Strategies for Assessment in Communication Centers: Perspectives from

Across the Field

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This essay offers key highlights from a panel discussion that took place at the 2014 National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) conference at Arizona State University – West in Glendale, Arizona. The panel included communication center directors from across the United States. Each participant was asked to describe assessment efforts at their respective centers. The presentations were rich with examples and evidence that assessment efforts at our centers are organized, purposeful, and on-going.

The post-panel discussion highlighted three themes. First, there is a wide range of knowledge about assessment practices among communication center faculty and staff. Some individuals have a great deal of experience with assessment theory and techniques. Similarly, some administrators are skilled at collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. Yet for many communication center professionals, assessment is an entirely new practice

with a steep initial learning curve. Because graduate education focuses on developing disciplinary expertise, not knowledge of assessment, many in the panel audience expressed concern about "not knowing how" to do assessment effectively at their centers. Others reported a lack of training in research methodologies and wanting to "shy away from number-crunching." Moreover, despite the importance of assessment in the national discourse about higher education, assessment techniques may not be a focus of the available or funded professional development opportunities on some campuses where communication centers are located (Hutchins, 2010).

A second theme to surface from the NACC panel discussion was the challenge of translating literature about assessment practices to the communication center context. Certainly a great deal has been written about assessment in higher education. This work is helpful, for example, in understanding how to assess student learning in the classroom, how to involve faculty in the assessment process and how to develop clear assessment plans (e.g., Andrade, 2011; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Brown, 1997). However, most communication centers operate alongside curriculums and use a peer-tutor model, rather than the traditional instructor-student approach used in classrooms. Panelists and audience members concluded that assessment strategies from academic services or campus writing centers appear to have a closer connection to communication center work, yet recognized that much more discussion is needed to understand how to bring practices from these contexts into their assessment efforts.

This appeal for more discussion about assessment culminated in a final theme to emerge from the 2014 panel. Communication center professionals strongly support the position that effective assessment is essential for promoting the benefit of their service to students and to evaluate the work of their directors (Turner & Sheckels, 2015; Yook, 2006). Yet so little public detail about the assessment work being done by communication centers is available that directors often struggle to start their assessment plans. The panel discussion highlighted a longing for a foundation of examples that could serve as inspiration for centers working on assessment and provide a basis for comparing center policies, procedures, and practices at institutions with varying missions and student populations.

This essay is a first-step in continuing the conversation about communication center assessment and responding to the call for more public documentation about the assessment work being done in the field. Four members of the 2014 NACC panel share an example of an assessment strategy that worked in their communication center. These examples of good practices highlight portable approaches that communication center administrators might consider when implementing or revising assessments in their own programs.

How good practices lead to best practices

The use of the phrase "best practice" can be misleading. By definition, "best" implies a superlative relationship to other practices and this can leads us to believe that there is one correct method for teaching, learning, or in this case, assessing the work of communication centers. However, the application of best practice is actually very dynamic and context specific. In other words, a "best practice" should be understood as one that produces a desired result, for a specific organization, in terms of the criteria for evaluation used by that organization (Veselý, 2011).

When organizations share examples of their effective practices, these are best labelled "good practices." A good assessment practice is one that produces information which allows an organization to (continue to) do its work well (Banta et al., 2009). Specifically, doing effective assessment in a communication center will result in knowledge which helps that center accomplish its goals. For instance, communication centers often strive to help students reduce overall communication anxiety towards public speaking. A communication center could consider multiple approaches to assisting students with speech apprehension. Effective assessment work should highlight which approach (or combination of approaches) best accomplishes this goal at a particular institution. For example, assessment through a survey instrument might reveal that students have less overall communication anxiety when working with peer-tutors rather than faculty mentors in a communication center. Because this information can be used to help the communication center tailor and improve its work, the center's efforts are an example of a good assessment practice.

Identifying good practices in assessment provides a foundation for individuals who are new to the field. In order to generate strategies for best practices in assessment at their home campus, communication center directors need examples of good practice to work with. Moreover, a review of good practices can encourage brainstorming and creativity in assessment efforts (Banta et al., 2009).

Assessment Examples

Communication center assessment is multi-layered. Assessment efforts can focus on information gathering, helping to clarify what is taking place in our centers, who our centers are serving, and how we can reach students and faculty on campus.[1] Assessment can also be evaluative. By tracking the outcomes in the center, directors can see how well initiatives accomplish desired goals. Each of the following examples showcases one of these approaches to communication center assessment.

Data Tracking to Connect with Students

One goal of the Speech Lab at Grand Valley State University is to assist students from all academic departments as they work to improve their oral presentation techniques. To determine who is visiting the center, and to evaluate how well the Lab meets this cross-campus goal, Grand Valley's online appointment management software integrates with the university's student information system to provide data about the center's consultations. When students log on to make an appointment at the Lab they see a copy of their academic course schedule and are asked to choose the class related to their oral presentation. Data from the 2011-2012 academic year showed that most of the Speech Lab's clients were from the university's public speaking class (86.5%). Very few students from outside the School of Communication's required course

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[1] The authors encourage all communication center faculty and staff to check with the Human Subjects Review Board at their institution prior to starting assessment efforts. Generally, assessment of college and university centers will not be subject to institutional review. However, when assessment data is collected about students, and then reported to a public audience, varying levels of review may be required. Assessment data reported for this essay meets each institution's criteria for research exempt from review.

were using the Lab's services. Therefore, the Lab's assessment report concluded that the center needed to do more to reach its target population of students in academic departments across the university.

