

Ethical Reasoning and the Five Roles of the Assessment Practitioner

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Abstract: Responsibilities of an assessment practitioner are many and diverse (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). As with any profession, the responsibilities are not devoid of moral situations in which practitioners must choose between two or more possibilities (i.e., moral or ethical dilemmas). We present an ethical dilemma concerning student equity and assessment reporting and demonstrate that based upon which of the five roles a practitioner takes, s/he must take multiple perspectives and consider decision-making impacts. Assessment practitioners support various persons with differing needs and expectations; this may mean that assessment professionals encounter situations that require ethical reasoning. The Eight Key Questions (8KQ) strategy provides a framework for the practitioner in the form of questions that should be investigated. The process is designed to elicit diverse perspectives on an issue without a pre-determined answer, making sure that important ethical considerations are included in the decision-making process.

Keywords: *Ethical reasoning, equity, professional identity*

Introduction

Higher education assessment practitioners play a central role in campus responses to implement evidence-based solutions, close student learning gaps, and guide data storytelling. The responsibilities of the assessment practitioner are many and diverse (Ariovich et al., 2018), and they vary widely across campuses. Practitioners guide faculty in modifying assignments or creating alternative assignments for instruction. They translate annual assessment reports for accreditors into stories that provide evidence of student learning improvement. Practitioners engage faculty in dialogue around their course assessment results and changes to the curriculum and/or pedagogy. They develop surveys for students to share about their educational experiences, interpret

accreditation requirements for senior administrators, and help faculty adopt equity-minded approaches to assessment to ensure the success of all students. These varied responsibilities map to the five roles of assessment practitioners identified by Jankowski and Slotnick (2015): assessment/method expert, narrator/translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer.

Ethics and Assessment

No matter which role an assessment practitioner fulfills, assessment work requires reasoning through difficult decisions. Assessment professionals are confronted with ethical dilemmas, or situations in which no single answer provides a desirable outcome for

all involved parties. For example, increased flexibility for campus assessment procedures during the pandemic may lead to decreases in the amount of data available for public reporting of program effectiveness. A decision alleviating stress for faculty and assessment practitioners may subsequently lead to decreased information for ongoing improvement initiatives, prospective students, and interested members of the public.

Given that higher education institutions are not immune to national conversations about systemic racism, many discussions explicitly invoke ethical considerations. This has led senior leaders at institutions to initiate changes, such as the disaggregation of student learning outcome data and the re-examination of disaggregated data used to determine student success (e.g., retention and graduation rates). Assessment professionals must balance the communication of these results by effectively telling the story to multiple audiences in ways that not only recognize educational equity gaps but also contribute to institutional motivation for improvement. Assessment practitioners need ways of navigating the ethical dilemmas that inevitably arise from conflicting stakeholder needs in their work. While determining the proper course of action in various situations, assessment practitioners must consider how to balance conflicting needs, and whether decisions are effective for all stakeholders.

When faced with these ethical dilemmas, we propose using a heuristic approach, the Eight Key Questions (8KQ), to assist in determining what practitioners should do (Fulcher et al., 2018). The 8KQ process involves asking questions designed to elicit multiple perspectives on an issue openly, without a pre-determined answer. The 8KQ are designed to

initiate an inquiry of the possible ethical factors that might be relevant, making sure that important ethical considerations do not go unnoticed but are investigated and included in the decision making. The 8KQ include: fairness, outcomes, responsibilities, character, liberty, empathy, authority and rights (easily remembered using the mnemonic “FORCLEAR”).

When applying the 8KQ to assessment-related ethical dilemmas, assessment practitioners consider questions, such as the following: Are decisions fair for all internal and external stakeholders (fairness)? What are the short-term and long-term consequences of a decision (outcomes)? For what and to whom are assessment practitioners responsible (responsibility)? What does a decision say about the character of the assessment practitioner or the campus (character)? Does the decision respect the autonomy of the students and faculty (liberty)? What decisions would be made if caring about all involved (empathy)? What do legitimate authorities expect regarding a decision (authority)? And are the rights of students or other stakeholders considered when making decisions (rights)? The purpose of the current paper is to describe the relationship between the 8KQ and the five roles of assessment practitioners, as described by Jankowski and Slotnick (2015). Specifically, we will explore how each of the 8KQ can be utilized within each role to support a fictional institution’s efforts to address educational equity gaps. First, we provide a fictional scenario demonstrating an ethical dilemma that might be faced by an assessment professional. We then introduce the 8KQ, applying each to a fictional scenario, before examining how each of the 8KQ apply to Jankowski and Slotnick’s (2015) roles.

