Mindset for Assessment

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The appropriate mindset for assessment is an important component of an effective assessment process. The assessor must respect the values and ideas of the assessee. The assessee must desire feedback to use for improvement and must remember that the assessor's sole role is to give feedback for improvement. Both need to remember that the locus of control of the assessment process is always with the assessee and that the assessment process is useful only if it is positive, individualized, meaningful, and important to the assessee. Effective assessment in the classroom enhances student engagement in the teaching /learning process. Effective assessment motivates both assessors and assessees to strive to elevate the level of performance. It focuses on individual improvement, not on judgment.

Mindset of Assessment from the Assessor's Perspective

The purpose of assessment is to facilitate improvement, and the process is multidimensional and integrated (American Association for Higher Education, 2003). For long-term improvement, the assessment process should be ongoing, tracking patterns and progress over time. For the assessor to give meaningful feedback that will be accepted by the assessee, the assessor has to be cognizant of the following mindsets.

An assessor:

- values the ideas of the assessee,
- respects the assessee for seeking feedback for improvement,
- gives feedback without giving explicit or implied judgment of level of quality,
- focuses only on feedback that can help the assessee improve performance, and
- focuses on characteristics of the performance, not the performer.

Example

An instructor is developing the mindset of an assessor. To give the students more ownership within the context of a course, the instructor could change the question from, "What will I teach?" to "What do they want to learn?" The instructor could ask students to write down their goals for the course. If the student goals encompass the course design, they could become some of the goals for the course. The criteria would be developed collaboratively between the students and instructor. The instructor might give feedback on the goals and assignments set by the students at specified times during the course. The student and the instructor could communicate on improvements and progress at the end of the term as well as discuss ways to improve further and directions for future growth.

Mindset of Assessment from the Assessee's Perspective

It is equally important that an assessee is open to feedback and intends to improve performance.

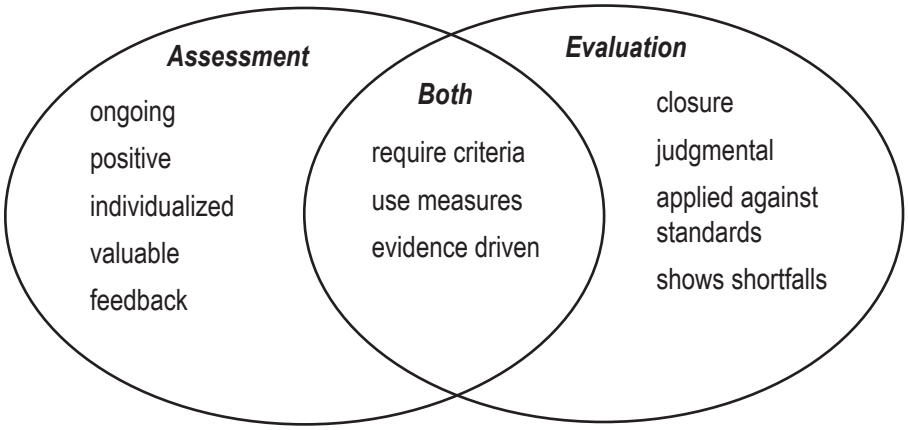
An assessee:

- desires to improve performance,
- respects the assessor for giving honest feedback that can lead to improvement,
- considers assessment feedback as non-judgmental,
- does not desire or ask for evaluation feedback from an assessor,
- works with the assessor to set criteria, negotiate feedback, and moderate pace,
- requests from the assessor what the assessee would find useful,
- looks at the assessor as a mentor, and
- understands that assessment is not about getting it right; it is about getting it better.

Example

A student can change his or her focus from "What do I have to learn?" to "What do I want to learn?" if the instructor asks the students what they would like to learn in a course. This may be the first time that the students have ever encountered an instructor who is willing to consider student learning goals. The students have to think about what they really want to get out of the class. If the course goals are developed in collaboration with the students, the students can be more active and invested in the course. The students will have to consider what is important. The instructor checks in periodically to assess the students' fulfillment of goals. When students can ask questions without the threat of "not getting it right," they ask better questions. Meeting goals of value to the students motivates students and establishes a positive student-instructor relationship. A summative assessment shows students how they have grown over time.

Figure 1 ***Venn Diagram of Comparing Assessment and Evaluation***



Similarities and Differences between Assessment and Evaluation

Some areas of assessment and evaluation overlap. (See Figure 1.) Both processes:

- require setting and using criteria,
- use measures to identify the level of performance,
- are driven by evidence,
- need accurate and holistic data for an accurate summary,
- provide motivation, and
- require reporting to the performer.

Because of the similarities in assessment and evaluation processes, it is easy to jump from one to the other without realizing it. Keeping the appropriate mindset helps in appropriately assessing or evaluating. Table 1 summarizes some of the differences in the two processes.

The remainder of this module focuses on faculty assessment of student learning within the classroom and how this process is affected by mindset.

Table 1

Differences between Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment	Evaluation
Focuses on desired outcomes of assessee	Focuses on desired outcomes of evaluator
Is requested by the assessee	Is requested by the evaluator
Focuses on growth	Focuses on quality
Has no consequences	Often has consequences
Never compares quality	Often compares quality
Has standards for quality developed by the assessee in collaboration with the assessor	Has standards for quality developed by the evaluator

Quality Factors Affected by Mindset for Assessment

Placing value on assessment

Assessment is a complex process. It does take thought and commitment on the part of the faculty member to incorporate it in the classroom. As improvements in curriculum and teaching are made based on assessment feedback, most faculty will begin to see even more value of assessment through increased student learning. However, a faculty member must first believe in the ability of the process to improve student learning.

