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Upending Current Assessment Practices: Addressing Faculty's Values

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Author Note

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Abstract: After more than 35 years of conducting assessment, which initially emphasized reporting, assessment practitioners and researchers continue their attempts to change faculty members' perceptions that assessment is a mandated add-on and burdensome to their sizable responsibilities. This workshop endorsed the perception of assessment and assessment practitioners as champions of student learning and aimed to advance this perception. Therefore, attention was centered on faculty and addressing their primary concerns of students and student learning, rather than programs and aggregating and reporting of assessment results. To foster the perception and achieve assessment adjustments needed, one practical and effective core component of Program Theory (PT) and Implementation Fidelity (IF), which centers on student learning, was presented and encouraged for broader assessment use. Because PT and IF are typically presented as research in assessment and instructional literature, modifications to the processes were essential due to their resource intensity. Both PT and IF can be facilitated with Generative AI, which was discussed as an effective resource for researching beneficial strategies and analyzing often underused qualitative learning evidence. Finally, Learning Organization literature was offered as guidance for cultivating a learning organization within a subset of the larger institution. For example, the importance of time and space for faculty to reflect on these approaches, and encouragement from supportive leaders, especially when learning about and applying new or revised approaches, were stressed in the workshop. This article explains the theoretical underpinnings and the implementation of the workshop facilitated at the 2025 AALHE Annual Conference. It also describes the foundations of the strategies discussed and the basic organization of the workshop.

Keywords: *assessment, learning*

Workshop Proceedings and Theoretical Underpinnings

Following introductions, we shared reasons for attending the workshop, discussed and confirmed that participants in attendance, mostly from smaller four-year institutions and community/technical colleges, were interested in changing faculty members' perceptions of assessment as an add-on unrelated to their values and roles. The focus was on fostering learning outcomes rather than reporting and realizing the potential of a broad-based collaborative approach.

Additionally, after discussing potential barriers associated with typical assessment practices and refocusing assessment processes to enhance faculty members' understanding of the role assessment

plays when integrated with instructional and curricular planning, we proceeded with discussing ideas for achieving this purpose.

Two primary contributors provided the stimulus and rationale for the strategies presented in the workshop: first, a university-wide project to foster students' core competencies of critical thinking and written communication in their majors; and second, an effective approach aligned with a key feature of program theory and a component of implementation fidelity. These contributors integrated, resulted in improved student learning and faculty members' changed attitudes.

Primarily over the past ten years, appearing more prominently in assessment and instructional journals, Program Theory (PT) and Implementation Fidelity (IF) (Finney & Smith, 2016; Fisher et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017, 2019; Smith & Finney, 2020) have demonstrated potential for improving the value of assessment for learning within academic programs and for student affairs units. Even though appropriate for student affairs and program assessment, this workshop was devoted to changing the focus of academic assessment to faculty members.

The proposed targeted approach suggested for consideration in the workshop was focused on selecting research or theory-supported practices to foster student learning. This aligns with faculty members' interests and values (student learning and the faculty reward structure), which is important to introduce at the course and faculty levels. Assistance in efficiently and effectively identifying research or theory for fostering each targeted outcome is critical, and Generative AI can facilitate the process.

As a partner to PT, IF is a method used to determine if the programming developed from the best practice research or relevant theory for cultivating the outcome is followed (Fulcher & Prendergast, 2021). Generative AI also can be useful for creating effective tools to determine the application of the best-practice plan. Without the use of AI, identifying the research or theory and developing tools to verify the application of the strategies developed are time-consuming and, therefore, overwhelming for most institutions, assessment offices, and practitioners.

Due to the resource intensity of PT and IF, which is daunting for many or most assessment practitioners, modified practices to current assessment processes were previously developed and presented in conferences and invited workshops. However, upon reflection, after promoting and presenting a practical approach for implementing essential features of these resource-intensive processes over several years of conference sessions, they remained ill-suited for broad assessment use. Further reflection, the emphasis was refocused from program assessment to align more with faculty members, their values, and institutional expectations. This process, which was successful at a public university with two campuses and a student enrollment of approximately 26,000.

