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TALKING BACK

A Jesuit Apologia for Assessment

An answer to Collender

By Timothy R. Austin

In the last issue, Michael Collender launched a frontal assault on those who promote the value of student learning outcomes research ("Where Do we Draw the Line in the Sand?: The Trouble with 'Outcomes Assessment'"). Unfortunately, like the very Pentagon theorists whom he rightly castigated, Collender mistook the nature of the target he was attacking. As a result, his ordnance fell wide of the mark and assessment has survived the barrage both in the Academy generally and, more particularly, on the campuses of Jesuit institutions.

As my military metaphor reflects, Collender bases his argument on what he terms an "analogy" between "outcomes based education (OBE)" and "Donald Rumsfeld's campaign planning paradigm, known as effects based operations (EBO)." That the acronyms for these two "concepts" mirror one another adds a certain flourish, I suppose, but it also serves a less benign rhetorical purpose, contributing to Collender's thinly disguised attempt to establish guilt by association.

For on closer examination, one finds no substantive grounds for the alleged parallelism between OBE and EBO. Collender himself advances the following justification: "If both EBO and OBE aim at affecting the cognitive domain through measurable outcomes, and if both paradigms achieve the health of their endeavors by aiming those endeavors at certain quantifiable effects, or outcomes, then the analogy is established." The fatal flaw in this argument is that neither of its premises is true (at least in the case of student learning outcomes assessment – I lay no claim to any expertise in "campaign planning"). Worse yet, by encouraging his readers to accept both his premises as presuppositions, Collender creates the classic straw man, a caricature of assessment that then predictably succumbs to even the weakest of challenges.

The first fallacy is to charge that student learning outcomes assessment "aims at affecting the cognitive domain" – or, indeed, at *affecting* anything at all. In fact, assessment offers faculty members

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a variety of tools for better *understanding* what and how their students learn. Like any other research methodology, then, it results not in changing anything but merely in the development of information. To be sure, advocates of assessment believe that the curricular and pedagogical choices faculty members make should be based on what they are able to discover about student learning. But they would also be the first to concede that the results of assessment studies always require careful interpretation and seldom if ever point unambiguously to specific curricular changes.

According to Collender, Rumsfeld's staff employed a "targeting philosophy" (I might substitute: "targeting algorithm"), basing the deployment of weaponry directly on the numerical scores that EBO assigned to potential targets. To allege that the practice of student learning outcomes assessment conforms to the same paradigm is absurd. Not even those who apparently play the villains in the world of higher education as seen through Collender's eyes – "the US Department of Education, ... regional accrediting bodies" and those administrators at Jesuit institutions who endorse their proposals – not even they would argue that faculty members should surrender their prerogative to make prudential judgments about the courses that they teach and the academic programs for which they share responsibility.

Advocates of assessment ask only that information about student learning be *taken into account* if for no other reason than that our colleges and universities base their right to issue diplomas on the assertion that their students do, in fact, learn.

If one wishes to portray assessment as a cog in a crudely mechanical model of curriculum development, as Collender does, it helps first to deny it any subtlety, associating it with a branch of knowledge that many humanists instinctively mistrust: statistics. In the passage I quoted earlier, Collender achieves this maneuver by deftly replacing the already suspect term *measurable* in his first premise with the more clearly disreputable term *quantifiable* in his second. If what is learned from assessment is quantitative, he asks us to infer, will it not serve as ideal input into the kind of "philosophy" (or algorithm) that led the Pentagon astray under its prior leadership?

But effective assessment can, and arguably should, use qualitative every bit as much as quantitative methods. At the College of the Holy Cross, we are using funding from the Teagle Foundation to work on an assessment task with colleagues at Saint Anselm College and Assumption College. Since all three institutions claim to foster students' moral, ethical, spiritual and religious development, our project is to learn as much as we can about our actual success in delivering on this promise.

As it happens, a small part of what we plan to do in the next two years does have to do with quantitative information; students can tell us what courses in theology and ethics they have taken, what retreat experiences they have explored, what formal religious services they have attended. But we knew from the outset that the richest vein of information of the kind we were seeking would have to be mined in other ways. So we will also be reading with care what they have written as first- and fourth-year students in courses that we believe should be serving as their introduction to matters of faith and morality. And we will be meeting with students and alumni in focus groups to hear what they have to tell us about their lived experience on our campuses.

The major figures from the Catholic intellectual tradition to which Collender points in his closing paragraphs offer plausible models of the kind of student we would like to see graduate from our colleges and universities. Their writings furnish valuable candidates for reading lists in our courses. But studying either them or their work will get us no closer to instilling wisdom, knowledge, faith and character in the young women and men we educate unless we also know more than we currently do about what does and does not work well in classrooms, laboratories, studios and concert halls. At its heart, in short, what motivates student learning outcomes assessment is a classic Jesuit desire: the pursuit of the *Magis*. And its approach to this task is both student-centered and intellectually rigorous – two additional values at the very heart of the Jesuit tradition. ■