



Faculty Development Series

4.1.2 Distinctions Between Assessment and Evaluation

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Educators use two distinct processes to help students build lifelong learning skills: assessment and evaluation. Assessment provides feedback on knowledge, skills, attitudes, and work products for the purpose of elevating future performances and learning outcomes. Evaluation determines the level of quality of a performance or outcome and enables decision-making based on the level of quality demonstrated. These two processes are complementary and necessary in education. This module draws important distinctions between assessment and evaluation, underscoring the need for both processes to occur at separate places and times, and ideally through different roles (*4.1.4 Assessment Methodology* and *1.4.7 Evaluation Methodology*).

Inconsistent Use of the Terms

In the last fifteen years, much has been written about assessment and evaluation, but the terms have not always had distinct meanings. As accrediting agencies have become increasingly interested in improvement, it has become imperative to have a word that describes feedback for improvement that is distinct from one that describes the determination of quality. To add another layer of confusion from the literature, the word “formative” (used as an adjective with assessment or evaluation) has typically been used to describe an improvement process, while the word “summative” has been used to describe a decision-making process (Brown, Race, & Smith, 1996). However, the words “formative” and “summative” mean “as it is being created” and “addition of all things,” respectively. A process to determine quality can both be accomplished either as a performance is being created or after it is completed, so other words should be used to distinguish the two processes.

In the literature of the last several years, assessment has usually been used to indicate that at least some hint of improvement is expected in the assessment process (Bordon & Owens, 2001; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Similarly, evaluation is usually used to indicate that some sort of judgment of quality will be made. The *Faculty Guidebook* is consistent in its delineation of these two processes of improvement and judgment. Assessment is the term used to look at how the level of quality of a performance or outcome could be improved in the future; it includes strengths that should be sustained as well as high-priority areas for improvement. The assessment process is not concerned with the level of quality; only with how to improve the level of quality. Evaluation is the term used to describe the determination of the level of quality. The evaluation process focuses only on the actual level of quality with no interest in why that level was attained.

Assessment and evaluation both have their purposes, and, when used correctly, both can add significant value to teaching/learning. However, there can be detrimental effects when the people involved have not agreed whether the process is evaluation or assessment, or when the Assessment Methodology gets confused with the Evaluation Methodology.

Key Attributes

Although assessment and evaluation are used for different reasons, they do have some similar steps. Both involve specifying criteria to observe in a performance or outcome. Both require the collection of data and other evidence by observing the performance or by looking at the outcome or product. Both require a performer and a person who collects information about the performance. Both processes also conclude with a report of the findings which include all the similarities and at least as many differences. The relationship between the people involved is different in the assessment and evaluation processes. In both cases a person (either evaluator or assessor) observes or collects evidence about a performance or outcome; another person (either assessee or evaluatee) performs or develops an outcome. In both cases a person (either the assessee or client) requests the process (either evaluation or assessment). In assessment, the locus of control rests with the performer; in evaluation, it rests with the observer. The report to the performer (assessee or evaluatee) is also vastly different. In the assessment process, the report includes information about why the performance was as strong as it was, and describes what could be done to improve future performances. In assessment, there is no mention of the actual quality of the performance; only how to make the next performance stronger. There is no language indicating the level of quality, such as “good,” “terrible,” “terrific,” or “horrible.” Conversely, in the evaluative report, only information regarding the actual quality of the performance is given. This might be in the form of a grade or a score or an evaluative comment, such as “good work.” The purpose of the evaluative report is to report the level of quality and possibly any consequences based on the determined level of quality. It is not used to suggest improvements in future performances.

Table 1 clarifies the similarities and differences between the two processes. The modules *4.1.1 Overview of Assessment*, *1.4.6 Overview of Evaluation*, *4.1.4 Assessment Methodology*, and *1.4.7 Evaluation Methodology* give supporting explanations.

Table 1 *Differences Between Processes of Assessment and Evaluation*

	Assessment	Evaluation
What is the purpose?	to improve the quality of future performances	to determine the quality of the present performance
Who requests it?	assessee	client
Who performs?	assessee	evaluatee
Who observes the performance?	assessor	evaluator
Who sets criteria?	assessee and assessor	client (with possible consultation with the evaluator)
Who uses the information?	assessee (in future performances)	client (to make decisions)
When can feedback occur?	during or after a performance	during or after a performance
On what is feedback based?	observations; and strongest and weakest points	level of quality based on a set standard
What is included in the report?	what made the quality of the performance strong; and how might one improve future performances	the quality of the performance, often compared to set standards
Who receives the report?	assessee	client
How is the report used?	to improve performance	to make judgments

Case Studies

Examples of the use of the assessment process or evaluation process can be found in *4.1.1 Overview of Assessment* or *1.4.6 Overview of Evaluation* respectively. This section addresses ways that evaluation and assessment can become confused.