During a university-wide program created to foster students' critical thinking and written communication in their majors, with an emphasis on faculty and faculty development, the program leader was introduced to PT and IF as they appear in assessment and instructional journals. Reflecting on these processes, the program leader observed that certain components of PT and IF emerged organically in the program. The program leader also recognized that many faculty members were

deeply engaged in the teaching/learning process integrated with assessment, which aligned with their values and interests and focused on students and student learning, not compliance.

Even though PT and IF in tandem intentionally foster each student learning outcome effectively, they are highly resource-intensive due to their emphasis on academic programs, creating and facilitating a common “treatment,” and are more aligned with research than assessment (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). PT is based on research demonstrating instructional strategies or programming that progressively and effectively foster a specific learning outcome or theory on which to guide strategy selection. The partner to PT, IF, is a method used to determine if the programming developed from the best practice research for cultivating the outcome, is followed. Resources required for these practices result in smaller institutions being essentially excluded from implementing these practices.

To address their resource intensity, we discussed modifications to both PT and IF for successful application without the drain on resources during this workshop. Moreover, because these modifications emerged organically in the University-wide program (Flateby, 2020, 2024; Flateby et al., 2022), participants were better able to accept their value and use.

Also, during the workshop, we discussed an in-depth analysis of the university-wide initiative, which uncovered additional essential contributors to effectively foster these learning outcomes. Supportive leadership, time and space for learning, reflecting on the learning and application of new ideas, and collaborations with units on campus, such as the faculty development office, library, and career center, reflecting Learning Organization characteristics were essential contributors to cultivating the program’s learning outcomes through a modified program theory process (Garvin et al., 2008). Participants in the workshop agreed on the value of collaboration, with a large percentage sharing collaborations at their institutions.

The University-wide program supported professional development events, such as 3-day workshops that focused on critical thinking and written communication, which reflected PT. Although these workshops were offered prior to the attention given to PT, IF, and Generative AI, these workshops introduced best practices to foster critical thinking and writing, facilitated by experts and scholars of these essential, broad-based skills. These faculty development opportunities provided the research/theory on which to plan and cultivate the outcomes. And while not intentionally using the PT/IF approaches, elements aligned with these approaches upon retrospection.

Encouraged by supportive leadership developed from learning organizational literature (Garvin et al., 2008), faculty from participating programs often introduced these practices into their instruction and recorded structured, manageable documents demonstrating best practice strategy application. In addition, these documents, “Course Reflections,” often included evidence of enhanced student learning for assessment purposes. Moreover, these Course Reflections provided faculty with credible evidence to support the “effective teaching component” in their annual reviews and promotion and tenure processes, which were often submitted and favorably received. Other institutions might consider adopting or adapting this process for these types of reviews. Therefore, strategies were discussed for institutions not engaging in these formal reviews; however, participants supported

documentation such as a teaching reflection in which details were included about teaching strategies implemented to support a specific outcome, attending to the selection of the strategies, and analyzing these strategies in relation to student learning results. They cautioned against trying to advocate for a single approach for institutions due to their variation; however, we discussed collaboratively and creatively planning additional ideas to document/these processes with other assessment colleagues.

We also discussed aggregating the “Course Reflections” or other similar documents for program assessment, for which I suggested using Generative AI to assist with qualitative analysis and reporting. Although an essential responsibility of assessment practitioners, more time was needed to thoroughly investigate this topic. Therefore, building communities of practice to discuss and implement ideas related to this workshop should be beneficial for cultivating a more effective assessment process for faculty members and their primary functions.

Summary and Reflections

The integration of thoughts from Jillian Kinzie’s keynote addresses reinforces literature about learning organizations, such as creating designated time and space to discuss future actions and applying practices followed in the University-wide program introduced in the workshop. Ensuring time and space encourages more interaction, greater willingness and opportunities to share. In addition, learning organization literature suggests organizations seek input from all voices. Similarly, assessment leaders must advocate for multiple voices, especially students, who have often been underrepresented from the assessment process.

I am attempting to further explore and introduce ideas discussed in the workshop by assembling colleagues into communities of practice to ideate specifically about aggregating documents faculty produce from adopting and adapting PT for teaching and assessment, and involving students in the assessment process. Also, needing to be discussed are further opportunities for institutions that may not have a structured method for demonstrating effective teaching to ensure faculty gain credit/recognition for the intentional cultivation of a targeted student learning outcome in their reward system.

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