

Assessment:

What is it? Why do we need it? How do we use it?

Assessment is one of those concepts that sounds simple until it is time to design and use an assessment instrument. In order to discuss it, we might ask of the process: What is it? Why do we need it? And how do we use it?

Roy Berko, D.Ed. & Linda Webster, Ph.D.

What Is It?

It is the purpose of the assessment process to develop a tool or measurement device which, when applied, evaluates what we are intending to assess. This circular-sounding description can be reduced to: a test tests what the test intends to test. Or, assessment assesses what the assessment procedure intends to assess. Therein lies the problem with the assessment process. Many schools, departments, and instructors don't know what they want to assess.

A survey by Ellen Hay, reported in "A National Survey of Assessment Trends in Communication Departments," July, 1992, *Communication Education*, indicated that only a third of these departments defined goals and objectives for themselves. This means they have no clear goal attainment to assess. In addition, many instructors develop courses with no clear specific learning and expectancy goals. Many of those same instructors lack any test and measurement courses or experiences, and so do not have the slightest idea of how to develop assessment tools.

So, we have a problem. Many of our colleagues start with an unclear purpose and then find themselves unable to work toward accomplishing that unclear purpose. Even when they have a clear purpose and the will to accomplish it, they may not know how to set up a procedure to assess that purpose.

In our field, we are expected to add the burden of evaluating skills and concepts which, in many instances, we cannot prove work. In public communication, for example, why is it that student evaluation of "the best" or an "A" speech often does not correlate with ours? Why is there no absolute winner in speech contests? And why couldn't Bob Dole's speech advisors for the 1996 Presidential campaign "make" his speeches work?

Group discussion is another example. How is it that a group refusing to follow an agenda we have made them develop is still able to complete the task? And, finally, we need to consider the ethical dimensions in the evaluation of communication. Can we accurately evaluate human acts? Perhaps

it is worth considering that the human tendency toward subjectivity rather than objectivity might get in the way of evaluating communication behaviors. Even more profound, how does one determine the benchmarks for the evaluation? Do we use grading forms that may judge the skills that students brought with them rather than those skills learned in class?

Two students in gym class are required to shoot seven out of ten baskets to pass the class. One student has played basketball for many years and consistently "hits" seven or more baskets from the first day of class. The other student has never played the game and shoots only one or two baskets on an infrequent basis at the beginning of the basketball unit. But this student became more consistent and accurate by the time the coach was ready to grade their performance. The more proficient young man hit his usual seven baskets and earned his passing grade. The less proficient young man made five of his ten baskets and failed the class. Now, if you were grading on improvement or mastery based on what was taught, how would you rate the second young man?

Can grading forms used this way be an accurate tool? What will it take to come up with inter-rater reliability? Are the questions on the grading form the essence of the real display of effectiveness of learning?

Why Do We Need It?

One of the obvious reasons for needing assessment is that teachers have to give grades. Coupled with the semester-end assessment in the classroom is the pressure for performance testing at all academic levels from state legislatures and Departments of Education. Many institutions are moving toward individual exit competencies for their majors including capstone courses, testing, and portfolios.

Additional pressure comes for outcomes-oriented teaching assessment at the collegiate level brought by accreditation agencies. For example, southern collegiate institutions must graduate communicatively competent students, though no

