

Nurturing Relationships Grounded in Assessment

By María B. Serrano Abreau

Introduction

I have been working as an Assessment Officer in a private university in Puerto Rico, for about two years now. It took a year to learn the job—what was assessment for, what was my function, how broad was the scope of my job, what influence did I have over institutional changes? Just as I thought I knew the job, the context changed, especially the shift to online modality, wrought by COVID-19. These circumstances have pushed me to review and reflect in every assessment aspect already learned and stated by the university's assessment office. Driven by this need for reflection, I came forward to virtual communities of educators (AALHE online conference, CLACSO virtual conferences and #abolitionistteaching on Instagram) who also had the purpose of reflecting over the educational process where assessment was not the exception. These communities have questioned, shared, and reimagined the educational process accordingly to what can be effective, given their experiences. I will share my reflections based on the learnings acquire from these virtual communities: there is a need to foster a change from a compliance paradigm to a culture of assessment that builds healthy relationships.

A Compliance Paradigm

Universities have not been exempted from acting under the neoliberal practices that characterize the world social order of the 21st century. Consequently, our university has executed a compliance paradigm which intensified with the transition to remote education given the pandemic. By compliance paradigm, I refer to the excessive amount of work required of Faculty by the university administration, whose focus is on evidencing actions taken to retain student population and learning assessment. This compliance paradigm was executed in the middle of the pandemic through a punitive and threatening approach to faculty where one of the aspects at stake, was the possibility of contract non-renewal in the next academic semester. Given the social and economic crisis in Puerto Rico (economic recession, mass layoffs of employees, elimination of employment benefits and increased cost of living, mostly due to the last governmental administrations and to the Fiscal Administration Board imposed by the U.S. government), faculty felt forced with no exception to obey the mandate.

This compliance paradigm was executed during COVID-19 through a series of improvised tasks that the university administration adopted to constantly demonstrate the actions taken by faculty, to educate, assess and retain students. Some of these tasks assigned in the first and second month of remote classes were: to complete course outlines and to contact and inform students. In addition, a form to document qualitative assessment was developed and deployed. Each course was required to complete the form, writing information about assessed competencies, group strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations. Blackboard certification as a mandatory qualification to teach summer courses (one weeklong; this task was required to the faculty in the same week that they were required to deliver grades) was also required.

The tasks above were in addition to a new assessment policy enacted during the 2019-2020 academic year. The new focus was on program competencies, in contrast to the older one which emphasize four major criteria (content, writing, critical thinking and technology literacy). The new policy required faculty to create analytical rubrics to evaluate their assessment strategy in contrast to the older one, which used a holistic rubric provided by the Institutional Assessment Office. Besides that, the new process required faculty to evidence their courses assessment (assessment strategy, rubric used, assessment evaluation, statistical report) in Blackboard. This would be simple, if the faculty had appropriate training and were familiar with assessment terminology (like analytical rubrics, indicators, objectives, and taxonomy), as well as, what the assessment results are being used for. The absence of training and declared relevance, created a perfect formula for having a faculty resist, question, and refuse to evidence their assessment process.

Given the execution of that compliance paradigm, January-May, 2020 seemed as if the university adopted the role of police surveillance rather than being a facilitator of academic processes. The demanding work imposed by the

pandemic, led faculty to feel burned out. Faculty began to ask themselves if the university also considered them as a population living with the consequences of the pandemic and with their own human and social needs. Were they considered as a priority in need of care or as mere production machines? In my opinion, they were understood as the latter.

Since the time I have been working at this university, assessment has been a loved and hated component of the faculty's responsibilities. Why this love and hate relationship? In my observation, some Faculty are aware that assessment is the process from where they gain an insight of what their students are learning and progressing towards their course's objectives. They find it as a necessary and fundamental practice in their courses. On the other hand, some faculty have shown either resistance or question the usefulness of evidencing their course's assessment given issues such as: the multi-step process of the new assessment policy; not understanding what the university uses assessment results for and; feeling that faculty voice is not being heard. In addition, required and changing tasks due to COVID-19 has added to the aversion of assessment.

An Assessment Culture to Build Healthy Relationships

Actual circumstances (pandemic emergency, remote learning) suggest that assessment culture provides a grounding that can inform social justice practices. As some of its core fundamentals, assessment aims for the best of students to flourish through a reciprocal healthy relationship between educators and learners. Universities need to draw from these assessment culture understandings, to build relations with faculty that considered them as human beings instead production machinery. There is a need to humanize processes and specifically, the administration's relationship with faculty. We must act as caregivers for all of those who brought in "food for thought" and honor the essence of the university and academic context. For this to happen, we must return to basics, such as:

- 1) Consider faculty voice. Faculty want to participate in the processes, they know the student population, they know the material in use: let's make faculty part of what we construct, whether that be rubrics or assignments or outcomes alignment.
- 2) Just as NILOA did starting the lockdown, let's check in with our people and build community. If we do not know how well (or not) people are dealing with situations, what are their needs, how can we help each other and build a common ground? We may be triggering broken and traumatized educational spaces.
- 3) The university must plan more effectively. How can we make easy-to-complete forms that can condense information needed for the institution in a reasonable period of time and not on a continuously basis?
- 4) Before making big changes or assessment policy reforms, we **must** pilot them in order to know what to expect, what things must be changed, what works and what does not.
- 5) Let's show assessment relevance and discuss it with faculty but beyond that, let's take into consideration alternatives given by them so this discussion does not seem setup.

This pandemic is calling attention to a shift of how things are made and understood. If we simply keep track of work informed by neoliberal practices, we will continue having a compliance paradigm instead of an assessment culture. We can change how we build relationships with faculty who are alienated by simply evidencing and complying. Instead, these relationships can be informed by the core aspects of assessment: seeking, watching over, caring, commenting, strengthening and building positive ground for and among, everyone.

References

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About the Author

Maria B. Serrano Abreu is an Assessment Officer at Universidad Ana G. Méndez. She can be reached at maserran@uagm.edu.