

The ASSESSMENT Primer: Creating a Flow of Learning Evidence

Abstract

by

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Envision a white water river . . .
flowing • connecting • diverging • channeling
. . . **and you have a powerful image of a learning college.**

Envision a raft of students with a guide at the rear . . .
anticipating • paddling • digging • trusting
. . . **and you have an image of the ideal learning experience.**

Envision rapids increasing in difficulty . . .
relevant • engaging • challenging • even demanding
. . . **and you have the source from which learning evidence flows.**

Background

Perhaps the biggest surprise in higher education today is that the call for student learning outcomes and outcomes assessment is not fading away. If anything, regional accreditation commissions are paying greater attention than ever to student learning standards in the wake of political threats of nationwide standardized testing for higher education. It is increasingly evident that if we, as college faculty, fail to (1) establish relevant student learning outcomes, (2) collect and systematically track learning evidence, and (3) use the evidence to improve our programs, someone else will. That “someone” is likely to be private industry which stands to reap millions of dollars for test construction, to say nothing of the additional millions students will pay for tutoring. Our challenge is to find a way to create our own flow of evidence

Moving to an outcomes-based curriculum that generates important evidence of learning needn't be as difficult as it seems when we come to realize that it all hinges on just a *slight shift in imagination*. Faculty have to come to “see” learning as the student's journey rather than as a faculty exercise in delivering content. The question is, how do we initiate this kind of shift in imagination? Where do we look—where do we turn—to find a new image, a new story to help us imagine anew the spirit of learning? Where better than a natural river system?

A New Image, A New Story

It is hard to remember the day that I did not hold the image of a river in my mind's eye. I was born in a small town on the banks of Oregon's famous Rogue River. As a family we never fished for the salmon nor rafted the wilderness rapids but, just the same, the river defined our place and taught me many things. It is no surprise that in searching for a better model through which to visualize learning outcomes and the flow of learning evidence, I have turned to the river for answers ... and the river has been generous.

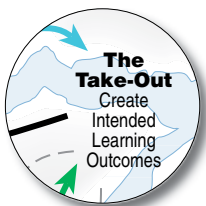
In our newly released book, *The Assessment Primer: Creating a Flow of Learning Evidence* (2008), it is the image and patterns of the river that provide a new way of imagining an outcomes-based curriculum. Even the language is drawn from the river—*put-in* (pre-assessment), *take-out* (robust learning outcomes), *wake-up rapids* (assessment tasks), *boulder gardens* (capstone experiences), *the narrows* (scoring guides and rubrics), *confluence* (triangulation of evidence), *eddy* (adjusting the curriculum based on evidence), *scouting stop* (mapping assessment tasks)—each describing in

some way the student's journey through a college program. Even the image of "guide" replaces the old notions of teacher and instructor.

When we chose the river as a metaphor, we weren't prepared for how much the river itself would teach us . . . (and continues to teach us). For example, one of our greatest challenges in writing this *Primer* was to figure out how we could isolate learning assessment from everything else that happens in classrooms. It was the river that told us we couldn't. In a river system, boundaries blur. All natural systems transcend our fixed notions of finite boundaries. We become aware that living systems flow and merge in ways that are quite foreign to our notions about a lot of things, including assessment.

While *The Assessment Primer* is distinguished by the image it creates of a large raft of students with a guide at the rear (one of the first things the river teaches us) and the reality that it is the paddlers who get the guide down the river, the real purpose of the book is to provide specific guidance to faculty in creating authentic assessment tools and using learning evidence to improve programs. The following summarizes the flow of both the river and the assessment process.

Developing the College Curriculum



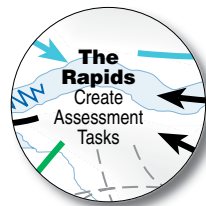
Curriculum development begins here—with the crafting of intended learning outcomes—statements that express clearly what students should be able to do in real-life context that we're responsible for in this program or course we are designing. From this starting point, it is possible to move "upstream" to any point. Curriculum development is not a linear process.



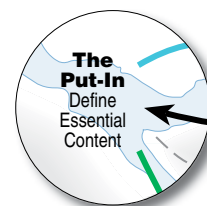
Capstone assessment tasks are the significant, culminating assessment points that ask the student to synthesize learning and show evidence of intended outcomes. Capstone tasks typically include final exams, projects and papers; practicums; internships; presentations and portfolios. Capstone experiences can be distributed across several parts of the program or concentrated at the end.



Every instructor who teaches in a degree or certificate program should have a clear picture of how his/her course connects • aligns • supports • the student's entire journey. The scouting stop involves creating a visual map of those connections.

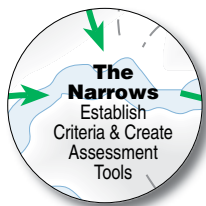


Rapids are the challenges we ask students to paddle through to demonstrate and assess learning progress. The difficulty level increases as the student progresses.



The put-in is where students begin their journey, but it is also where faculty make decisions about course content that is essential to the intended outcome. In an outcomes-based model, content is expressed not as topics to be covered, but as concepts students must understand, issues students must critically analyze, and skills students must master in order to achieve the outcome.

Creating a Flow of Evidence



On this south fork of assessment, the narrows represents the place where we (1) "narrow-down" assessment standards for student performance on each "rapid," and (2) make the standards public in the form of scoring guides and rubrics.



The confluence is a place where assessment data from direct and indirect measures is deposited and tracked for review over time. Ideally, the confluence is a college-wide web-based system for data gathering, analysis and graphic display.



The minor eddy is a yearly event (usually spring) where faculty review assessment data that has been recorded and formatted at the confluence. Faculty also randomly select and review work samples and portfolio entries against the standards. Program improvements are initiated based on evidence of student performance.



The major eddy is the formal program review process. The program review responds to accreditation and licensing issues. It is distinguished from the minor eddy in three ways: (1) it happens every 3-4 years, (2) it involves more extensive data collection solicited from stakeholders outside the college including program graduates, and (3) it synthesizes how evidence has been used.

Conclusion

When the white water river first began to emerge as a potential new image for guiding and learning, we did not know to what extent it would continue to hold true the more we learned about rivers. But after three years of total immersion, it continues to hold new truths for us each day and in 2005 inspired the creation of The White Water Institute—an actual week on the river each summer for instructional leaders in community colleges.

Using a white water river to imagine what can really happen in real as well as virtual classrooms has for us become as natural as the river itself. My best friend from my own college days, Dr. Irene Hays, said it better:

The river tells our story.
Unlike a pond, lake, or mountain
a river goes somewhere.

The river speaks for us.
Nothing compels the unyielding
as does a river.

The river teaches us.
Like it's lessons
a river has no end.

Ruth Stiehl is Professor Emeritus, Oregon State University and President, The Learning Organization. She is co-author with Les Lewchuk of *The Outcomes Primer: Reconstructing the College Curriculum* (3rd ed., 2008), *The Mapping Primer: Tools for Reconstructing the College Curriculum* (2005) and *The Assessment Primer: Creating a Flow of Learning Evidence* (2008). Dr. Stiehl lives and works in Corvallis, Oregon.