Fictional Scenario: An Assessment Practitioner's Ethical Dilemma

Consider a scenario in which, as an assessment practitioner, you annually report and present on D, F, or W (withdraw) course grades to college/school/department personnel. For the past three years, you observe that there are more than 30 "gateway" courses (i.e., a passing grade is required for entry into a major) where the DFW rates have been consistently at 30% or higher. Faculty in the department (and university leadership) are interested in identifying characteristics of these students. You conduct a demographic analysis which reveals educational equity gaps in terms of race, wealth, and transfer status; these results are shared with faculty and university leaders. As part of the institution's five-year strategic plan, it is an institutional goal to increase the number of undergraduate degrees awarded to black, Indigenous and people of color, low-income, and transfer students; therefore, the educational equity gap must be much improved within five years. The academic senior leadership asks you to monitor data concerning the courses faculty members teach with high DFW rates.

Five years later, you are preparing written documentation on the results of the goals for the institution's self-study accreditation report. Unfortunately, the institution's results are not favorable. However, you understand the importance of integrity. The provost asks that you submit a report omitting the results on this goal and instead report on other goals that are complimentary to the institutions, i.e., demonstrate that goals were achieved.

How should you respond to the provost's request? How might the 8KQ be utilized in this case?

It is likely that readers have their own natural response to the above fictional scenario. This response is most likely based upon an ethical ideology or set of beliefs, values, and attitudes a person has adopted. Ethical ideology is described using two dimensions: relativism and idealism. Relativism is the extent to which individuals reject universal moral rules or principles. Idealism describes an individual's attitude toward the consequences of an action and how the consequences affect the welfare of others. These dimensions and the level to which they occur help to explain the differences in reasoning and judgment when faced with an ethical dilemma (Forsyth, 1980; Forsyth & Pope, 1984). When using the 8KQ, it is important to pay attention to and then set aside our initial judgment and reasoning. Including the 8KQ strategically helps practitioners to take a more methodological approach than is possible using ethical ideologies as a guide. The 8KQ strategy includes determining which of the 8KQ are relevant to the situation, generating associated questions about the relevant ethical considerations, answering each set of questions, and deciding upon an appropriate action. This allows the practitioner to make more deliberate decisions than would be possible without the use of an ethical reasoning framework. Because each of us is inclined toward certain ethical ideologies, working through the 8KQ strategy encourages us to think of perspectives we might not have otherwise considered. In doing so, we are likely to notice ethical factors that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Application of the 8KQ

Returning to the fictional scenario outlined above, following a directive from the provost to omit data from an accreditation report raises significant ethical issues. Working through all

8KQ provides a strategy for inquiring about and reflecting on ethical factors that must be taken into consideration and included in decision making. Below, we provide a brief definition of each of the 8KQ, apply them to the fictional scenario, and generate relevant questions.

“Fairness” is the expectation that each party’s needs are considered and balanced equitably. This is in terms of procedures, processes, and structures that affect the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens to members in society. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves if we are treating everyone (including ourselves) equitably, and how all relevant interests can be balanced. At the core of the fictional scenario is an underlying theme of equity, asking the difficult questions about how higher education can become equitable for all students. We may ask: What is the just thing to do? How do I balance the interests of everyone, including the provost, accreditors, and students? How do decisions promote equity broadly within higher education?

“Outcomes” take into consideration the short- and long-term benefits and costs of various actions. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves about the possible outcomes of any action, including who might be affected, who will benefit, and who will be harmed. In the above fictional scenario, we may ask who (or what) will be helped or harmed by removing this information from the report and what are the negative and positive consequences of those choices in the near and distant future. “Responsibilities” include duties and obligations to multiple parties. In any ethical situation, an assessment professional may ask themselves what duties or obligations they have to the provost, accreditors, and students, and whether these duties or obligations conflict. In the above fictional scenario, we may ask: am I

being insubordinate if I do not follow the provost’s orders? What is my obligation to be transparent with accreditors?

“Character” involves reflection on the virtues and traits associated with a desired version of the self. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves what a person we respect and admire would do in this situation. For example, if we value honesty and transparency, we may ask: Does removing data about this goal from the report align with the characteristics of an honest and transparent person?

“Liberty” is people’s freedom to live life as they please, if it does hurt others or hinder their autonomy. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves whether our actions negatively affect someone else’s freedom. In the above fictional scenario, we may ask whether we are impacting the progression and future success of students by not being transparent with multiple stakeholders about the DFW rates. Or, we may question the extent to which the course instructors have the liberty to set their own rigor and grading standards. By reporting course instructors with high DFW rates, are we violating their liberty? Should the institution have the liberty to choose how to report results?