In the following two academic years, the communication center staff tried various approaches to improve participation from non-public speaking students. The center increased the quantity of campus advertisements about its services. Representatives from the communication center made more class visits to courses housed outside the School of Communication to describe what the Speech Lab could offer to students. The Speech Lab director also worked with faculty in various departments to encourage a system of incentives to motivate students to use the communication center before an in-class presentation. Two types of incentives were offered. Some instructors required a Speech Lab visit as part of their course requirements. Others offered students extra-credit.

The 2013-14 assessment data suggests these efforts were effective. Over 92% of the consultations held in the center were with students from non-public speaking classes. During the same period, the Speech Lab also tracked which incentives instructors used to motivate students to use the center's services. This information was then matched with appointment data in order to assess the effectiveness of requiring students to visit the Lab outside of class versus offering students extra-credit for making an appointment. While some students made it to the lab without any incentive, it did appear that making a visit part of the course requirements was more influential than offering extra-credit (63.7% vs. 20.9% of consultations).

This assessment effort now shapes the focus of Speech Lab outreach at Grand Valley. Rather than investing in more promotional materials, communication center staff spend time identifying faculty members who use oral presentations in class and connecting with those faculty to encourage class-based incentives for Lab visits. Ongoing assessment is now focused on how best to overcome faculty resistance to these appeals. Because of assessment, communication center staff can use their time more efficiently.

Mixing Methods and Involving Stakeholders to Tailor Services

In the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University, a committee comprised of graduate and undergraduate consultants designs assessment instruments, and this committee collects data about the Studio's services using the most recent version of these tools. Each year, the Noel Studio offers hundreds of workshops on aspects of communication design. Workshop offerings include "Communicating for a Specific Audience" and "Reducing Speech Anxiety," for example. The assessment committee designed a survey to examine whether the subject matter of a workshop was relevant to students' assignments, among many other factors. In 2014, the committee administered surveys to 187 students across a random sampling of available workshops. The survey involved both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing the assessment committee to understand the overall trends related to workshop content as well as the opportunity to review student comments. The committee found, in this case, that on average students rated the relevance of the subject matter for a given workshop as 4.66 on a five-point scale. Interestingly, students discussed the value of group activities and the opportunity to analyze samples as two methods used in workshops that helped to connect the content to their own assignments. The assessment results encouraged workshop facilitators to focus on, and refine strategies for, developing interactive, peer-to-peer communication-learning experiences, such as small-group activities, based on particular student audiences and assignments.

Where possible, mixed-method assessment approaches stand to provide a deeper understanding of 1) whether a communication center program is performing as expected, 2) major trends in communication center programming that might need additional attention or a closer examination, and 3) more detailed explanations that provide context for results. Noel Studio assessments involve multiple stakeholders through the assessment team and mixed-method approaches that help the team understand certain aspects of the program and answer questions about these efforts.

Triangulation for Long-Term Assessment

When assessment has been ongoing, it can be difficult to think of places to improve. Triangulation can help. Since 2003, the director of the University Speaking Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has worked on campus, with the office of Assessment and Accreditation in developing outcomes based assessment efforts that speak to the Center's institutional effectiveness. To mark the Center's tenth year, and to clarify what is being done at the Center, a complete assessment history report was submitted to the university administration.

The report describes the Center's assessment work, which first focused on the Center's early growth and impact. Later assessment efforts moved towards speakers' perceived quality of the Center's support. Ongoing measures, which capture a speaker's perceptions of their experiences in the Center were established in 2006. These measures included asking speakers to complete a survey in which they: (1) identify the most important thing they learned as a result of their time with consultants (in a consultation or workshop), (2) identify what questions remained unanswered, and (3) identify changes that they planned to make as a result of the consultation or workshop. In 2013, the center started to better triangulate assessment efforts by adding a year-end survey of faculty whose students had come in for consultation services. Survey results are shared with faculty partners whose students use the Center and are referenced in the Center's ten year report. Effective triangulation works to identify areas of strengths and opportunities for on-going improvements for Center services.

Overall, formal assessment efforts focus on between two and five outcomes a year. Each outcome has a distinct plan for measurement, a metric, and a result. These assessment efforts represent a small sample of the data regularly collected. Other data collected from student consultations and workshops includes course number, instructor name, and student identification number. While not all data collected need be formally assessed, it all informs our understanding of the organization. For example, student numbers are used to correlate speaker use of the Center with freshman retention. The full ten year report can be accessed online.