Setting aside time

Assessment and evaluation are both necessary within the academic setting. Many activities focus on the evaluation side of the balance since almost all faculty must assign grades. Commonly, assessment gets neglected in the day-to-day tasks of busy lives. Once an instructor begins to value the process of assessment in student learning, he or she will be willing to find time to incorporate assessment strategies into courses.

Setting criteria

The criteria for assessment should address the things that are really important, not necessarily the easiest to assess. Assessment begins and ends with the assessee's vision for the future. Setting criteria pushes both assessor and assessee toward clarity about where to aim and what standards apply (American Association for Higher Education, 2003). At the beginning, the students (assessees) can identify which criteria are most important for them to work on during the next time frame; these criteria can then be used during the assessment process by the instructor. Collaborating to set criteria for assessment builds respect for diverse interests and ways of learning (Cross & Steadman, 1996). In an environment focused on the assessee, more time will be spent developing the criteria and assessing work at various stages of the process (Huba & Freed, 2000).

Focusing on what is important

The focus is on a process that is ongoing, positive, individualized, meaningful, and important to the assessee (American Association for Higher Education, 2003). It makes a difference when assessment begins with issues of individual growth and illuminates questions that people really care about.

Giving feedback

When an instructor gives feedback to a student, the instructor models the assessment process and helps the student improve. It is important that the feedback:

- focuses on the set criteria,
- gives suggestions or strategies for improvement,
- uses only non-judgmental words, and
- remembers that the assessee is the audience.

Instructors can observe how their feedback is received as a cue about how well it is delivered. They will have evidence for the importance of trust, and they can observe how the feedback can be geared based on the comfort level of the student. They will be able to look for and see the effects of evaluative words on the assessee (Mahara, 1998).

The timing of feedback is an important consideration. At times, feedback can be given to the group, while at other times feedback should be shared one-on-one. Office hours, time during and after class, and additional study or meeting times open the door for a mutual exchange. Assessment leads to more public sharing (e.g., peer reviews) to discuss work and its strength and improvements. Peers have valuable insights, and the assessment format can moderate the affect of students who have the mindset of evaluation. An assessor should always ask for permission to share assessment findings with people other than the assessee. The assessee has the right to be involved in identifying a time and place where assessments can be shared.

Building trust in the system and in the environment

Once the instructor has found value in the assessment process and determined how to incorporate effective assessment strategies into a course, the improvement of student learning will depend in part on the trust the students have in the process. This trust can be developed as students begin to see their improvements due to assessment. Part of developing the trust includes assessment strategies that:

- guide improvement,
- align with goals of the course,
- include timely feedback,
- give feedback to individuals confidentially,
- include individual feedback based on desires of the individuals, and
- include students as equal partners (American Association for Higher Education, 2003).

By creating a trusting environment, assessment produces opportunities for "magical or teachable" moments, enhances learner ownership, and shifts responsibility for learning to students. The more an assessor's feedback enables a student to learn independently, the more a student will desire to work with the assessor and respond to his or her assessments. In future situations, the assessor becomes better at self-assessment. Thus an assessor's current level of performance builds power for the assessor in future assessment situations. It motivates both assessors and assessees to strive to elevate the level of performance. A trusting environment is respectful, supportive, and open. Engagement is encouraged and dialogue is regarded as a process. Students are encouraged to question and challenge the teacher, and the process generates growth (Mahara, 1998).

At the beginning of the assessment process, students may want to mask their skills that need improvement because they feel they will earn lower grades if the instructor knows where their weaknesses are. This commonly occurs when the assessor and evaluator are the same person. In the ideal world, these would be separate processes and people. In the real world, the best case might be explicitly separating feedback for assessment and evaluation into separate time periods. Also, assignments

can be designed that give credit to honesty, accurate identification of personal learning needs, and a high quality action plan to improve. As trust in assessment and in the instructor builds, students begin to appreciate how much the instructor cares for student learning and how much the instructor can facilitate growth.

The assessee may need repetition and time before this assessment process is trusted. It is important to be patient and to reinforce the idea that the reason for giving feedback is that it enhances student learning.

Getting buy-in

Issues may surface related to either the buy-in of the assessor or assessee. When the assessee looks for "what you want" rather than "what I need," the assessee may have the mindset to please others, rather than deriving the desire to learn internally. On the other hand, the assessor may be looking for "what's wrong" rather than for "what can be improved." When the assessee is hesitant to let the assessor see the weaker areas, his or her history might indicate that disclosure is not rewarded. Assessors should be alert to cues that may indicate some hesitation to participate in the assessment process and address them explicitly as they occur. Buy-in happens in the beginning stages, but can re-surface as the current situation brings up unresolved issues from the past.

Concluding Thoughts

Effective assessment enhances student engagement in the teaching/learning process, motivating both assessors and assessees to strive to elevate the level of performance. Wider improvement is fostered when people from across the educational community are involved. The mindset of both the assessor and assessee during the assessment process is fundamentally different from the mindset during evaluation because the locus of control moves from the observer (in evaluation) to the performer (in assessment).

Assessment makes a bigger difference when it addresses questions that assessees really care about (American Association for Higher Education, 2003) and when the assessor keeps improvement as the focus. Although some improvement comes out of almost any assessment process, the mindset makes a huge difference in both the quality of the feedback and the receptiveness to the feedback. Being conscious of the mindset and working to align the mindset with assessment can enhance the assessment process and accelerate improvements.

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