

An International Reflection about Formative Assessment
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I just returned from an international conference on formative assessment held in Norway and sponsored by Northumbria University and the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI). It was a most impressive venue and I found the conversations (all delivered in English) surrounding the papers most intriguing. Representatives from over twenty various countries presented their research on formative assessment in poster presentations and twenty-minute blocks of three papers organized around a similar topic. I had the great privilege of presenting my university's work. I was so honored and excited to teach an international audience about what we had learned from formative assessment, as well as to learn how to improve our formative assessment process from these well-respected delegates. I learned a great deal at this conference, however, my greatest lesson was that no one seemed to care about my university's findings on how to improve undergraduate student learning.

Having lived in the United States of America all my life, I have grown accustomed to thinking of the United States as an economic super power. Having worked all my adult life in higher education (less the years working my way through college in a variety of interesting positions) I had also grown accustomed to U.S. higher education being perceived with great respect. Thus, I truly was taken by surprise to have the work that I was presenting be so very graciously dismissed.

Before I introduce my perceptions along with the direct questions of my new international colleagues as to why they so respectfully disregarded the findings I was there to present, allow me first to paint the picture of some fascinating similarities among all twenty countries participating in the symposium.

Common Concerns

When the delegates from over twenty countries discussed common concerns surrounding faculty engagement in formative assessment, almost every colleague I talked to raised the following shared issues:

1. Confusion around what the word "assessment" means
2. Confusion around what the words "formative assessment" means
3. Inability to articulate "sound" criteria for measuring student learning
4. Concerns that formative assessment practices are too subjective and therefore
 - a. May be invalid and/or unreliable at measuring student learning
 - b. May create opportunities to discriminate against students
 - c. May encourage students to cheat
5. Concerns that we are not learning anything about student learning from summative assessment
6. Perceptions that summative assessment is considered to be:
 - a. Costly
 - b. Time-consuming
 - c. Inconsiderate of various student learning styles

- d. Inconsiderate of varying students' preparation for higher education learning
7. A general agreement that the perception of awarding grades or marks keeps the student from purposefully focusing on what she is learning and why it is important
8. Perceptions that the reward of institutions having students with "good" test scores or rankings undermines the institution's ability or commitment to focus on identifying how and what students are learning
9. Concerns around finding time to implement effective formative assessment.
10. The concern of how to impact high level decision makers with quality formative assessment results rather than less meaningful summative assessment results
11. Concern over motivating students to take responsibility for their own learning
12. The concern over assessment becoming disengaged from the focus on deep learning
13. The debate of who defines and sets the accepted standard of quality learning

The list went on and on. As one professor from the United Kingdom characterized it, it seemed to him that we had an international struggle to develop good teaching and learning practices in the midst of all types of constraints, such as those in the aforementioned list.

I don't know why I was struck with all these similarities. Apparently, due to my ignorance, I had thought that the United States was leading the world in conversations regarding formative assessment and what we were learning about student learning. And thus, we would be leading the world in identifying constraints to formative assessment as well as solutions. Yet, through these discussions, similar struggles were very apparent.

The Dismissed Assessment Findings

While some presenters were focusing on primary and secondary research findings, most were focusing on higher education and further, on the application of those findings to tertiary education. While my findings included specific examples from various disciplines, in higher education; it was simply "old news" to most of the participants. When I asked about the disinterest, the delegates very graciously and patiently, explained to me that I had nothing new to share. Furthermore, while they recognized the type of institution from which I was sharing my data (for which I received a bit of credit), their skepticism seemed to cause a bit of a paradox. They were skeptical about what a research university was learning about undergraduate student learning primarily because the United States' "obsession" with research in its higher education arena meant to many of the delegates that we simply did not care about how undergraduates learned; we only care about our research and "producing" good researchers. I was stunned. And there was no one to come to my aid. So, I simply sat down and reflected on what I had heard.

Later, after following up with several of the delegates who had attended my session and with many others who had not, I sought more explanation. The aforementioned perspective of U.S. higher education had been confirmed. We, in the U.S., are very well

respected for the research we produce. I am very proud of the international respect the U.S. higher education has for the research it produces. However, why are we not known for the “quality” undergraduate student learning we deliver? Apart from Alverno College (Thank you Alverno), no one knew of any other institution engaged in meaningful assessment of undergraduate student learning. Why is that? Is it because of our obsession with media rankings or is it due to our fascination with an industry entirely based on testing knowledge? Do we need to even care about this? Will it catch up with us? Or has it already? What price are we paying or what price will we pay if this an accurate international perception?

The Vice Rector for Education at the University of Byrgen stated that “educators working to assess student learning are scientists practicing research-based education.” He further clarified that “this scientist’s formula or hypothesis is not of the consistency used to produce products rolled off any manufacturer’s line - chemical or mechanical. Rather, it is a complex science calling for the keenest of minds and the most dedicated researchers.”

If the U.S. is known for outstanding research, why is it that we may be (and were, in this context) perceived as having no contributions for the science of undergraduate student learning? Is this a reputation we can afford to have because our research is so well respected? If so, is this a reputation that we want to have? If not, how do we proceed with changing this reputation?