Using Survey Data to Build Campus Partnerships

Assessment in The Speaking Center at Mary Washington provides important data for managing the across-the-curriculum Speaking Intensive program at the university. Students must complete at least two Speaking Intensive (SI) courses as a graduation requirement, and can often find at least one of those courses in their major. Unfortunately, this across-the-curriculum requirement does not include a required communication course. As most students complete the SI requirement without taking a basic communication course, the Speaking Center plays a pivotal role in providing communication instruction and support for the University's Speaking Intensive program.

Students are asked to complete a survey at the conclusion of their communication consultation. The survey includes questions about the quality of the visit and instruction, their demographic and course information, and their willingness to return to the Center. Survey results are used for consultant's evaluations, while demographic and course information is used for evaluation of across-the-curriculum integration. The survey information has been used to help prepare faculty development workshops for instructors teaching Speaking Intensive courses by identifying use trends by specific courses and instructors. The survey information also helped the Speaking Center identify Speaking Intensive courses that made extensive use of the Speaking Center, prompting the Center to offer more in-class workshops for those courses. In-class workshops, tailored to support specific assignments, further promoted use of the Speaking Center and resulted in more efficient use of individual consultation time. The Speaking Center has since promoted the use of in-class workshops for other classes, as well, resulting in our ability to support more Speaking Intensive courses than before.

The results of this survey were also used to inform plans for the University's First Year Experience QEP ("Quality Enhancement Plan") that included new oral communication learning outcomes for our First Year Seminar. While students' oral communication proficiency had previously been assessed, it had not been tied to use and assessment of the Speaking Center. The Speaking Center now plays a directed role in supporting communication-related student work, including supporting oral communication proficiency, communication apprehension, and class discussion. Upcoming assessment of student presentations, for instance, will include a

comparison of results for students who utilized the Speaking Center with those who did not. The same will be done for assessment of class discussion.

Conclusion

Each of the previous examples makes mention of an outcome(s) assessed at a communication center, and how that assessment serves to inform center practices. What can be learned from these brief descriptions of assessment "good practices" at communication centers? Grand Valley's Speech Lab is one example of how diagnostic assessment can provide important insight into what is happening at a communication center. By learning about the students visiting the Lab, the communication center was able to identify a key area for improvement. Similarly, the Noel Studio at Eastern Kentucky emphasizes the possibilities of incorporating multiple-stakeholders and mixed-methodologies into the diagnostic process to create more well-rounded understandings of what is happening at a communication center. This process of gathering and interpreting data, which then informs future practice, is known as "closing the feedback loop" in an assessment cycle (Banta & Blaich, 2011).

Banta & Blaich (2011) explain that this understanding of assessment as on-going and cyclical is vital to establishing a culture of progress and improvement in higher education. Colleges and universities are dynamic sites of learning, culturally and historically situated, and therefore, subject to changes in population, ideology, technology, practices, and curriculum. Effective assessment plans account for variation over-time by reflecting on the past, reconsidering goals and measures, and providing more than a one-time snapshot of program evaluation (Banta & Blaich, 2011). UNC—Greensboro's approach to assessment of its Speaking Center is an exemplar of this component of effective assessment. The on-going incorporation of assessment over ten years of programming is made more powerful through continually improved measurement efforts and a willingness to collect data with an eye towards future program evaluation.

Assessment of the Speaking Center at the University of Mary Washington draws attention to how the assessment done in communication centers can, and should, greatly inform campus and community partnerships. In addition to understanding how communication

centers can serve different campus constituencies, Mary Washington's recent efforts point to possibilities where assessment in communication centers may be needed to complete larger program assessments. By participating with its partners, the Center at Mary Washington is contributing to a collaborative mindset that is necessary for effective assessment to work at an institutional level (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis & Kinzie, 2012). All communication centers will need this understanding of their unique role and position on campus in order to complete assessment effectively. As Emery (2006) explains:

> Communication centers can be found in two and four year colleges, at large state institutions and small private colleges, serving residential populations and commuter campuses, housed in communication departments, academic outreach offices, and tutoring centers, our differences are often much more apparent than our similarities. (p. 63).

Such differences will require conversations about how to best adjust assessment to fit the needs of a specific communication center.

The examples shared in this essay highlight some of these potential sites of difference that may be reflected in an assessment plan. For example, communication center assessment may differ based on the number of paid and volunteer staff available to engage in assessment efforts. The presence of graduate students interested and available to do data collection, may likewise alter the scope of assessment. Communication centers that only provide individual consultations with students will have a different approach to assessment than those that use in-class or on-campus workshops to teach communication techniques. The extensive variety between communication centers is a central feature in the vibrant and growing community of teachers and scholars engaged in discussions such as those that will be found in this journal.

This community has acknowledged that differences between centers should not prevent efforts to establish common ground. It is very unlikely that any contemporary communication center will exist for long without attending to the call for effective assessment of its operations. Returning to the introduction of this piece, the purpose of this essay is to lay a foundation for

understanding how the shared experience of communication center assessment is currently being practiced. The examples of good practice provided here can be used as a starting point to develop assessment plans, to brainstorm new strategies for assessment, and to begin the work of establishing a series of cases through which we can identify underlying mechanisms that contribute to effective communication center efforts. It is through such good practices in regard to assessment that communication center assessment can be at its best.

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