Case 1: The person observing a performance believes he or she is assessing, but the performer perceives the feedback as evaluative because the performer has not worked with the observer to set up criteria and valuable feedback.

Dysfunctional Partners

One of the first steps in the Assessment Methodology is for the assessor and assessee to determine the performance or outcome criteria for which the assessee would like to gain feedback. If this step is skipped, no matter how well-meaning the person giving feedback may be, the feedback is likely to be perceived by the assessee as judgmental. Since the control in assessment rests with the assessee, feedback will be used for improvement only if the person receiving the feedback wants to use feedback from the assessor.

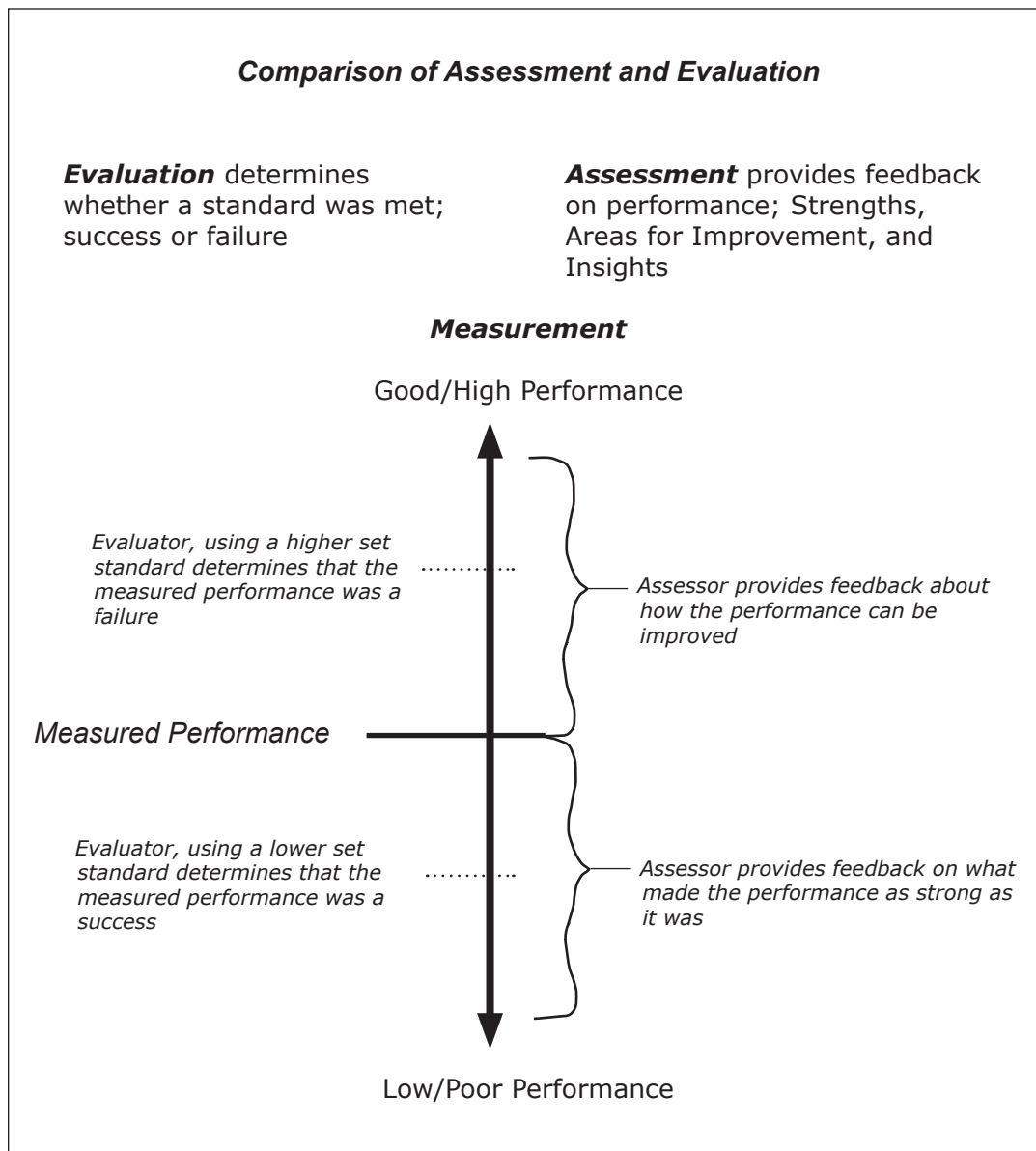
Parent-Child Relations

All parents want their children to improve. However, parents also want their children to perform at acceptable levels of quality. When a parent gives feedback for improvement using evaluative language to a child in an area in which the child has no desire to improve, the child will perceive this feedback as judgmental. For instance, there is a big difference in the message sent between saying, “Your room is a mess. Clean it up now or you will be punished,” and “If you put your books away and make your bed, your room would look much nicer.”

In-Class Assessment Exercises

Students are more used to feeling that they are evaluated by instructors, rather than assessed. Part of the reason for this perception is that instructors do evaluate students by giving grades. Part of the reason is that students are not often included in determining what should be fed back to them. In order for assessment of student learning to work effectively, students must participate in determining the criteria that will be used for their feedback. For example, after giving an assignment that requires a draft, you could ask students to tell you in what areas they would like feedback for improvement. In this way they would have to determine the areas where they feel improvement would make a difference, and it would help clarify that the purpose of the draft is not for a “free” grading cycle.

Figure 1



Case 2: A person, observing a performance and using the same criteria, gives assessment feedback as well as evaluative judgments.

Interim Feedback on Work Products

Students are often dismayed when they make all the suggested improvements on a paper that was turned in for comment as a rough draft and they do not receive an “A” on the final product. In this case, the instructor has given feedback for improvement without determining the quality of the paper. The student perceives that if he or she improves in the areas noted, he or she will have an excellent paper. One way to avoid this problem while strengthening the assessment process is to ask the students to request feedback on the draft based on set criteria.

Supervisor as Mentor

