standardized tests. This organization is one of three that work together to define the *Standards of Educational and Psychological Testing,* which guide the development of all standardized tests in the USA and many other countries. Standardized testing has been the association's main focus for decades. Nonetheless, realizing the importance of the movement to include classroom assessment in teaching, learning, and assessment, and in recognition of the work being done nationally and internationally on the changing conditions of assessment, NCME began running conferences on classroom assessment every two years and providing resources for assessment professionals and students alike to use. They do so because of the clear evidence that formative assessment and feedback are being recognized globally as the future of improved decision making about student learning in support of student success.

Standards-Based Program Evaluation

Accreditation is a form of program evaluation, and in any evaluation design, the evaluator is responsible for meeting the standards of the evaluation profession. The *Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarborough et al, 2011) guide the evaluation profession through six standards sets, the first two of which are utility and feasibility. Perhaps it is through these two lenses, utility and feasibility, that an added focus on formative assessment and smaller scale improvements should be considered.

Today, there are no answers to what the scope of institutional evaluation should be; there are only directions suggested by various leaders in the assessment and evaluation community. What we do have, however, is a model for innovation and leadership in 21st century change with the National Council of Measurement and Evaluation (NCME) and their work on providing resources and training to lead the way professionally. CHEA has that opportunity, too, given its Standard 1D on innovation. Perhaps this is the time for a conversation to begin about what the future of accreditation should be in an evolving world where accreditation can be "on the cutting edge."

Improvement Focused Rubrics

In 2019, I presented a viewpoint (Wilkerson, 2019) that incorporated a sample illustrative solution aimed at resolving, at least in part, the paradigm conflict between quality assurance and quality improvement. I presented a simplified, feedback-generating rubric design alternative that moves away from the complex traditional tabular format that typically leaves students wondering what they did well and what they did not do well. The format, which I dubbed, "the AFI rubric," (for "areas for improvement") is but one example of an innovation that models an improvement emphasis through formative assessment and feedback with its focus on self-assessment, formative use, systematic analysis, and opportunity to use evidence (data) in support of improvement claims.

AFI rubrics have allowed me to make data-driven improvements in my courses, resulted in a reduction in common student errors, and resulted in improved satisfaction levels of my students. Course after course, about 95% of my students attest to the helpfulness of these rubrics in their learning and accomplishments and about 85% of them hope to carry these rubrics to the schools in which they teach. Nonetheless, the details of this research are all beyond the scope of this writing. which aims at a more global purpose. It is just an example that has yet to be tested for feasibility and utility in terms of broader use beyond my classroom.

Questions for the Future

The literature of the past two decades seems to suggest that we need to rise out of the "black box" of assessment, reliant on the traditional outcomes measures, and commit to student growth through formative assessment and feedback to improve student success, celebrating those successes, one at a time, as a measure of institutional growth and improvement. CHEA, through the standards that govern the work of the accreditors, has the opportunity to "support implementation of innovative practices" as a model for the accreditors, and NCME provides an example of how that kind of leadership can be taken through modeling and disseminating "best practice."

Perhaps a new role in these changing times is possible. Just as the standardized test profession and its national organization have moved into research and professional development on classroom assessment, perhaps the accreditors can take on a similar role at a different level defining continuous improvement as a cumulative, never-ending process. Just as Hattie (2009) posed his third question for student assessment, perhaps the continuing and ultimate question for QI is "Where do I go next?" Perhaps that's worth discussing as 21st century accreditation evolves and grows.

References

Banta, T. W., Ewell, P. T., & Cogswell, C. A. (2016). *Tracing Assessment Practice as Reflected in Assessment Update (NILOA Occasional Paper No. 28).* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Black, P.l & Wiliam, D. (1998. Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education (5)*1, 7-74.

Brookhart, S. M. and Oakley, A. (2021). *How to look at student work to uncover student thinking.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Washington, D.C.

Hattie, J. (2009). The Black Box of Tertiary Assessment: An Impending Revolution. In L. H. Meyer, S. Davidson, H. Anderson, R. Fletcher, P.M. Johnston, & M. Rees (Eds.), *Tertiary Assessment & Higher Education Student Outcomes: Policy, Practice & Research* (pp.259-275). Wellington, New Zealand: Ako Aotearoa.

Phillips, S.D. (ed.); Kinser, K. (ed.) (2018). Accreditation on the Edge: Challenging Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pryor, J.H. (Aug 29, 2010). Accreditation should focus on what leads to learning. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Wilkerson, J.R. (2019). Rubrics meeting quality assurance and improvement needs in the accreditation context. *Quality Assurance in Education (28)*1. 19-32. DOI 10.1108/QAE-04-2019-0045

Yarbrough, D.B.; Shulha, L.M.; Hopson, R.K., & Caruthers, F.A. (2011). *The Program Evaluation Standards: A Guide for Evaluators and Evaluation Users, 3rd ed.*. Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation: Sage Publishers; Los Angeles.