“Empathy” is the ability of an individual to reflect on the perspective of another. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves whether our actions or inactions affect others or consider how we would feel if experiencing action or inaction from a different vantage point. In the fictional scenario, we may ask who is affected by omitting the report on educational equity gaps and as a student. How would I feel if educational challenges I had experienced were concealed from accreditors? How would I share data if I cared about all involved? An additional challenge is to

consider empathetic questions related to those with whom we are less prone to empathize. For example, we may consider the experience of the course instructors included in the high DFW list or the administrator who is asking for the information. How might I receive data that is not positive if I were one of the instructors of a “gateway” course with a high DFW rate? How might I respond to disappointing results if I were the provost who had not achieved an institutional goal?

“Authority” involves considering what a legitimate authority would expect in the situation. In any ethical situation, we must first consider the legitimacy of a given authority figure. In the above fictional scenario, we may ask whether the provost is a legitimate authority and whether they can request that the report omit the goal and its results. Who has legitimate authority to dictate the report’s contents? Who are the other legitimate authorities, such as the state oversight body, federal government, accreditors, and students? What do other legitimate authorities expect about the means in which data are collected? What do other legitimate authorities expect regarding the analysis and interpretation of data, reporting of results, and maintenance of information? Will legitimate authorities use the results for compliance or policy purposes? How do we reconcile the authority of the accreditors (which call for accountability) with the authority of an administrator who requests concealing information?

“Rights” are protections and permissions given to people. In any ethical situation, we may ask ourselves: What are my rights and the rights of others in this situation? Do these rights conflict? If so, whose rights should be weighted more heavily? In the fictional scenario, we may consider the type of treatment to which

students, institutional representatives, and accrediting agencies are entitled, and whether the rights of one group infringe upon the rights of another.

Each of the 8KQ (and the additional questions they raise) provide fodder for conversation and deliberation as the assessment professional determines the best course of action. Further, deliberation using the 8KQ enables the assessment practitioner to reveal ethical considerations that may not be readily apparent. However, it is unlikely that all assessment professionals would hold each of these questions (and sub-questions) in equal regard: assessment requires a diverse skillset, and individual positions within the field vary in terms of their obligations and responsibilities. Jankowski and Slotnick’s (2015) investigation of this variability led to their classification of five “roles” played by assessment practitioners. In the following section, we turn to these roles and consider how varied orientations within the assessment field might differentially emphasize each of the 8KQ. Although we will explore the application of the 8KQ to these roles in the fictional scenario, we will also take a broader approach to the application of the 8KQ to demonstrate their relevance to a variety of ethical situations that arise in assessment practices.

8KQ and Assessment Professional Roles

There is a wide variation in institutional context, office structure and responsibilities for which assessment professionals work. To provide a structure for understanding the varied duties of the assessment practitioner, Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) reviewed almost 100 assessment job advertisements and conducted four interviews with assessment scholars who have impacted the field. Using this information, they defined the five

prominent roles of assessment practitioners noted above: the assessment/method expert, the narrator/translator, the facilitator/guide, the political navigator, and the visionary/believer. Building upon Jankowski and Slotnick's work, we argue that each of the roles evoke different ethical considerations. Using the fictional scenario above, we describe each of the five roles (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015) and the relevant perspectives each must consider as they move through each of the 8KQ. While the 8KQ can be applied in all five assessment practitioner roles, each role entails different relationships, priorities, and philosophies. Therefore, one of the 8KQ that was particularly salient to the dispositions and emphases of a specific role was selected. That is, an assessment/method expert might focus more on certain key questions than the narrator/translator. The purpose of narrowing the focus is not to imply that a given role has exclusive ownership over a particular 8KQ but it is to demonstrate the key areas in which the five roles may differ in their approach to ethical scenarios.

We have not identified all possible questions, as the relevance of a given question depends entirely upon the situation at hand. The practice of considering each question in turn, regardless of role or situation, is useful in uncovering subtle ethical perspectives; the questions discussed below are intended to act as a catalyst for further thought and conversation. Readers are strongly encouraged to use the questions provided to stimulate their own questions.

Assessment/Method Expert

In the fictional scenario, the *assessment/method expert* would work with either individual faculty member or a small group of faculty with high DFW rates in courses

to develop and examine a curriculum map in order to understand if the course outcomes map to assignments and assessments. The assessment/method expert may also analyze assessment results to understand where student challenges with the content and pedagogy might be. Another part of the role may be to help faculty understand the value of reviewing disaggregated results (i.e., race, Pell Grant, and transfer status) and make decisions based on the findings. Based upon their work, assessment/method experts may ask the following "outcome" questions:

- What are the long-term outcomes of failing to report on inequities in gateway courses?
- What will happen to the individual faculty members with high DFW rates for black, Indigenous and people of color, low-income, and/or transfer students if I push for this portion of the report to be made public?
- How will the information be used?
- Are we collecting information that will ultimately help programs improve?