Often chairs of departments are expected to mentor their non-tenured faculty in their department at the same time that they are expected to make decisions on continuing employment. Although the individuals might agree on criteria to use, it becomes difficult for the assessee to feel in control of using or not using the feedback as he or she sees fit, since, at some point, the assessor will become the evaluator. Although this is sometimes unavoidable, the problem can be reduced by choosing the criteria differently in the two cases. In the mentoring situations, the non-tenured faculty member should choose the criteria for focus, while in the evaluative situations, the chair should. In both cases the criteria need to be known by both parties.

Case 3: A person who is more comfortable with the evaluator role is put in the role of assessor.

Expert Assessing a Novice

Sometimes, someone who is so ingrained in an area of expertise is unable to stop judging the quality of a novice performance. Though all criteria and scale are agreed upon, the expert as assessor can sometimes give the feedback in evaluative terms without realizing it. This sometimes happens when faculty start teaching right after they have earned their graduate degree. They are not prepared for the limited understanding and skills of the students who are taking their class. Rather than mentoring the students to help them build their knowledge and skills, the faculty members are sometimes apt to evaluate students as unmotivated and poorly prepared.

First-Time Assessor

Often, when one is used to giving feedback on the level of quality only, someone can feel uncomfortable giving “critical” feedback to an assessee, feeling that pointing out areas to improve is the same as criticizing the performance. This can cause even more problems when the assessee also perceives the feedback as evaluative (Case 1). Practice and building trust help this situation the most but it can also help if the assessor imagines what feedback he or she would have wanted if he or she had been the performer. It is important for the assessee to send the message that he or she would like to have the feedback from someone he or she trusts.

Concluding Thoughts

Discussion in this module is intended to strengthen outcomes from assessment and evaluation in teaching/learning situations. Assessment is a process used to improve a performance or outcome. Evaluation is a process used to determine the quality of a performance or outcome and to make decisions based on the quality. Both processes can be formative (undertaken while an educational process is ongoing) or summative (taken at the conclusion of an educational process). Before starting either assessment or evaluation it is essential for instructors to clarify the purpose of the process. It is then critical to communicate this purpose to everyone involved and to establish whether this will be conducted as assessment or evaluation. Finally, one should be cautious whenever an assessor will ultimately be an evaluator or when assessment is initiated without buy-in of the assessee.

References

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