Narrator/Translator

In the fictional scenario, the *narrator/translator* would gather and share contextualized gateway course data and the needs of different student populations. They would also likely prepare messages tailored for different audiences so that they are understandable, accessible, and actionable. Based upon their work, narrators/translators may ask the following "responsibility" questions:

- What are my (and my institution's) obligations to students who have been traditionally marginalized?
- What duties and/or obligations should be considered when analyzing and interpreting data, and maintaining information?

- What are my (and my institution's) duties or obligations when disseminating and communicating outcomes information?
- To whom am I responsible for effectively and transparently communicating the results of the goal?

Facilitator/Guide

In the fictional scenario, the *facilitator/guide* would work to understand the challenges faculty members have in and with the assessment process, adapt to various campus cultures when providing learning opportunities for faculty to build assessment literacy, and provide spaces for faculty to reflect on the learning and environmental experiences of their students. Based upon their work, facilitators/guides may ask the following "empathy" questions:

- How can I best listen to/motivate/mentor the faculty and staff with whom I work?
- Am I able to understand and address the challenges that faculty members have in and with the assessment process?
- How do I create a safe space for faculty to reflect on assessment results, identify initiatives to rectify disparities, and continuously monitor disaggregated data based on students' educational experiences and outcomes?
- Do I adopt a "one size fits all" perspective when assisting faculty with and through the assessment process?

Political Navigator

In the fictional scenario, the *political navigator* would adapt multiple perspectives of the needs, expectations, issues, and solutions of affected groups. The political navigator would act to balance the interests of the affected groups (meeting the needs or short-term demands of one group without jeopardizing the needs of or having a long-term impact on other

groups). Based upon their work, political navigators may ask the following "character" questions:

- How do I convey an institutional character of integrity?
- How do I personally act with integrity?
- How can I serve as a trusted liaison to faculty, staff, administrators, and external stakeholders?
- What are the virtues that I want to nurture, model, and espouse (such as a commitment to more equitable learning systems)?

Visionary/Believer

In the fictional scenario, the *visionary/believer* would work to build a sustainable culture of assessment and be a campus champion who leads cultural change by supporting diverse needs and addressing competing expectations, while conveying a compelling story of student learning. Based upon their work, a visionary/believer may ask the following "fairness" questions:

- How do I analyze, interpret, and report results such that faculty, staff, and administrators are provoked to use results in decision-making for improvement?
- How do I fairly report on assessment findings in a manner that builds enthusiasm and passion for:
 - institutional quality and improvement (improved pass rates for traditionally marginalized groups in gateway courses)?
 - student achievement of outcomes (pedagogical instruction and the curriculum)?
 - black, Indigenous and people of color, low-income, and transfer students' lived experiences?

The fictional scenario demonstrates the presence of ethical dilemmas that may arise in

assessment practice. The 8KQ strategy can be used to determine the most salient questions relevant for each assessment practitioner role. This strategy can be applied to any scenario with an ethical dilemma that assessment professionals may encounter: the fictional scenario provided here simply illustrates how the 8KQ may apply to a common ethical dilemma in assessment practice. The methodical approach to evaluating an ethical situation helps practitioners to expand the questions they would normally consider when evaluating an ethical dilemma and reflect on other ethical factors they may not have considered in the decision-making process.

Discussion and Implications

The assessment practitioner serves many masters with different and possibly competing needs and expectations, leading them to encounter ethical dilemmas. Rather than solely relying on or rationalizing their ethical ideologies (set of beliefs, values, and attitudes), a robust array of ethical considerations in the form of questions should be included and investigated during the decision making. The 8KQ involves asking ethical questions designed to elicit multiple perspectives on the issue in an open way, and without a pre-determined answer.

The questions elicited by the 8KQ approach will vary based on institutional contexts and based on the roles fulfilled by a given assessment practitioner (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). The

examples provided in this manuscript are not prescriptive: instead, we seek to demonstrate how the goals, skills, and responsibilities of a practitioner might make some ethical questions more salient than others. Regardless of a practitioner's inclinations toward ethical questions, the 8KQ approach provides a flexible way to navigate ethical dilemmas, partially because it prompts the consideration of ethical dimensions that otherwise pass unnoticed.

The global pandemic has illuminated broad inequities within society, to which higher education systems are not immune (e.g., Hoover, 2020, November; Kafka, 2020, October). Faculty and student inexperience with online instruction and learning environments and students' difficulties with balancing school with family and work responsibilities impacted students' success in learning and completing course material (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2020). Consequently, in addition to managing the demands of a global pandemic, faculty are attending to inequities within higher education systems (e.g., Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, 2020; Authors, 2020). To effectively navigate these situations, assessment practitioners must ask ethical questions openly before making substantive decisions. The 8KQ strategy will better equip assessment professionals to support faculty in incorporating equity-centered evaluation practices (i.e., "grand challenges"; Authors, 2020).

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